

The Retreat

(A Magick P.I. Novel)

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The two psychics who work together in a metaphysical shop are drawn into intrigue when a mutual client goes missing and through their psychic talents are able to locate her.

A federal agent and a forensic scientist are working on a separate case of a murdered reporter. The two pairs find each other when the cases merge into one.

A string of murders, government corruption, electronic voter fraud and bio-terrorism takes members across the country, placing all four members in danger from government infiltrators, assassins and worse.

All four members are forced to rely on the skills of the others for their very survival and each discovers talents they didn't previously know they possessed.

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Ross Malde



A Paper Wasp Production

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Part I

The Worm



Chapter 1

When Johanna returned she was exhausted. It was only 9:30 in the morning and it had already been a long day. She hadn't expected anyone to be at the office early on a Saturday, but Steve was there. He apparently had pulled an all-nighter working on the user interface. It was their ongoing headache. It made her groan just thinking about it.

Even though all of the functions had been defined, there was the ever nagging problem of making the end product intuitive for even the most technophobic little grandmother. Voting machines needed to be accessible to everyone and the precincts weren't capable of having a technical consultant on location.

To complicate matters more, the code had to be extra compact for the machine capacity. Johanna vaguely understood the limitations all of the engineers had been working under. Not that she understood anything about programming code, but she was the one they all came to when they needed to vent. Unfortunately, Steve was in one of those moods and getting him out of her office had taken her half an hour.

She told Steve that she forgot to make a list for buying supplies and that she would only be around for about an hour while she figured out what they needed. "Any requests?" And of course there was. There always was. "See if you can get some of those Frappuccinos," he had said as he wandered back toward his corner office. Finally, she was alone.

Fortunately, as systems administrator, she could access the files since she was the one in control of all the final changes to the final program compilation. With her as build control, the gatekeeper, it guaranteed that only one final version was created and the work of all the different programmers meshed. Many companies had dedicated people for just this job, but that was one of the reasons she had been hired. She knew the systems inside and out but she could also do everything else having many years experience as an Administrative Assistant and Office Manager. This job used all of those skills and many more that she never knew she had.

Her progress was slowed a little by her continual awareness of her door, which had to be monitored to make sure that Steve wouldn't wander back in while she was busy. He sometimes did that, especially when he was tired. His brain tended to go numb from programming and then he just needed human

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contact, someone to talk to get things working again.

Fortunately, he left her alone until she went to the supply room. She had to at least appear to be compiling an inventory. Of course, he then burned another half an hour of her time before she could take a quick look and go home. By then she was done with what she really came in to do so it didn't really matter.

Now, Johanna was sitting on the couch in her living room. She hadn't even bothered to put her coat away, which was unusual, but it had been an unusual day. Jerald, her husband, was giving a seminar today and Johanna really had to get those files. Oscar really wanted them. There was no hurry now. She could rest. The soft overstuffed couch with its matching ottoman felt cozy and as soon as she sat down she found herself starting to drift off. She needed coffee.

Her body ached as she arose, a reminder that she had missed her morning workout. Maybe she would drop by the gym later.

The kitchen was large, with parquet floor, stainless steel appliances lining the wall on the right, the sink and counters on the left and a cutting board island taking up much of the middle. She was certainly happy that Jerald was into cooking and appreciated the importance of doing the kitchen up right. She thought of that every time she entered the kitchen. Until two years before, she never dreamed of having all Kitchen Aid, All-Clad and Henckels to work with. At the back beyond the appliances, there was a pantry door that hid at least two months food aside from meat and dairy and even the meat was accounted for if you included the freezer in the garage.

She reached up to the cupboard and retrieved her favorite cup. It was of medium size and made by a local potter. She loved the slightly rough feel it had in her hand. She looked down at the counter below and found that the coffee urn had not hit its two hour limit. Adding half and half and sweetener to the steamy brew, she decided to check her e-mail and then maybe take a short nap, though she never did that. Time was never so kind.

Cup in hand, she grabbed her purse from the living room and went up the immaculately carpeted stairs, the smooth custom banister sliding carelessly through her hand. The home office, converted from the extra bedroom, was perhaps the most interesting room in the house. One could tell a lot about people by observing what they read and this room was wall-to-wall bookcases. Both she and Jerald are avid readers and since their tastes varied from each other, there were literally hundreds of titles in at least three dozen genres. She knew that because she had gone through the ordeal of organizing them.

In the corner opposite the door was a complete computer station and desk that appeared to wrap around the user. It almost faced the door in a way that let her feel secure. It didn't take her studying of Fung Shui to know she felt

uncomfortable facing a wall. On the riser that protruded from the middle of the 'L' shaped table, there was a massive gas plasma screen and on it hung a yellow post-it note.

She set down her coffee and purse and made herself comfortable in her ergonomic computer chair. She removed and read the note, then with a sense of dread crumpled it deep into her palm and dropped it into the rattan basket between her and the dark oak leg of the computer desk. Jerald had left the note on her monitor before he left. It was a good thing Jerald would be gone until late that afternoon and wouldn't have had a clue what the message meant. It seemed innocuous enough. "Johanna, call Gretchen at the youth center." But the message really said that something had gone wrong.

She turned on her computer, and sat there waiting only seconds for the high speed processor to kick in and her flat panel screen to come to life. Her thoughts drifted back to a couple of nights before when she went to see Merrill for her monthly Tarot reading.

Merrill had told her she was entering into something potentially dangerous. And she had known it as well. Merrill always gave her accurate readings.

She thought about when she first met him. It was in Mountain View at the Psychic House. The store was best known for their psychics.

She hadn't come in for a reading. She was there to buy a book on angels. It was a Wednesday evening about 7:30 and she noted that the parking lot was almost full, yet other than the rather stocky blond man looking through books in the Buddhism section, two customers at the counter, and the two clerks that were helping them, the store appeared to be empty. She remembered looking all around for a section containing angels and it was nowhere in sight.

The store was strange. There were books on various forms of witchcraft, eastern philosophy, Native American Beliefs and Practices and almost any other form of philosophy and pop-psychology one could imagine. The walls were a dreary red, and on shelves and counters throughout the store that were not covered with books were candles, incense, statuary, jewelry, and religious symbols of all kinds. But she could not find angels. She had felt perplexed.

"You look lost" the blond man had said.

She explained to him that she was looking for a book on angels.

It seemed odd to her when he just turned around, pointed down and said, "Like these?"

She had felt a little foolish until he explained that he actually was unable to find them at first and had to ask about them as well. He went on to explain that he was a psychic reader in the shop, and that maybe she should consider having a reading. "Not necessarily by me", he said.

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“There are three of us working tonight and each of us has a different talent. Jan, there in the corner booth, finds things. Just explain to her what you are looking for and while holding your hands, she can envision where you left or lost it. There’s also Kalen who is working in one of the offices in the back. His specialty is channeling. He enters a type of meditative trance and receives messages from the ethereal plane. As for me, I’m Merrill, and I’m a little more conventional. I specialize in divination using the Tarot.” Then he had paused a moment and smiled. “I just thought since you were here you should know that there is more here than books.” Then he pointed down once again to the shelf of books on angels and said “Enjoy” and walked away.

She thought the whole encounter was a little strange, but it did intrigue her, so while she purchased the book on angels, she asked about the readings. The woman at the counter also explained that they would need to know the type of psychic she was interested in and provided an intelligent explanation that was consistent with what the man had said. She decided to try it.

She learned that night that she would meet and soon after marry Jerald. She was told that she would have several suitors over the next month, but one of them was going to be a wonderful partner and provider. She was also been warned that she would have to keep her priorities in line if the relationship was going to last for her. A month later she was there for another reading, and from then on it had been weekly, just like clock work.

She had trusted Merrill immensely, but even though he told her, actually insisted, that she might want to alter her plans. She just didn’t want to hear it. She knew what she had to do, and hopefully it would still work out.

She pulled up Messenger, and there it was, waiting for her, a message from OTJ45, “Meet me at the Antique Store 11AM.” Damn, she thought, “What happened?” She could feel a cold shiver rush down her spine, she paused and closed her eyes to settle herself, then looked at her watch. 9:45, she had only a few minutes before she had to leave.

She took a sip of her coffee and then selected the reply box and typed, “I’ll Be There” and hit send. She sat silently for a few moments staring dumbly down at the keyboard and biting down on her lower lip before turning off the computer. Her eyes, unblinking began to water.

She shouldn’t have been contacted that way. It was not supposed to be for another three days, and then only via Messenger. What could possibly be so important that he made a call to get her and even more, why hadn’t he used her cell phone?

The answer to that was obvious enough, in her rush to get to the office early this morning; she had left her phone on the desk. She opened it the screen said “3

Missed Calls.” Shaking her head slowly, her full dark hair trembled across her shoulders. She took her purse and placed her cell phone into it, and grabbed her memory stick. The memory stick looked like a woman’s cigarette lighter with a USB connector hiding beneath an end cap where the working parts should have been. She took a quick gulp of her coffee, set her cup down, and hurriedly left the room. She went down the stairs, deftly staying on the balls of her feet to avoid tripping on her three inch heels, rounded the corner nearly tripping on the carpet runner that protected the oak flooring, dashed through the living room and on through to the kitchen, and stood a moment as if searching for something, but her mind had gone blank.

After regaining her composure she went into the pantry and found a stainless steel shaker on the baking shelf. She examined it, nodded in approval and added the memory stick to the powdered sugar contents. She replaced the shaker to its place on the shelf, and then headed through the living room. On her way out, she grabbed the coat she had left on the couch and locked the heavy oak front door behind her.

Her mind was racing the whole time as she made her way from the Cupertino house, left the gated community, and weaved her way out to the 280 freeway. The morning light was intense, the way it always was on a spring morning in the Bay Area, causing her to squint. She grasped her sunglasses from the glove compartment and relieved the strain on her eyes with the darkened lenses. She was further relieved when the road gradually curved to the north, moving the sun slightly behind her and her away from the bright glare.

The hills were stunning as they always are during that part of the year, a lime green that can only be thought of in watercolors, nothing real. But she didn’t have the attention to notice this morning, only to wonder what Oscar wanted. Fortunately, it was still early for a Saturday and the ever present traffic was still light, unlike during the week, or how it would be in another hour. Oscar must have had a woman call for him, being her home number, he probably didn’t want to raise any suspicion and apparently he hadn’t.

She only half realized when she went over the Berkley Linear Accelerator, the ominous narrow building that stretched under the freeway as far as the eye could see in either direction, and the SETI Dish standing high on its hilltop, but it told her she was approaching Menlo Park and about half way to her turn-off.

She approached a pack of cars as she started up the first of several grades and found herself trapped behind cars that were pacing each other and not leaving any path through. Her hands tightened on the wheel. “Damn it” she yelled out in frustration. Just then the car in front of her accelerated and moved to the right. She accelerated to pass and then backed off to about 70. What had been

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intermittent hills on both sides opened up on the left to a wash, not really the creek it appeared to be but more of a backwash where the bay backed up into San Andreas Fault. She was almost to the turn.

She made the exit to the 92 and entered the banking turn realizing just then that she was going too fast and suddenly braked. Her Mercedes had eased up over 85 when she wasn't paying attention. She felt as much as heard the siren 'bee bip' from behind her. Taking a deep breath, she pulled over, stopped, took out her license, registration and insurance card, slipped off her jacket and sunglasses and waited until the young highway patrolman dismounted his motorcycle, removed his helmet and walked painfully slowly to her window.

"Good Morning Officer", she said handing him the papers she had already assembled. She forced herself to keep her voice soft and said, "Sorry, I didn't realize I was going so fast." He smiled and accepted the papers. "Well I'm sorry too, ma'am. I am going to have to write you up. You need to be more careful out here; you whizzed by some of these folks and almost didn't make the curve." His speech was slow, and she could feel his eyes examining every curve of her silk blouse and tight denims through the open window even though he wore very dark sunglasses. She remained calm and tried to keep her dark brown eyes as soft as she could.

He returned to his cycle wiping his forehead with his sleeve. The sun glistened off of his short hair mixed with sweat as he took up his mike, and then returned only moments later. "Please sign here ma'am", he said. She took the small clipboard from his hand and signed the citation that said she was had been traveling at 66 miles per hour. As she returned it to him, she noticed that this time he was focused on her face. He seemed like he wanted to say something but then his expression shifted and he half coughed, "Now, take it easy out there ma'am and have a nice day." As the officer returned to his cycle, she smiled to herself thinking how easily she had manipulated him. But then sighed as she watched him pull out, realizing that it had not been enough to keep her from having to take that damn driving school and that she had lost precious time.

As soon as she saw him double back onto the freeway going south, she replaced her sunglasses and continued on her way down past the Skyline cutoff and into the curves. She found it amazing every time she took this route how in a matter of a couple of miles the scenery changed from arid grassland to dense forest made especially noticeable by her needing to remove her sunglasses once more. She seemed to be driving into a wonderland of tall green pines mixed with madrona. When she passed the large Christmas tree farms, and commercial nurseries she knew she was almost there.

The oncoming traffic flew by her as she navigated the curving narrow highway,

her milk chocolate knuckles looking pale with the strain of her grip, her long bright red nails almost digging into the heels of her long delicate hands. Her lip was getting raw she realized. She hadn't noticed that she had been biting down on it again. She backed down the speed when she felt that she was close to flying off of the road again, just in time for the speed trap as she entered the outskirts of town. She arrived where the road split and maneuvered to the left across the bridge into downtown. In the center of the bridge was a small sign: Welcome to Half Moon Bay.

The quaint little city was old with just a hint of renovation that left the old cannery buildings in tact. Most had been converted into small shopping galleries and what had been feed stores and stables were now small boutiques and art galleries. She parked behind what had been the largest of the canneries took her sunglasses, rested them high toward the front of her head, took her purse and went inside pressing the lock button on her keychain as she went in. She had an unbelievable 20 minutes before she was supposed to be at the antique store so she stopped at the small breakfast counter that overlooked Main Street and ordered.

"I'd like a 16 ounce, vanilla soy latte" she said to the young girl sitting on a stool near the cash register. Without a word, the girl stood up and began her task of making the drink. She could not have been older than seventeen or eighteen, wearing tight jeans with an even tighter blouse that exposed her midriff and a silver ring hanging from a pierce in her navel. Her hair was a yellow blond pulled back into a pony tail with obvious brown roots that left a racing stripe over the center of her head where the hair parted. Johanna shook her head in disapproval and drifted off into her own thoughts.

"That'll be \$3.75," the girl said while handing over the wax coated cup with the expected white cover that had Solo Traveler embossed in the top. Snapping back to consciousness, Johanna scrambled into her purse dropped in her keys and pulled out a five. She discovered her moisturizing lip stick in the process, kept it in hand, gave the girl the bill, took the coffee and wandered out to the front of the building.

She stood there a moment and noticed that the shop had put a small table and two chairs out front. Placing her cup and purse on the table, she applied the lipstick to her grateful lips, put the tube back into her purse, retrieved her belongings, and began her stroll toward the antique store.

She walked the two blocks south and one to the east and stood there staring across at the converted barn, sipping carefully on her coffee while she determined that Oscar was not outside waiting for her. The old rusted wire fence surrounding the barn and its yard looked as if it had been the original and the yard was filled

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with garden décor, mostly gaudy statues and little Mexican terracotta stoves. There was nothing that she would ever buy.

The barn itself looked weathered like it hadn't been painted since it was built probably back in the '20s. She could barely read Something Feed in faded paint high above the doors. She could imagine that once it was full of bales of hay and cloth sacks of feed. Probably the only feed store for 40 miles back then. No need for a feed store these days.

As she went through the gate and approached the old wood steps that led to the main floor, a middle-aged man and a woman came out. Johanna recognized Roger Cramer, the owner, but knew very well that he would not remember her, not by name anyway. He was wearing his typical tan denims and polo shirt with his belly over his belt. The woman was wearing black slacks and a light gold sweater that looked like it might be cashmere, she was tall and had long blond hair. From the back she might have been twenty five but when she turned she displayed crows feet that made the rest of her seem out of place.

The two of them were discussing how to load something. She couldn't make out what and really could not care less. "Be with you in a few minutes." The man's voice was pleasant and she gave him a nod, stepped out of the way to let them pass and then continued into the store.

The room was dark compared to the outside and it took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust. In her first scan of the room, it looked a scramble of old everything that took some organizing in her mind. It was crowded and a little claustrophobic as always. Near the entry was a large bench that could be used for storage with a mirror framed with English Oak as a backboard. She raised the seat and was surprised that the oak was lined. She could smell the pleasant and acrid scent of cedar. When she lowered the seat to reveal her face in the mirror, she noticed her sunglasses and rather disgustedly removed them. She hated it when she absentmindedly did that with her glasses. She hated the way it looked. Other than that she was pleased enough, but then she always was.

Where is Oscar? She wondered as she walked into the shop and saw the obviously old painting of the evil looking woman in a worn gilded oval frame was still hanging where it had been for the five years she had visited the store. The woman was wearing a dowdy front button dress like a 19th century school master, had piercing dark eyes, and a frown that seemed like it had never left her mouth. She looked sour like someone who ate children for breakfast. It made her shiver.

Below the picture were tools that looked like they have come from farms from when she was a child. An old scythe dominated her view, its long curved blade was rusted and the hardwood handle was dry and partially split. With it there was an assortment of mauls and sickles, hoes and rakes that could easily

have been fifty or more years old. She wished that some of that past would fit into her décor, but of course it wouldn't. She had moved into an age of modernity that was devoid of rust and soil.

The store never changed much. Some of the items had always been there, like the antique ringer washer that stood toward the back of the store and furs that no one would dare wear. Ever since the seventies, wearing fur was associated with contempt for animals and cruelty. So, like many others, they hung there forever. She thought what a waste it was since the furs were so sensual to touch. But the practices had been unjust.

She continued forward to the glass case that surrounded the sales area and saw some gold jewelry that was added since she had been there last. Setting her coffee and glasses on the case, she knelt down for closer inspection. In the middle of the new display box was a brooch. It looked like it had traveled through time from the turn of the century, inlaid with onyx and ivory. She wouldn't wear it of course, but it truly was beautiful. In her preoccupation with the pin, she hadn't sensed the other presence until the large hand covered her mouth and nose and she felt the pain of something sharp piercing her neck.

It would be almost closing time before the storeowner discovered her sunglasses and cold coffee sitting on the edge of the glass counter.

Chapter 2

John Patterson clutched the steering wheel glove of his 1982 Fiat with ease and competence as he maneuvered up the curved highway approaching the Skyline. He was enjoying the coolness of the air rushing around him chilling his face and messing his hair. He could see at each quick glance his fiancée, Gloria, enjoyed it just as much. He pointed occasionally to different features as they passed them and called out to her trying to describe what they are seeing, knowing full well that she could only hear bits and pieces of his words over the whine of the engine and the road noise.

He had been excited about showing her the lookout, and had been rattling on about it ever since he had picked her up from San Jose Airport just yesterday. She had arrived from Los Angeles to visit for the weekend and the two of them were 'seeing the sights'. John wanted Gloria to be comfortable with her anticipated move to the Bay Area after their wedding, only six weeks away.

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The road had curves all the way from Saratoga out, but he was looking forward to the real climb. He pointed to the rows of motorcycles that lined up in front of Alice's Restaurant and General Store as he took the right fork in the highway. This was the hangout of the countless bikers who loved to take the run.

One peculiarity that he showed Gloria was how the bikes were in two defined separate rows. There were the choppers which were ridden by the old timer bikers who dressed in studded leathers and typically looked like the sixties stereotype complete with tattoos.

Then there were the 'crotch rockets' that were designed strictly for speed. Their yuppie drivers wore high tech aerodynamic helmets and special skin tight pants and jackets. The cops knew they took their bullet bikes through the curves at over a hundred miles and hour, but they rarely did anything except look the other way.

Once he finished showing her the highlights of Alice's, he punched the accelerator. "HERE WE GO!"

The little car's four cylinders roared out as they entered the seemingly endless curves that swayed back and fourth as they climbed the first of several climbs to the top. The little car, even as light as it was could not do over seventy on that climb but it was enough to feel the extreme freedom the perfectly banked road provided.

Gloria's eyes sparkled as she saw and felt the wonders of their passage. Her fine blond hair was flying free except for the front where she kept it calm with the scarf that John had suggested she wear for that purpose.

Earlier, just as they had left Saratoga, the whole nature of the area changed. It had been amazing to her seeing the valley so green, since she had never been there in the spring, and the current color only lasted a few weeks, but from the little town on, the area changed into deepening forest. At first the trees were Eucalyptus as seemed fitting for the Northern California landscape. Then they changed again into firs and cedars. Little patches of wild flowers covered the occasional open areas and the over the top of those areas you could see the southern edge of the bay and the airport.

They were both wearing light jackets. It was 2:00 and the fog had not burned off of the top of the mountains yet. "But it would," John had promised. Gloria was looking forward to spending the evening in San Francisco. She had always wanted to see the waterfront and this would be her first time. But, John wanted her to experience what he felt was the best part of the trip up.

John pointed off to the left and to her amazement, through the trees was the ocean, and then it was gone. Only a few moments later he pointed again, this time to his right. The bay was shining bright from the sunlight even though she

could see the thick white clouds starting to impose themselves in the middle of her vision. Then the bay was gone, and only the fog remained.

John saw the sign telling him that slow traffic should move right with the introduction of a temporary lane. He looked in his rearview mirror to see two bullet bikes approaching. Good timing, he thought.

The approaching bikes looked like they had no riders at first glance. The drivers of the high speed land rockets were poised so far forward that became part of the bike and added almost no additional air resistance to the sleek frame. He moved over and reduced his speed, he could only see about a quarter mile now and as the two riders flew by, they almost instantly vanished into the fog.

John slowed even more and pulled off the road to the right. They had made it to the look out. After he stopped, he removed his harness, reached behind his seat and pulled out his digital camera, opened his door and climbed out. By the time he reached the other side, Gloria had also lifted herself out of the low seat and was standing waiting for him. He put his arms around her, pulled her into his chest and kissed her. "Damn, I am glad you are here."

He held her for a few moments and then released her and said, "You have to see this... Its like magic." As they walked out to the walkway that curved its way along the cliff, he pointed down. The fog seemed to be literally lifting in front of them and rolling backwards over their heads like a cotton blanket and over the higher cliff and trees behind them, like nature was unveiling a wondrous picture of the entire valley. It was amazing. The fog moved so rapidly, like a show planned just for them with the bright sun shining down and reflecting on the small swells that covered the bay.

John pointed to the south and Gloria could see the flatness of San Jose extending on to the lift of the mountains that warded off the east and seemed to surround the entire Bay Area only a few miles from the edge of the water. She was smiling and had goose bumps from the excitement of it. Progressively from South to North, John pointed out San Jose, Santa Clara, Sunnyvale, and then, Mountain View and Cupertino, which were in the center of their panorama. Then looking slightly north he showed her Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Redwood City and San Mateo. They could see further north but he couldn't describe individual cities after that point. All three bridges were visible as was Oakland, which John pointed out at the far end of the Bay Bridge. The vista was beautiful. He then showed her how the freeway system made a giant 'U' around the base of the bay and the obvious line of El Camino stretching the entire length of the valley.

"I wanted to show you how amazing the valley is... ah," he hesitated. Then he blurted out, "I was hoping you would like it as much as I do."

She threw her arms around his neck, and pulled him down to a passionate

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kiss. "I do love it, and I love you."

They just stood there, holding each other, feeling each others building passion until finally she reluctantly pulled away. "We should get on to San Francisco, shouldn't we?"

"Yes" he said and drew in a long breath to compose himself. "But first, let me get some pictures" John lifted up the camera and gestured for Gloria to pose by the guard rail. He took some shots of her facing south, then she moved to the middle of the scene and he took a front shot of her with the valley below. She moved further north and pointed toward Oakland and as her eyes panned back toward John, she stopped short and exclaimed in a startled tone, "What is that?" She moved her pointing finger down into the brush that made its way to the edge of the cliff where the lookout curved inward.

John stepped forward toward Gloria and followed her finger down to what looked like the sole of a shoe. As he looked more intensely he could make out that it was something like a dark green Hush Puppy and it had a stocking covered leg extending from it to the brush. He went pale and his now blank eyes looked up at Gloria. "I think it's a body."

He moved further toward the northern edge of the view point to get a different angle. From there he could see part of the pant-leg made of dark green casual material which extended into the brush out of sight. He returned to Gloria. Her skin was as pale as his was, and her eyes looked glazed as she stared at the now obvious shoe that she had before only guessed at. He helped Gloria sit down and handed her his camera. Out of his left front pants-pocket he produced a cell phone and dialed 911.

Within seconds of hanging up with the operator both John and Gloria looked suddenly to the south with the report of the police siren approaching at high speed from the direction they had only moments ago traveled. John suspected by the prompt response that the officers had apparently stopped for coffee at Alice's when they got the call. It was not only the bikers who liked Alice's, or enjoyed an excuse to run the hill.

After the Santa Clara Sheriff's car pulled into the lookout's parking lot and plowed its way across the gravel, two officers emerged and approached John. "Are you John Patterson?" He nodded. "What do you have?" John walked with them to the north part of the lookout and pointed down to the shoe. "Ok, come with me and I will get some information" said one of the officers, the other went down the rocky ledge to the body and knelt for a moment and then back to the car and took out a roll of yellow crime scene tape and cordoned off the area. It only took about 10 minutes before John and Gloria were allowed to go. They proceeded north at a much lower speed than John had originally planned.

The officers would have a full day; it would be two hours before the crime scene guys would even arrive.



At 8:30 AM Sunday morning Grant was standing on the patio of the two-bedroom apartment where he had lived for the past six months. He was smoking a cigarette and sipping his coffee. It was his morning ritual. He never smoked inside, but the need for that first cigarette always pulled him out into the cool air. Some ducks were in the large pool with the three fountains racing back and forth as if they might take off. He enjoyed waking up to see them. It was the small daily dose of nature that had attracted him to this complex.

He threw out a handful of cubed bread and watched a nearby group of the ducks waddle up and then dart in and out of his little patio taking the pieces as though they had not eaten in a week.

He had gotten up and half dragged himself into the kitchen, found the last cup in the cupboard and filled it with the hot brew made an hour before by timer. He always set the coffee up the night before. Until he had that first half-cup of coffee, he was no good for anything.

He had been up late the night before. He and Greg Stoddard, a long-term buddy in the Bureau, had been out shooting pool and tossing back a few brews until the tavern closed. There weren't too many neighborhood taverns anymore. But not long after he had been assigned to the Valley, he had established himself as a regular in a quiet little pub on the southern border of Santa Clara. It wasn't that he drank so much, last night was a fair exception, but the place had a pool club and it gave him a chance to talk to people other than the mostly stuffy self-serving bureaucrats that he worked with each day. And that was the other exception, Greg was not like the others either. They could work as a team.

He took the last drag of his smoke, flicked off the head and went inside. Moving in an almost robotic manner he mindlessly crossed the large living room, dropped the butt into the trash basket near the water dispenser that marked the end of the small dining room, and set his coffee down on the table.

He crossed through the kitchen, opened the front door, retrieved the Sunday paper from the porch, quietly closed the door and went to the dining room table where he could sort out the paper before reading it. He was still only running on partial cognition.

He rubbed his chin and cheek and realized that he definitely needed a shave. He didn't even need to look to know that his dark hair looked more like a punk style than his normally groomed self. But that could wait. It was Sunday

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morning and he had no where he needed to go.

He returned to the table and sat, took another sip of his coffee and unfolded the newspaper. The Mercury News banner stood out at the top of the page, identifying the largest paper in the valley. The top national story of the day was more of the Iraq Crisis. There was more detail than Grant thought should be in the public's daily awareness.

Shrugging, he glanced down to the lead local news story. Here he stopped. Set down his coffee and stared at a picture with the caption that read: "Oscar Thornwood, honored news reporter dead at 52." The article went on to say that the cause of death was not revealed by the medical examiner, but that it was suspicious in nature. It also told of Mr. Thornwood's long career as an independent journalist, his recent articles on corruption within the government, and his leaving behind his wife of twenty-two years and his nineteen year old daughter.

Grant was supposed to meet with Mr. Oscar Thornwood the next day at the deceased's request. It had something to do with information connected to the series of articles on government corruption he had been working on, and he had said it was important. He also said he could not say any more over the phone.

He reached behind his shoulder and grabbed the phone and dialed.

"Santa Clara County Medical Examiner's Office" a young man's voice answered.

"Hi, this is Grant O'Connor, is Sarah there?"

"Hold on."

Grant sipped his coffee and waited patiently for a few moments and decided Sarah must be there and just busy as usual. He hung up. It would be probably more efficient to just go talk to her. Besides, she was not bad to look at and this was just the excuse he needed to go see her.

There were many times that Grant had wanted to ask the lady out. Her athletic body, flashing blue eyes and quick mind intrigued him beyond belief. But he knew how tight her schedule was, how tight the schedule was for any forensic pathologist. And he knew his own lack of time. As a consequence, he hadn't been able to figure out when.

He knew that he was lying to himself. The real reason he hadn't asked her out was that he was so attracted to her he was afraid of messing it up. He'd been wanting to for almost two years. Who knows, maybe today? After all, it *is* Sunday, he didn't have to work and just maybe she could take off for a few hours, "Hmmm."



It took him only 40 minutes to clean up, dress and navigate the three and a half miles to the new medical facility. During the week it would have taken him at least twenty minutes to make the drive, but traffic was light early on Sunday. He had decided on the brown slacks, blue dress shirt with open collar and corduroy jacket. Grant liked to think of this as his friendly look.

Grant looked through the glass door that opened into the ME's office. He noticed every time he went to this ME's (Medical Examiner) office how it was modern and used pastel colors in an attempt to create a nurturing environment for the bereaved guests that would come to see their deceased loved ones.

The reception room was pale blue and had comfortable couches, and modern coffee and end tables, with lamps that seemed to belong in someone's living room. They even had a coffee service set up. It was certainly was a far cry from how an ME's office used to be. One could never guess by the new appearance that they handled close to five thousand bodies a year; fortunately only around forty of those were homicide investigations.

Grant didn't recognize the guard seated behind the reception desk. He reached inside his jacket pocket, and pulled out the small folding leather wallet and flipped it open to reveal his badge and identification card and held it up against the door and knocked loudly. When the guard reached the door he looked a little confused. "Grant O'Connor, Lieutenant; Federal Bureau of Investigation" the young man read aloud and then opened the door. "What can I do for you sir?"

Grant realized immediately that the tall spindly young man was newly out of the military. He still had that stiff sense about him that screamed out, Yes Sir!

"Is Dr. Hamilton in?"

"Yes sir, she is in her office."

"Thanks" he said as he stepped in, crossed over to the reception desk and reached for the sign-in tablet while the guard admitted himself with a key. As soon as he had signed, he was admitted with the 'beep' of the opening electric lock that released the half door that separated reception from the rest of the facility.

He knew where her office was, down the hall two corridors; turn right and the first door on the left. He could see through the glass panels on either side of the door that Sarah was in her office bent over a pile of papers. He stood there a moment admiring her shapely hips before he sighed and opened the door.

"Hi Sarah, how's it goin'?"

She looked up, straightened and smiled, and Grant couldn't tell for sure, but there seemed to be a slight blush in her cheeks, but aside from that she was all professional.

"Lieutenant, I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see you here today."

"Why's that?" The comment took him by surprise.

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“You weren’t called in?”

“No, why would I be?”

“I notified the Santa Clara Sheriff’s Office about three hours ago on the results showing a homicide, figured they called the field office.”

“Hmm, let me guess, Oscar Thornwood.”

“That’s a fair guess, she nodded. “If you weren’t called, then what else brought you here?”

“Well, it actually was about Mr. Thornwood, but I found out he was dead from the news. I wanted to find out how he died.”

Sara walked him over to a human physiology chart that was hanging on the wall opposite the door. Pointing to the back of the skull she said, “The victim was killed with a long sharp instrument, we are presuming it to be an extra long ice pick.” She looked up the full foot difference in their heights to see his reaction and then continued. “It looks like it was forced up through the base of the brain and then moved from side to side to assure it was fatal. If this weren’t odd enough for this area, the assailant apparently used super glue to seal the wound when the blade was extracted. I could show you the x-rays but with the amount of damage, it is really easier to explain it this way.”

“Super glue was originally invented as a field bandage for the military if I am not mistaken,” he paused, deep in his own thoughts for a moment. “Thank you Sarah... just one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Would you be interested in going out for coffee or maybe lunch?”

She smiled, “I would love to, but it can’t be until after about two.”

Chapter 3

Kalen tightly gripped the handle of the door, and opened it as slowly and as quietly as possible. He didn’t want to startle his friend if he was in meditation, but he felt the information he had was urgent enough to interrupt. He knew Merrill wasn’t in session, at least they said he wasn’t at the desk. But it wasn’t uncommon for any of them to work practice techniques when they weren’t busy.

He was right. When he looked in there was no light, aside from the single candle in the center of the desk directly across from the door. He could see the glow of the orb that rested just beyond the candle’s flame and beyond that he could just make out intense eyes. The eyes were steel blue. They were intensely

focused like lasers on the crystal ball that lay before them. There the intensity stopped. The surrounding face seemed soft as though all of the muscles had been relieved of all normal tension and held no expression at all. Above the face, soft blond hair carried the yellowness of the flame. It was an eerie sight even for Kalen who had seen it many times before.

Suddenly tension returned to the face and the eyes softened and momentarily closed. A moment later they snapped open and Merrill put on his glasses. "Damn... I can never get that damn ball to work."

"Sorry to bother you, Merrill."

"No problem, this wasn't going anywhere anyway."

"Were you getting anything at all?"

"Yes, but it made no sense."

"You never know, what did you see?"

"It was strange but I don't know how it could relate to anything, I saw the body of a man, and it was being consumed by a giant worm. I didn't recognize the man and he wasn't decomposed, so the worm should *not* have been there... that's all I got." Merrill shrugged, "Told you it didn't make any sense. Anyway, what did *you* need?"

"I was just in a session... you know the little gal that came in earlier."

Merrill knew the lady Kalen was talking about. The same lady had read with almost all of the readers at one time or another. She was one of the lost souls that really have no future unless they quit trying to place themselves in someone else's custody and make things happen for themselves. The potential was there and he remembered telling her. But he also had told her that she had to stop waiting for her life and live it. Then there would be something to read the cards about. Kalen had told her the same thing a couple of months before, and a few weeks after that Jan had done the same. A co-dependant personality is how the books would describe her.

"You mean Marci."

"That's her."

"Pretty long session for *her* wasn't it?"

"Actually it was really strange." Kalen stroked his full white beard and grabbed one of the two armchairs that were usually occupied by clients. His rotund body filled the chair leaving no room for his arms except for the armrests. The man was just big, at least eight inches taller than Merrill's five and a half feet, and probably twice Merrill's slightly more than ample weight, and everything about him was white. He had white hair, white eyebrows, and even his clothes were white since he liked to wear his chef's attire even when doing readings. All of this made him seem a little like the Stay-Puff Marshmallow Man from Ghostbusters. But as a

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reader, Merrill knew him to be honest, and sometimes a bit profound. Well, sometimes.

“When she came in, I thought it was going to be very much like other readings I have had with her. You know.” He continued speaking in a high mocking female-like voice. “When is my love going to appear? When is my wonderful job going to appear?”

“Yea” Merrill sighed, “I have refused to read and refunded her a couple of times myself. Some people just don’t get it.”

“Well, something has changed. This time when I went into channel I was visited by her guide and it seems she is making herself active. She has joined a Yoga class and has met a guy. Basically, her guide told me to tell her to take things really slow. It seems the poor guy is kinda shy and she needs to be careful not to scare him away.” Kalen chuckled causing his belly to noticeably shake.

“But that’s not what I came in to talk to you about.”

Kalen stretched his legs out and looked about the room. He seemed to enjoy the peacefulness the room offered. Unlike the rest of the Psychic House which was dark red and adorned with ‘New Age’ posters and statuary of angels and gods and goddess’ from every pantheon, this room was pale blue and sparsely decorated with a few winged cats and wolves and a small rose quartz fountain. The fountain glowed from a light within and a small rose quartz ball spun on a bed of water on top as a stream of water flowed down the sides of the crystal into blue amethyst crush at its base. The sounds it made were peaceful; just the right space for meditation.

He often stopped in the middle like that, seeming to gather his thoughts, and when he did, Merrill always knew there was a lot more to come.

“When I went back to my room after the reading”, Kalen began in a slow pace, “It was as if I were being forced into a channel. I had to sit immediately and when I did, it opened by itself.” He paused again and looked at Merrill.

“It was Muriel... the archangel. Remember, that was the one who sent a message through me to you two years ago. Just before 9/11 as I recall.”

Merrill looked across his desk at the white figure illuminated dimly in the yellow light and slowly shook his head. The last and only time he had been channeled for was just as Kalen remembered, and the only real message he had received was that he had to be ready and everything was going to change. Problem is there was no explanation of what was going to change, how he should prepare, or what his role would be.

“Muriel told me that someone is in trouble and that we would be involved in helping. He said that somehow you would be contacted. The strange part was that he said that it would begin tonight and I have never had such a direct time

reference given to me before.”

“Now wait a minute.” Merrill sat up straight. “It is a Tuesday night, dead slow except for your reading, and a short phone reading I had over an hour ago, it’s almost nine and we leave in an hour.” His left eyebrow raised and his right eye squinted slightly behind his bronze colored glasses.

Kalen knew this look. He slowly lifted his heavy mass out of the chair and lumbered toward the door.

“I can only tell you what I am told.” He grinned and closed the door behind him.

Only moments passed when there was a knock on the door. “Some one is here to see you Merrill, are you open for a reading?” It was Charlie, the evening manager. “Ok, let them know it will be a couple of minutes.”

As he heard the steps move away from the door, he took a cone of incense from the center drawer of his desk and lit it. He allowed the small flame to burn itself out and placed the smoking cone into the small glass bowl to his left. He put the crystal ball in the drawer on his right and took out the small wooden box that contained the silk pouch that protected his Tarot cards. Pushing the votive candle across the desk to his right, he placed the box directly in front of himself. He turned on the small lamp on the corner of the desk, and viewed his office. When he felt satisfied that everything was in order, he went out into the main store to greet his unknown client.

As he left his office and entered the hall, he could view the counter before entering the store. There were two tall black men, both casually dressed, which in the Valley usually meant polo shirt, slacks and ‘Burkies’ with socks. One of them was wearing a colorful tunic, what Merrill had become accustomed to as traditional African Wear. These were not his usual customers. He entered the store, turned to the left away from the counter and went around the center display. This was his custom when he saw new clients. This allowed him to get a sense of them before accepting their business, and then he would appear at the far side of the counter to allow the desk staff to introduce him.

“Gentlemen, this is Merrill” Charlie said to the men in the slightly promoting tone and then he turned and nodded toward the man in the tunic. “This is Mr. Johnson; he would like to have a word with you.”

“Good evening” Merrill said. He gave them an approving nod, and asked how he could help them. Only the man in the colored shirt spoke. He seemed to be sizing up Merrill. “I need to talk to you about my wife.”

Merrill seemed confused; it was not the usual request. “Is this about a reading? Do I know you?”

“No, I don’t think we have ever met. But you have read for my wife. She’s

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missing and I was hoping you might have some clues on where she went.”

It was then that Merrill realized who he was: Jerald Johnson. He invited the men to join him in his office and looked up at Charlie. “This won’t be a reading. We will be out in a few minutes. Keep me open.” He stepped behind the men and gestured for them to follow. When he entered his room he stepped around his desk offered them the two chairs.

“I’m assuming that your wife’s name is Johanna and you are Jerald.” Both of the men seemed stiff as if the mere presence of a reader went against their grain and Merrill had experienced the attitude many times before. No matter how urgent the need, it would have taken a lot for them to come into a store like this, especially to talk to a reader. There was more, even though the man seemed to be calm, his presence exuded agitation. Was it concern? Jealousy? Whatever he was feeling, Merrill realized that the man’s pride would never allow him to show it. Not to him anyway. The feelings coming from the other man were different. They were made up of sheer hostility and distrust. His glaring eyes supported the feelings Merrill was sensing. He would have to be careful how he talked with them and not let anything seem to rely on his intuitive. “I read for her last week.”

“Did she say anything about going on a trip?”

“No, in fact I got the impression that she was going to be super busy with work over the next month or so. She said something about wishing that the two of you could get away for awhile, but didn’t see how that could happen.”

“Did she say anything that might say where she went?” The man leaned forward, “She disappeared last Saturday, just two days after she came here.”

“Nothing that...”

“Come on Jerald.” The other man rose and began to leave. “I told you that this was a dead end before we came.”

“Thank you” said Jerald as he rose. And the two just left.

Merrill sat there for a moment, turned off the light and gazed into the flame of the small candle. Johanna had been his client ever since he started working with the store. He had seen her change since she had been married. She had always been the self-centered type, looking for any way to make her personal dream happen. But she had become more obsessed as she attained the things she wanted. Nothing was ever enough, but there was something underneath that Merrill always thought was goodness trying to make its way to the surface. Besides, she had been a client so long that she seemed like a long-term friend. He hoped nothing tragic had happened. He took the cards out of their case and bag and began to shuffle and cut. As he laid the first card out, ‘The Tower’, he sensed dread in that card and the second card that crossed it, ‘The Devil’ was no better. Everything had apparently fallen apart and it was by her own device. He could tell immediately

that this was not going to be a good reading.

Thirty minutes and three casts later, Merrill was standing outside Kalen's office. He poked his head in and found Kalen talking with Jan. "Come on in", Kalen said shifting his weight in his chair. "How was your reading?"

"It was no reading and it looks like you... ah, Muriel was right there is a problem. Johanna is missing and I don't have a good feeling about it and neither do my cards for that matter." Both Kalen and Jan looked at Merrill like he had three eyes in his head. "She's what?" Jan sounded like she was in disbelief. "The one guy was Johanna's husband, and I will tell you, that was a strange way to meet the husband of someone you have known for a long time and on top of that I could hardly talk to him. I got the definite impression that the other guy really didn't want anything to do with psychics. He couldn't wait to get out of my office." Merrill paused. "I just read for her last week, and I told her that she was getting into something that she shouldn't. Apparently she didn't listen, and now my casts are showing that she is in real trouble."

Merrill looked at Kalen. "Is there any chance of getting your guides to give us a little more to go on?"

"Not after Muriel has already told us it was coming. Not this soon anyway. If he wanted us to know, he would have told us. So, I guess we're into it."

"How 'bout you Jan? You know her don't you?"

"Yes, but it's been months since she has come to see me. Not since she misplaced her father's picture. We found that easily enough, so the rapport is there, but I need an item of hers."

"I don't think the husband is going to be much help, so we are going to have to try to dig something up ourselves. I remember her telling me that she worked for some game company in Sunnyvale. I don't think there are many there. I will check that part out on the net when I get home. You guys available tomorrow?"

"Not until about three, I have to work in the morning." Jan said.

"Kalen?"

Merrill was distracted. Between trying to figure out the meaning of the readings he had just done, the strange visit by his unexpected guests and then there was a third element in the mix, Jan. She had become a growing distraction, and that distraction had taken him out of the conversation into his own thoughts. 'She is so beautiful. She's so petit, and I love how she dresses in those old English peasant clothes, barefoot most of the time. It drives me crazy. I have to stop thinking about her. But those bright beautiful brown eyes just pull me in and her smell...'

"Merrill?" Jan said. "Are you ok?" She looked concerned. "Ah... Oh, Ah... I'll be here," he finally responded, feeling a little embarrassed that he had faded away and even more embarrassed that he was afraid that his arousal might be

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detected.

And so it was decided, they would meet there the next afternoon. None of them was sure how they would find her, but any way it went they needed an item that she owns and has handled. And it was up to Merrill had to figure out how they could get that. The store was closing, none of them had made any real money that night and the pit in Merrill's stomach was growing larger.

Chapter 4

Grant stared blankly at the monitor in front of him. "Damn, I wish this thing would hurry up." Apparently there was something wrong with the lines. Usually the DSL flew from page to page, but this evening, it was at a crawl, and taking up to five minutes to pull up a page and that was on the infrequent times it didn't time out. It always seems to be like that, he thought, when you really want to get something done.

He sat back in his padded office chair, mindless of his finger tapping on the arm of the chair. "Forget it", he growled at the machine, selected 'Turn off Computer' and stood up. "I guess I wanted a cup of coffee anyway." It had been a frustrating evening, he really didn't want to work but his normal caseload had kept him from following up on Oscar's murder the way he wanted to. He had requested being assigned the case, but there wasn't enough evidence to bring the FBI into what was being considered a local concern so there really wasn't a case. There probably wouldn't be unless he found something on his own. He thought the fact that he had been called by the victim should have been enough.

He stared down at corner computer table deciding what he should take with him. Grabbing only his USB drive, he turned and crossed the room to the closet and slid the door open. He picked up his leather computer case that looked like a slightly oversize attaché, and flipped the strap over his shoulder.

The evening was a cool sixty degrees outside as he strolled out to the little strip mall bordering the west side of the apartment complex, separating it from the constant roar of I-280, the western part of the loop that traveled through the valley up to San Francisco. In the center of one side of the mall there was a fairly large Asian grocery that anchored the half dozen other smaller businesses. It had been, up until about a year before, one of the large chain grocers. After they left, the building was left empty, until fairly recently.

The parking lot was always busy, even without the grocers support. Other

than the video store, barber and dry cleaners that were almost always present in similar malls, there were two outstanding features that took the outside corners of the malls 'L' shape. One was the most wonderful Eastern Bakery. It was not uncommon for Grant to stop there in the morning and pick up coffee and a treat on the way to work and stop again on the way home for the some of the wonderful flatbread to go with the spicy curry he loved to cook for dinner. The other feature was the little corner coffee shop on the opposite end, which was where he was heading.

As he pushed his way through the swinging glass door he saw that his favorite corner was open. Sometimes on a rainy weekend he would come here to read and enjoy a cappuccino. It wasn't because he couldn't do that in his apartment; in fact he really preferred the espresso drinks he made himself. But he enjoyed watching the people and feeling like he was a part of the community. The apartment complex provided the owners of the coffee shop with plenty of regulars that over time recognized each other.

He navigated his way around the scattered tables, placed his load on his chair and then went and placed his order. "Triple White Chocolate Breve', No Foam, Extra Hot."

The barista laughed. "Don't you ever order the same thing?"

Grant looked surprised. "What? You remember?"

"Sure, last time you were in it was a Double Vanilla Latte, No Foam, Extra Hot, and I can probably tell you what you had a couple times back.

"How do you do that? It has probably been over a couple of weeks."

"Yeah, but you always order No Foam, Extra Hot." The young man handed Grant his drink. "That'll be three bucks."

Grant handed him a five and when he was handed his change he grinned and dropped the two bills in the tip jar. "I guess I will have to start being more consistent."

When he returned to his chair, he unpacked the dreadful laptop. He hated working with it or really any laptop because of the inconvenient keyboards and mice they always had. Connecting the power cord and plugging it into the wall plug behind him he noticed that the external power light came on but not the battery light. When he opened it and pressed the power on button, a small message appeared on the LCD screen: 'Battery Power Low'. "Well, Oscar, you are going to have to wait a few minutes longer."

Closing the lid of the computer to let it charge a few minutes, he took a sip of his coffee and with a satisfied sigh sat back and waited. There were very few others in the shop; of course he expected that on a Tuesday night. So he closed his eyes and thought about Sarah. The lunch date had been very pleasant especially

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due to her company.

As he had anticipated, Sarah was very unusual in very attractive ways. Not only was she beautiful, but she was very intelligent and what had surprised him was that they had quite a lot in common. She was meticulous in her likings for food and drink, she loved the technical part of her work and she loved problem solving.

He had asked her if she liked Indian food and was thrilled when he suggested that they go up to Castro Street. Mountain View had some of the best Indian and Asian Restaurants in the entire Bay Area. She had not been surprised at all when he suggested going to Sue's. But he had been, especially when the owner, who always greeted her guests, knew her by name. He remembered feeling a little uncomfortable when she suggested the tandori in what he thought would be *his* choice of restaurant. And of course she was right; it was delicious. Afterward they had walked across the street into Bookbuyer's. This was another commonality; they were both, using her words, frequent customers of the 'best used bookstore in California'.

When he had dropped her off at her office, they had agreed that it would be fun to go out again, maybe down to one of the beach towns. She had suggested that the best time for her would be on Thursday, which she always had off and as it turned out, he could adjust his schedule.

Almost falling asleep with his warm reflection, Grant suddenly jerked awake realizing more than adequate time had passed for his battery to be recharged enough to use. He took a sip of his coffee, lifted the lid once more and pressed the button. This time the computer came to life and the wireless card that extended from its side lit up. He was online.

Grant took another sip of his coffee and began his search. First bringing up the web page for the San Jose Mercury, selected archives and then filled in the authorization pop-up with his federal membership and ID. In the search grid, he typed Oscar Thornwood and selected 'by author' and pressed enter.

He really didn't know what to expect to be displayed. He really didn't pay much attention to the individual writers and was completely amazed by the over four hundred entries that came up. Fortunately, the search had defaulted on most recent first. He began his review of article titles and saw immediately that the reporter had been working on a series that reviewed political corruption scandals. WASHINGTON GOVERNOR'S RACE CHALLENGED AS FRAUDULENT, NEW VOTING PROCESS INVESTIGATED, a pretty harsh challenge by both Republicans and Democrats he thought, I don't think there is anyone in the nation that isn't aware of that case. It's a little too reminiscent of the Florida situation during the Bush election. Now the election committee wants to

hide behind what they call a flawed system and avoid their responsibility. They seem to think the answer is in computerized voting. LEADER APOLOGIZES FOR SCANDAL, hmm, money laundering and kickbacks, pretty common these days, he thought. ENRON'S CRASH, he doubted the extent of that one would ever be known. He had worked on part of the background on that one, but who hadn't. It was a huge mess that had links high in the government only they couldn't really nail down how high. There were suspicions, both public and within the agency. GOVERNOR CANDIDATES DEBATE BECOMES BRUTAL, that was maybe a bit of a sensationalist leader but there had been some pretty ugly mud slinging and allegations mishandlings of public money involved. WHEN DOES A GIFT BECOME A BRIBE, that question has been going since before he was born, he thought.

He realized there was a common thread among the articles. It seemed that Oscar was becoming a kind of specialist on financial corruption within the state and federal governments. He wondered if that was why his office had been resistant to offering his assistance to solving the demise of Oscar.

Oscar had been stepping on some heavy duty toes. He had called him and then he was killed. Not killed, *assassinated*, Grant thought. Who ever used the ice pick in that way was too experienced to not be a professional. But why? I am not going to be able to let this rest, and there is no way I am going to follow this up on my day off. Gulping down the rest of his neglected breve', Grant packed up his machine and left. The short walk home was refreshing and cleared his head enough to make the decision. He would call in tomorrow and request vacation for a couple of weeks. He needed time off anyway; he had gone too long without some free time of his own. And who knows, maybe he could spend a few days with Sarah.



Grant had slept only intermittently when his alarm jolted him away from the series of questions that had been circling in his mind throughout the night. When he did sleep, the dreams he had were disturbing. In one dream he found himself tied to a cement column in a parking garage with his own hand cuffs while the 'bad guys' waved at him cheerfully as they drove away in their shiny Corvette and later to find that the handcuffs were an illusion.

His arm instinctively swung across his body allowing his hand to slap down on the defenseless clock radio. Six o'clock and there is no way I am going to work, he thought as he swung his legs out into the cool air and touched his feet down on to the carpet. He knew what the dream meant.

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There was no great mystery. He had been feeling like his hands were tied behind his back ever since he took on the job of section leader.

He slowly rose and made his way into the bathroom to relieve himself. He was thinking about how he was going to proceed for the day. Washing his hands and face and taking the water up into his eyes and then into his hair he began to gain some focus. First I need my coffee, he thought. He grabbed his robe and wandered slowly down the hall to the kitchen. The coffee was ready of course, and soon he was sitting out on his patio chair smoking his first cigarette of the day and sipping on it.

Life came fully back to his body and his mind. The ducks were waiting for him. It seemed as though they had all decided that he was late and kept poking their heads in to look for bread and back out again from the many small entrances at the base of the fence. "Sorry guys, you're gonna have to wait."

Having finished his cigarette, he went back inside, turned on his computer, picked up the phone and dialed. "Federal Bureau of Investigation, Hanson speaking," the voice on the phone said in a hard but professional tone.

"Bill, this is Grant. Has Greg made it in yet?"

"Just coming in now, hang on."

"Greg Stoddard"

"Greg, It's Grant. I've decided to take some vacation. There's just routine stuff on the boards right now, so for the next couple of weeks, you're in charge. Let Kathy know I will e-mail in the paperwork."

"Anything wrong Grant?" Greg's voice showed just a touch of concern.

"No, just tired, and there is a situation I want to follow up on. I may have to call on you to do some checking for me later on if I run into any blind leads."

"No, problem, following up on that little forensic gal I am guessing", Greg said with just a hint of glibness.

"Well there is that too." Grant laughed. His tone sounded lighter.

"Have fun."

"Thanks," he said and then hung up. Now, he thought, let's see if this computer is going to cooperate.

Fortunately, the computer was working. He had access to the databases he needed through the secure ISP to the Bureau that he could not have accessed from the café the night before and after searching the unsolved case files that tied into all of the states. He found several that involved a murder using a sharp instrument into the cranium and it looked like any or all of them might match up with this case and none of them were solved.

Case, he thought. Well, not officially but it was his case now. For each of these matches, he filled out a request that a copy of the coroners report be sent

to Sarah for review and downloaded the respective files to his computer in case any of them proved to be a positive match. Afterward he sent Sarah an e-mail explaining the files that would be coming and asked that she call him when they got there. Of course he couldn't help adding that he was looking forward to Thursday and that he would pick her up at ten.

He took a sip of his coffee and found that once again he had let it get cold. While he went to get a refill, he decided that his next step would be to have a look up where the body was found, Skyline.

Chapter 5

Through the haze Merrill could barely make out the curvaceous form of Johanna. She was naked and strapped to a bed with manacles restraining both her arms and legs forcing her to be stretched out in an awkward cross. There was a worm wrapped around her neck and traveling down between her breasts and inserted grotesquely into her vagina. She was writhing in what seemed to be this strange mix of pleasure and terror. There was the strong odor of cedar that surrounded her and he could hear her screams.

Waking in a start, Merrill sat up realizing the clarity of the dream he had just endured. His stomach turned in revulsion and sweat poured from all over his body as he tried to shake the disturbing images still locked into his now conscious mind.

He turned and noted that Cheryl had left for work already. He had told her when he got home the previous night about the strange happenings at the store and that he and the others were going to try to figure out what happened to Johanna.

But he couldn't get the awful dream out of his head. He went into the living room where his laptop laid on the coffee table and turned it on. Still groggy he opened the sliding door to the patio and stepped out to let the morning coolness refresh him and to have a cigarette but his anxiousness wouldn't allow him even that pleasure.

He flew back inside and began typing furiously. He brought up Google, typed in 'Game Software Design Sunnyvale'. He noted that there was only one listed, most of the others in the area were in Palo Alto, San Jose and Los Gatos. That has to be the one, he thought.

Using his mouse he copied down the address and phone number and pasted

it into notepad. He copied only the address into memory and then typed 'www.mapquest.com' and pasted in the address. With this he confirmed that company was near the train station as he had thought. He sent the map to the printer in the back room. He wandered down the hall and went to the second bedroom that acted as an office, retrieved the copy, and went back into the living room. He wrote the phone number on it and then looked down at the time at the lower part of the screen. He realized that it was only 9:30 and it would be quite awhile before the others showed up at the store so all he could do until then would be to try using his psychic ability to try to get more clues. They were futile attempts.

By noon, Merrill couldn't handle it any longer, so he had driven up to the Psychic House to wait and found the other two already there.

"What are you doing here so early Jan? I thought you couldn't be here until at least two."

"I couldn't concentrate at work. All I could think about was Johanna. It was as if she was invading my sleep."

"I had a dream too", Kalen offered. "Mine was not anything like you two had, but who knows, it might be important. It was more of a vision really. I just saw a really evil looking woman, a painting I think and she was looking at a paper cup that was wearing sunglasses."

"What?" both Merrill and Jan exclaimed. "What could that have to do with anything?" Merrill paused. "Of course last night I couldn't see the relevance of the snake eating through the man, that's not to say I understand it now either. But the worm has reoccurred and hopefully we can make all of this make sense eventually. Did you by chance have any luck with channeling?"

"No."

"Ok," Jan said, "What's the plan? Did you figure out where we need to go?"



Fifteen minutes later they were standing outside a Spanish style building with a center portico that stood adjacent to the Sunnyvale Train Station. It looked almost like a hacienda that had been converted into offices and there was a Mexican Restaurant at the far end. "Kalen, why don't you wait here and let Jan and I give it a try. That way if we don't manage anything, they won't know who you are if we have to try something else."

Kalen nodded and took a seat by a fountain in the center of the portico. Merrill and Jan went to the second floor toward the far end of the building. Alpha Gamma Engineering was printed on a sign on the door in an obscure

font with heavy serifs. "This has to be it", Merrill said as he grasped the doorknob and turned.

When they entered, they found themselves in a room large enough to be a great room that had two offices in front of them and went off into other large areas in either direction. To their left they could see that it went down a hall and opened up into what appeared to be a bullpen of computer stations. To their right, the room narrowed but then reopened into another great room that had a ping-pong table in the center. There were several office doors on each wall that they could see and each wall had the occasional arcade video game and tables with what couldn't be described as anything but toys. Paddle balls, plastic fantasy creatures and warriors were the most obvious. Darth Vader guarded the entrance to one of the doors near the end.

The doors were open to the two offices in front of them. Each had a sign next to the door. The one on the left said, 'Candice Jacobs Office Manager' and the one on the right said, 'Johanna Johnson'. Merrill noticed movement in Candice's office. Jan had entered the room behind Merrill; even though he was only 5'6", her 4' 11" and slight body was fully hidden behind him.

Merrill gave her a nod toward the other door and went to talk to the woman named Candice. As Merrill walked into the office Jan slipped unnoticed into the other room. The middle aged woman that seemed more like a den mother than a secretary was sitting at a desk that was to the left of the door.

"Hi, I'm Sidney Stone and I am from Office Supplies on Wheels. We are a new company and I just wanted to say hello and ask that next time you need office supplies that you look for us on our website." As he spoke he maneuvered himself to the far side of the desk so that he could make out movement outside of the door.

"We usually buy our office supplies from Office Depot", said the kind face of the woman behind the desk. "I'm not sure that we would be too interested in changing, unless there is a fair amount of difference in price. We have had pretty good luck with getting what we need."

"I can guarantee that you will find our prices far better than our competitors", said Merrill.

Out of the corner of his eye and not in view of Candice, Merrill could see Jan give him a nod and head toward the entrance.

"And we guarantee delivery the next day on anything ordered before 4:30. Here, let me give you my card and when you have time to look at the web site, then give me a call and we can set you up with an account", he said reaching into his wallet. "Oh, wait. I seem to have run out of cards, let me run down to the car and get one. I should only be a couple of minutes."

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Candice nodded and Merrill was on his way out the door. It was just in time it seemed because as he was leaving a tall sandy haired man came out of the office just beyond the one Jan had been in and headed toward Candice's office. Merrill gave him a nod as he left through the front door, sweat began forming on his forehead.

Outside, Merrill found Jan with Kalen in the portico and gestured toward the way out. Once clear of the building he looked wide eyed at Jan. "That was close", he said. "The guy in the next office came out just after you left. What did you find?"

Jan held out her hand upside down and placed something into Merrill's palm. It was a stone statue of an African figure, about 1" long, very narrow aside from the head dress that looked like a double axe.

Still walking toward the car, Merrill studied the small figure carefully. "If I am not mistaken, this is an Orisha. In several parts of Africa, there are Yoruba tribes. They believe in ancestors that take on association with natural structures everything from rocks to lakes to mountains, or in this case, I believe it is Shango, the Thunder God."

They had arrived at the car so he handed the Orisha back to Jan. "Let's head back to the store and we can work in my office."



When the three returned to the Psychic House, they were met just outside by a man, vaguely familiar to Merrill. It was Jerald Johnson. "I dropped by to apologize for leaving so abruptly last night", he said. "Cal is superstitious and really didn't want to come here. When you said that you didn't know where she was, well... it was all the excuse he needed to drag me out of here."

Kalen and Jan looked at Mr. Johnson excused themselves and entered the store.

"What can I do for you Mr. Johnson?" Merrill sensed the man was still anxious but seemed to be handling the stress much better than the night before. "I wanted to see if maybe you could do a reading for me in respect to finding Johanna. I am really more than anxious for her."

Merrill winced, "I don't think that is a good idea. Right now emotions are running so high that anything that I could draw through you about her would be distorted and I don't want to pass on bad information. But, I will do some work on my own and if I come up with anything, I will most certainly call you if you want to give me your number."

"I suppose you're right, but I really would like you to try. If you think you can do it better on your own I'll trust you're judgment." He reached into his wallet, took out a business card and handed it to Merrill. "Use the cell, I am not sure where I will be and I always have it on."

"I can't guarantee that I will come up with anything at all, but if I do..."

"Thank you, Merrill." The tall dark man walked away toward the rear of the building where his car was parked and Merrill went inside to his office where Kalen and Jan were waiting.

"Now, that was strange", said Jan, holding up the little Orisha. "He was the last person I wanted to see just after going and stealing this."

"Borrowed," corrected Kalen. "Besides, he might even appreciate what we are doing."

"Somehow I don't think so." Merrill said low tone. "My intuition tells me he was more worried about what we might know more than about her. Another thing I picked up was that the other guy that was here the other night was her brother and the reason he doesn't like us is because he fears backlash from his Orisha. I couldn't figure that out before, probably could now because of that little guy there," he said, pointing at the statue. "I think that was a gift from him."

Jan held Shango loosely in her closed hand. "I think you are right," she said. "And I can tell she handled it every day." She paused, looking at the tiny figure. "Light a candle for me and close that curtain. I want to try going deeper into it."

As soon as Merrill had lit the candle and drawn the shade to keep extra light out of the room, Jan sat perfectly still. She held the figure in her closed hand at first and then only between her finger tips. Her eyes stared at the flame of the candle and all of her facial muscles went limp. Like a zombie, alive but not, she sat there. Five minutes past, but for Merrill watching, it felt like an hour.

Jan's forehead began to bead with sweat and then she began to shake convulsively.

Reaching down, Merrill forced her hands which had tightened into a death grip with the small stone idol and forced it out. "Jan! Pull out."

As soon as the stone left her hand, the shaking stopped and her head slumped temporarily forward. Then slowly lifting it once again, she sighed.

They let her rest a few minutes and then she began to talk slowly. "Well, I can tell you that she is alive, at least for now. And I can also tell you that she is west of here. Somehow in connection with feeling the direction, I saw an image of the moon and it seemed to be at first quarter."

Merrill pulled out his gold pocket watch and opened it. The face of the watch had a moving picture of the moon that reflected the current phase. "The moon is now dark, so the time frame we are in now is not consistent," he said more

thinking out loud than directing the information. Looking up at Jan he said, "And you got that with the direction?"

"Yes, and somehow I feel they are related."

Again Merrill started thinking out loud, "West and moon, west and partial moon, west and HALF MOON! That's it! Half Moon Bay is west of here. Guys we have a field trip to go on." Looking again at his watch, "It's about 2:00 now, would be about 2:45 by the time we would get there and I know that place shuts down by 6:00."

Jan cut in. "We have to give it a try, I was sensing a lot of fear in my contact and with those dreams we had, I really don't know how much time we have."

"Ok, come on, we'll take my van."

"I still don't know what we are looking for", said Kalen.

Chapter 6

Once Grant finally got out of the apartment, it had only taken him thirty minutes to travel up Saratoga Road, through Saratoga and up the hill to Alice's Restaurant. He had driven the cherry red 1969 Catalina Ventura that he had restored and 'beefed up' a bit. He decided since he was not officially working, he would leave the Fed plates behind.

The Cat was his baby that he had nurtured back to health over the past five years and he had only driven it a few miles. It had taken him months just to find manifolds to support the specialized Quadra-jet carburetor, but it was well worth it. At low speeds it used very small intakes and was relatively efficient on gas for a big car. But when he stepped into it, that car just up and hauled. Or at least it should, he hadn't had time to take it out for a real drive ever since he finished it last winter.

In front of the restaurant he found the inevitable row of motorcycles. It didn't seem to matter what day of the week, he thought, they are always here.

While driving he always liked to listen to the news. He learned that there had been an accident on the 280 Freeway near Redwood City and traffic was backed up all the way down to the Highway 101 interchange. Of course he knew that since he passed right over it just after he left the apartment. This was pretty normal for that stretch which is why he usually avoided it. He realized that he was not in the mood for the regular news broadcast and switched to another channel. The next station on the dial was a talk radio station, which he seldom listened to,

but the name Oscar Thornwood caught his attention. The caller talking was asking if Thornwood's death might have any connection to the series of articles he had been writing on political corruption. He, like many of the listeners of this particular host was convinced of some clandestine motives involving sinister governmental plots all involving the *other* political party of course.

Grant was amused with the caller's firm conviction and listened until he reached Alice's. Then he got out of the car and walked up to the small grocery store on the south end. He noticed something strange. He wondered why would there be a crotch rocket parked with the conventional bikes? Those guys don't have anything in common. He shrugged and went into the store.

Other than the man in the white tee shirt behind the counter, there were three others that seemed to be as much loitering as shopping. They all wore different styles of motorcycle leathers and jackets complete with patches of their motorcycle clubs.

"Excuse me," Grant said to the clerk. "Were you working on Saturday?"

"Yes, I work here pretty much every Saturday," the clerk responded in a less than enthusiastic tone. "I'd change that if I could, but you know that ain't happenin'."

"I suppose you heard that a man was found murdered up the hill on Saturday."

The clerk nodded.

"Well, I was hoping to talk to some of the riders that may have seen anything that morning. You know if any of the guys here today were around then?"

The man turned and yelled across the store, "Hey Charlie, you were here on Saturday weren't you?"

A burly man with a curly beard, tank top and whose bare arms were solid with tattoos came sauntering down the center food isle. Grant thought he looked a little stoned which was confirmed with the acrid odor that emanated from him. "Yeah, I took the run three times on Saturday. It was a great day for it."

"I have heard it was a great ride," said Grant. "I haven't had a chance to try it yet."

"Not much thrill with that whale you got out there," the man said with a slight laugh.

"It does well enough, but I thought I might come back with my bike one day and give it a try."

"What kinda bike you got man?"

"I picked up a Triumph Rocket a couple of months back and haven't really had a chance to make her fly," said Grant. "Guess I should bring her up here one of these days and take the run."

"That's cool... come on up and well fly it together. That blue one second from the end is mine," he said. To Grant's surprise the big biker was pointing at

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the seemingly misplaced rocket.

"Nice wheels." Grant paused in appreciation and wonder of the man's choice in bikes. "The reason I am up here right now is to find out what I can about anything unusual you might have seen up near the lookout. Anybody hanging out that might have seemed odd to you."

"Actually there was, fairly early in the day, in fact the fog hadn't really lifted," the man said. "There was a truck backed into the corner with the back open. I thought it was kinda early for tourists bein' so foggy. In fact I wouldn't have seen them at all except that I scared the shit outta myself on the curves just before it and I pulled off for a second to regroup."

"Could you tell what kind of truck it was?"

"It was a black dualee, big four door type. Don't know the make."

"Thanks Charlie, that helps a lot. Maybe I'll stop up and well take the run together one of these days."

"Be cool man."

Giving the clerk a wave of thanks, Grant walked out to his car. Bet those blue shirts didn't even try checking out the riders on Saturday, he thought.

The fog had lifted to the top of the ridge providing more than adequate visibility. "What the Hell," Grant said out loud as he pulled out of the parking lot. Once centered in his lane, he stomped on the accelerator. With a whooshing sound from the carbs the Cat took off. The extra wide tires didn't even squeal, they just grabbed in and within a few seconds Grant was entering the first turns that began at the first crest of the steep hill at over 90 miles per hour. Hitting the brakes and drifting through the first curves at 70, Grant was glad he had put in the extra stiff suspension. He had wondered if the extra stiffness that made the normal ride a little less than cushy was worth it, he no longer had any doubts. The car was holding the road like a champ. He stepped into the carbs again and again he was up over 90 and still accelerating. Over the next knoll the car took flight. It was only for a fraction of a second but he was off the ground. Quickly he braked again and drifted through the three sudden curves that came before the flats. Now with the two mile straight-away, he could really let it fly. When he hit the next two mile climb he was going 130. Half way up he let up and let gravity slow the big car down, when he came to the final curves he was back down to 50 and slowed it further so that he could pull off.

With the crunching of gravel and a plume of dust, the Catalina had shown her worth. He couldn't have been more pleased. He just sat there for a moment in appreciation that he had delayed all of these months.

Stepping out onto the gravel, he got himself back into an investigative mindset. He could see the remnants of crime scene tape that someone had carelessly

ripped off leaving just a circle of yellow on a tree to the northwestern edge of the parking lot.

Sure don't have to guess where the crime scene is, he thought as he walked over and pulled down the tape. Then he looked at the gravel near the end of the traffic barricade. Even with the traffic that had passed through the lot since Saturday he could still make out the remnants of dual tread marks left by a heavy truck.

They were spun out, which meant that they left in a hurry. Slowly examining the ground he made his way around the barricade and onto the damp ground. It was completely trampled down of course. He had expected that since there had already been a crowd of investigators and police recording every detail of the area and the Coroner's people removing the body.

He really didn't know what he was looking for but he didn't trust others not to overlook something. He scanned the area where he assumed the body had been and found nothing. Taking out and lighting a cigarette, he squatted down to think about what he knew so far. Just as he let out the first deep inhale of smoke he noticed about twenty feet down the cliff there was a small bit of red cloth stuck on a broken off branch of a log. He stood and looked more carefully. The path was like a staircase of boulders almost until he reached the log. The last step was steep and while getting down he almost ran into the log himself. When he turned, he noticed that the edge of the last rock was scraped. He took the cloth remnant that seemed to be flannel, like part of a plaid work shirt then went back to the rock.

Just below the scrape he picked up a few small slivers of wood which his nose told him were cedar. He looked around. There were no cedar trees in this section of the forest, not close anyway. He stopped again and took another draw off of his cigarette. The muddy ground showed signs of traffic going down below the log onto another shelf about thirty feet further going off to the left. Being careful to take one side from the path so he wouldn't disturb any shoe markings, he slowly made his way down. When he reached the shelf and went another twenty feet the path took a curve around a boulder that almost made the path impassable.

Grant reluctantly put out his cigarette so that he could use both hands and went out on the ledge to make the turn. He had to go down to where the path was at eye level in order not to disturb things. While balancing himself against the side of the hill, mud kept breaking off sending small showers of mud and pebbles onto his shirt. He was about to turn back when he saw that path cut back under an overhang and stopped. He could see a crate.

He climbed across a little further again avoiding the path, he climbed up to the small shelf. Once he was on level ground he could see that it was not a crate, it

was a cedar chest and it had a lock on it.

Quite awhile had passed since Grant had picked a lock but he always carried his tools with him in his wallet, just in case. They were little tools that he had modified himself to keep them small with tubes for handles that slid over the shafts to slide out and flip sideways to make a 't' for leverage. He didn't have any latex gloves so he would have to be careful not to touch anything other than the lock itself, he thought. Bad enough to be touching the lock, but he could see no choice in that. Moments later the lock was open and he carefully lifted the lock tang.

"Oh, shit!" He was not much for swearing but the stench that came out of the box was horrible. He realized that the chest had rubber seals that held back the smell until it was opened. And the source of the stench was the partially decomposed body of a woman probably less than a week old by his guess. The once tall blond was naked and even now Grant could tell she was once beautiful. But you couldn't say that about her then.

He closed the lid of the chest, took out his cell phone and dialed 911. It was goin' going to be a busy week for Sarah, he thought.

Chapter 7

"So much for forty-five minutes," said Kalen disgustedly as he looked at the lines of cars in front of the van. They had made great time on the 280 but as soon as they took the turn off to the 92, it had been a crawl. "Damn construction, we could have gone over to Santa Cruz and up the coast in less time."

"We have only lost fifteen minutes Kalen", Jan said with a hint of patronization to her voice. "I am anxious too, but it won't do any good to get angry. I think we are all concerned enough without adding to the tension."

Just then they came up to a flagman who cut off the line of cars heading into town with them. "Well, I guess we will make it through on the next turn," said Merrill as he brought the van to a halt. "Once we get beyond here, we will only be five minutes away from downtown. It could have been much worse. As it is we will still have a good hour and a half before the businesses start shutting down and most of them stay open an hour after that. I hope we have found something by then."

Jan held the little figure of Shango in her hand. It felt warm, not just from the heat of her hand, but from something inside. She was just starting to reach into the feeling of it when the van lurched forward.

“Finally,” Kalen said, “I was beginning to think we would never get on our way.”

Merrill steered the van into the left lane and while cut off from their normal lane by construction cones, they were at least moving at half speed toward their destination. After about a mile they were directed back into their normal lane and began passing the long line of cars that was forming heading the other way. “There has to be a better way for them to do that. Or at least they could choose a better time than close to rush hour during a business week.”

The line of cars heading out of town extended the full two miles to the turn off heading into town. “Ok, we’re here,” said Jan. “Are you going to park behind the main pavilion?”

“Yes, I thought I would, then we can make a loop heading north down this side of the road and then back up the other, to see what we can either see or feel.”

Merrill parked the van and the three of them walked into the pavilion. Jan suddenly stopped and looked around. She saw the coffee shop that faced the main street and had a realization. “She was here,” she exclaimed. “I can feel it.” She held the stone statue now tightly in her hand and made a slow rotation with her body. I am almost certain that the feeling is stronger that way,” as she headed toward the front of the building. After going outside she stopped and felt again.

Merrill took out a cigarette, lit it and took a deep drag. “I don’t even have the statue and I can tell you we have to go that way,” he said pointing south with the cigarette.

“I think you are right,” said Jan.

“I don’t feel anything at all,” said Kalen sounding a little disappointed.

But they all moved south, more assured with each step. After about two blocks, both Jan and Merrill stopped suddenly. “That building over there,” Jan said excitedly and pointed at the old barn with the Feed sign on the top. “I am sure of it.”

Merrill threw down his cigarette and the unlikely looking trio began running until they had gone about half a block. Then Kalen stopped suddenly and looked like he might fall over. Gasping for breath, he struggled out, “Sorry guys, I just can’t do that.”

Merrill and Jan stopped and waited for Kalen to catch his breath and the three proceeded at a more even step. Still anxious but more careful about how they moved. “Guess we shouldn’t go running in there like a bunch of idiots anyway,” said Jan. “How do you want to approach this? I don’t suppose we can just go in and tell whoever is there that we are three psychics and we are trying to track down a woman who is missing and that we have been drawn here?”

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“Yup, that’s exactly what I am going to tell them,” Merrill said as if a matter of fact.

“Are you nuts?”

But in a sense, that was exactly what Merrill did. After they went up the stairs and entered the store, they all suddenly stopped. All three felt like the hairs covering their bodies were suddenly standing straight out. Kalen spoke first. “There is something just plain nasty in here.”

Merrill put his hand in front of him, palm out, and like a directional antenna he used it to focus on the negative energy he felt. He turned from left to right twice until he felt he was certain. “It comes from over there,” he pointed off to his left. In direct view was the painting of the evil looking old lady. “Oh, my,” said Kalen. “That’s the painting in my dream. She’s the one looking at the coffee cup wearing sunglasses.”

“Can I help you?” A disembodied voice came from behind them. Merrill steadied Kalen who looked like he might faint. Then a thin man in denims and a dark polo shirt appeared from behind a display. “Actually,” said Merrill, “we are hoping that you can.” He stepped forward and shook the hand of who Merrill had correctly assumed was the owner of the store. “My name is Merrill, this is Jan and this is Kalen. I know this is going to sound strange, but...” The man cut him off mid-sentence. “Go ahead; what you have to say can’t be much stranger than everything else that has happened this week.” Merrill stepped back and looked at the man wondering if maybe they had come at a bad time.

“Well...” Merrill continued, “The three of us are psychics and we are trying to find out what happened to a woman that has turned up missing and our trail has brought us here.”

He stopped and waited for the anticipated rejection.

“Well, as strange as you may think that sounds,” said the man. “It fits right in. Everything has gone wrong and has even felt wrong since Saturday early. My name’s Roger Cramer, I own this place.”

“Would you mind telling us your story? It could be that there is more to all of this than you know. So, it might be best if we hear it all.”

“Oh, I am more than happy to. I’ve needed to talk to someone about it, just drivin’ me nuts. As I was opening the door on Saturday morning a truck backed up to my front door. A couple of guys dropped off this really beautiful chest with a mirror. Not the kind of thing I get all that often, it was a higher grade of furniture than I usually see here. Custom built. It even had a cedar lining. It was a beautiful thing.”

Roger’s brow wrinkled. “I was happy to take the piece on consignment or even purchase it for that matter. The guys said that their boss had said to leave it

on consignment and for me to take the usual rate. They gave me a card, so I went back to get the paperwork for them. But by the time I came back, they were driving away.” Roger paused momentarily to see if his listeners understood the strangeness of this.

“That is a little odd,” said Merrill.

“I’ll say it is, with a piece that nice, to just leave it without an agreement?” Roger seemed a little agitated with the understatement. “But it gets even stranger. It wasn’t even a half hour later this rich lady comes in and almost immediately seems to fall in love with the thing. She offers four thousand dollars for it. Well, I know that this is a nice chest, and maybe worth near that much and it certainly looked like a good payday to me so I agree.” He took a breath. “Since it was a check, I verified funds at the bank and they said it was good. So, I went forward on the sale. Then the lady was really concerned with how we were going to move it for her. I even took her out to look at the truck we have.” Roger looked distant and bewildered for a moment. “I had almost forgotten this part. While I was going outside with her, there was this really pretty lady that I’ve seen in here before. She came into the store while we were going out. But I’ll come back to that.”

Roger was talking faster with each word, “My guys loaded the chest and followed her all the way down to Capitola, they stopped and unloaded and when they started to take it up to the house, she had them drop it off, right there on the sidewalk. I didn’t find that out until four hours later when they came back.” He sighed deeply, “I found out today from the bank that the check was bad. The account was closed. So, I tried to call the guy who brought in the chest from the number on the card to let him know what happened. The phone number on the card was bad.” “Oh, you’re kidding,” Jan said.

“What about the lady you saw going into the store?” asked Merrill.

“Oh, you’re right, I promised to come back to her. That was another really strange thing. After the guys left with the truck, I went in to help her. Only, she wasn’t there. I know I’d have seen if she left, but she was no where to be found. So, I shrugged it off, thinking I must have missed her somehow. But near closing I found a cup of cold coffee and a pair of woman’s sunglasses sitting right there on the counter.”

“There’s your coffee cup wearing sunglasses,” Merrill said to Kalen. “Hold on, let me think about this a minute.” He closed his eyes and thought over what the man had told them. Then after a few moments he said, “Do you remember what kind of truck dropped off the chest?”

“It was one of those construction crew cabs, black with four doors and dual rear wheels. I definitely remember that, I have always wanted one of

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those.”

“Do you by chance still have those sunglasses?” Jan asked.

“Sure, figured I would keep them until I saw her again.”

“You think I could take those? They might just help.”

After assuring Roger that they would let him know if they figured any of it out, they thanked him and left. Jan having taken the sunglasses was trying to see if she could get any feelings from them. “I am gonna have to sit down with these. What do you say about stopping and getting some coffee?”



After the trio had returned to the pavilion, they purchased three coffees and sat in the same outdoor seats where Johanna had stopped. Being only two chairs, Merrill opted to stand and have a cigarette. Jan sat across from Kalen and began her meditation. She held the sunglasses which she could now tell for certain were Johanna’s. She received no vision, only a physical sensation of being pulled south. But not south toward the store where they had been only minutes before, but much further south.

After explaining what she got from the glasses, the three of them piled back into the van and began their drive south along the coast. By then it was a quarter to five. Merrill pulled out and opened his cell phone to call Cheryl to let her know where they were and immediately closed it.

“This has to be the worst area for cell service,” he said.

“You must have it set for digital only”, Jan replied from the back seat. “You could probably get out on analog.”

“I’m not paying the price; she can wait until I can get a signal. She knew I was going to be late.”

After about an hour and a half of following the curving highway 101 down past the few small communities and finally into Santa Cruz, Jan said, “I think she is close here. But she feels different somehow. I do not like this at all. We have to find her Merrill, there is really something wrong now. I am afraid we are going to be too late.”

They past downtown and headed on toward Capitola just as it starting to get dusk, when suddenly Jan screamed, “She’s up there somewhere.” She was pointing up to the scattered houses to the left nested in the woods overlooking the ocean. “Great, I have no idea how you get up there,” Merrill said and began watching for a road that went though. Finally after about a mile they found an exit from the highway that had an underpass that gave them a clear path up the side of the cliff and into the woods. “Keep going,” said Jan. “I can feel we are getting close.”

As they climbed the hill, Merrill noticed a black pickup truck pass them in the opposite direction. "Oh shit, did you see that?" "It had dual rear wheels," said Kalen. "She's over that way." Jan's voice almost screeched as she pointed off to the left. The van threw up a cloud of loose dust as Merrill swerved, overshot the turn and jumped the shoulder. Merrill made a mental note of the street sign that said Prospect Heights as they passed the next road that turned off to the right. They hadn't traveled more than about a quarter mile further when Jan once again yelled almost at the top of her lungs and pointed at a house. "She's there!"

Merrill pulled the van into a pull off about a hundred yards beyond the house and they all piled out. It was getting a little dark by the time they reached the front of the house. It was an old brick house that looked as if it had been recently renovated and there was a sign in the front stating boldly 'For Sale'. The bricks were freshly cleaned and sealed and the driveway looked as if it had just been treated. As they approached the front, Merrill noticed that the ground sloped slightly downward toward the rear. A row of glass block made up the top row of the cement foundation that was half exposed at the lowest section of the hill. "Oh my," said Merrill. "Look over here."

As they went to the back of the house they found that the rear was backed right up to a sudden fall off. Well above their heads was a deck that overlooked the gully and a stream at the bottom. "I guess that explains why they didn't make it a split level," said Merrill. "We are going to have to find another way in."

Light was all but gone as they walked around to the other side of the house and found a side door that had raised porch with a half dozen steps as an approach. Kalen tried the door expecting to find it locked. It wasn't. They were in.

"I can still feel her, but she is weak, she's below us," Jan said, "We have to find the way downstairs."

Merrill felt the wall next to the door and could not find a switch so he followed the counter that went off to his right and felt his way to an interior doorframe that he hoped would lead him to the living room. The sounds within the house were hollow like in a tomb. Once in the front, there was a little of light coming from a street lamp giving him enough vision to make out an old push button switch panel near the front door. He pressed them both. Light filled their eyes momentarily blinding them as both the lamp in the center of the ceiling and the porch light came to life. Rubbing his eyes and then refocusing he saw that the room was empty. But he also saw what he was looking for. "There is a door over in the corner."

Kalen lumbered over where Merrill was pointing and tried the door. "It's locked."

"Well we are all but breaking and entering now. Can you kick it in?"

Kalen looked at the door and realized that it opened away from him. "I'll

handle it,” he said in a confident voice as he stepped back and then slammed his shoulder into the door. The door gave way with a sudden ‘crack’ and Kalen flew down the other side flailing for something to grab onto. Finally catching a railing he stumbled his way to the bottom. Once stable he called out, “It’s dark down here.” Jan was the next one to the door. She found the switch on the wall at the top of the stairs and turned the light on. It was empty aside from the chest with the mirror.

Jan rushed over to the chest and tried to open it. “IT’S LOCKED!”

Merrill was just reaching the bottom of the stairs when Jan placed her hands on the top of the chest. She looked up at him, “She’s inside.” Merrill looked around; there was nothing to work with. “Hold on,” he said as he went up the stairs. It took him almost five minutes to make his way back to the van in the dark, get his tire iron and return. He inserted the hub cap removing end into the hasp and gave the bar a heavy push. Nothing happened. Again he tried, and again and still there was no budge. Kalen placed a large hand on Merrill’s shoulder and gestured for him to move aside. BANG. With one solid push the hasp broke completely free of the chest.

When they opened the chest they found what they dreaded. Johanna was laying nude, face up. Her face was sunken and showed no life. Her wrists and ankles shone blue and black with bruising. Jan knelt beside her and felt her neck for a pulse and then dampened a finger and placed it in front of Johanna’s mouth to check for breathing. “She’s still alive,” she said. “But not by much I don’t think. Call 911.”

Merrill took out his cell phone. Just as he had feared, there was no signal. He fumbled with the menu and finally after a couple of minutes he found the signal option. Digital, Analog or both, he selected both. His display now showed full signal. Realizing that he would need the address, he headed upstairs to the front porch and found the numbers on the front of the building illuminated by the streetlight. He dialed 911.

Chapter 8

Of course Grant knew the day would be a long one as soon as he had found the body. The sheriff had responded quickly enough but then it was almost four hours before the crime scene guys got there. After explaining how he had found the body to the lieutenant in charge he had to go into San Jose and fill out a report

for the Sheriff's Office and another for the bureau. By that time it was almost eight o'clock. Since he was in the neighborhood, he decided to drop by the coroners and see how Sarah was doing. He knew that she wouldn't have any results back on the woman yet, but they did have a date for the following morning.

Just as he was climbing out of his car, his cell phone rang.

"O'Connor," he said in an impatient voice.

"This is Greg. What are you doing showing up with a body when you are supposed to be taking a vacation?"

"Just lucky I guess," said Grant. "I take it you saw my report."

"Yes, I saw it and within a few minutes. Division has been calling looking for you."

"Looking for me? Why would they be looking for me?"

"Apparently the body you found fits the MO of a series of murders that they have been tracking. The cases are mostly in the east and southeast but the naked woman and cedar lined box pulled up matches as soon as the report was scanned in. And since you faxed in your report, it was immediate. It sounds like we are on the case now."

"How does that tie in with the murder of Oscar Thorndike? That's where I found the body. It was right next to *that* crime scene."

"I dunno, but the reason I called is that I want to know if you are still going to take that vacation or should I plan on our partnering up on this?"

"Well, I suspect I am off of vacation. I doubt that my date will be free tomorrow anyway." He paused, "You know Sarah?"

"She's the coroner down in San Jose, right?"

"That's the one."

"So you finally got up nerve enough to ask her out?"

"Actually we did go out for lunch the other day and had intended on going somewhere tomorrow, but now after I've dumped a bunch of cross reference cases on her and now a new corpse, I doubt she will have time for me."

"That's ok," Greg laughed. "Division had told me I was to insist on your coming in, so actually you weren't going to have time either."

"Great, nice to see I am loved," Grant said sarcastically. "Guess I will see you at about seven tomorrow morning."

"Ok, see you then," Greg said and then hung up.

Walking toward the Coroner's Office Grant noticed that it was dim inside. It was closed. He should have realized that it would be but with everything else going on, he had forgotten what time it was. As he reached the door to peer in, he saw a light on in the back offices where Sarah worked. He pulled out his cell phone again and began to dial when it rang again. This time it was Sarah. Once he

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explained that he was out in front of the building, they hung up and Sarah came out of her office and let him in.

Grant caught himself looking lecherously at Sarah's well formed legs and the outline of her small taunt butt as they walked down the hall. She was wearing a tight mid-thigh skirt and loose blouse, appropriate for work, for her age and for her curvaceous figure.

He thought he'd like to take her right there but knew all too well that he could never do that. From the slight blush on her face when she turned, he could tell that she had felt his stare and from her soft expression he could also tell that she didn't mind.

"You look tired," she said.

"You look great," he said.

"I really think we should get your vision checked. I look just as worn as you do after today. I got the body and notification that your reports would be piled on my desk sometime tomorrow," she said in an exaggerated annoyance. "If you didn't want to go out with me, you should have just said so, not pile me with work so that I have to back out of it." Sarah's mock pout made Grant chuckle. He placed his hand under her chin and lifted it up and kissed her. She reached up around his neck and they kissed and embraced.

It didn't seem like a first kiss to either of them, just more of the warmth they had felt for each other during their date with much added passion. After several minutes, they mutually pressed away. They both knew what the next week was going to involve and then was not the time to get moon struck.

He explained that he was going to get stuck on the case as well and they agreed to try it again as soon as things settled down. She led him into her office where there were several files open that she had been working on. She pulled up a chair for him close to hers. "This is what we have on that woman's body so far. I am scheduled to do an autopsy on her tomorrow but it my immediate sense of it is that she has been dead since either Friday or Saturday and she died of an overdose. Won't know for sure until we run a tox scan but that is what it seems to me right now."

Just then Grant's cell phone rang again. "Busy night," he said as he answered it.

"O'Connor," he said in a tone that could only be described as resignation. When he hung up, he looked at Sarah. "You feel like taking a ride?"



"You realize this is going out of my jurisdiction," said Sarah when they were

leaving Saratoga on their way down Hwy 17 toward Santa Cruz. While they had been driving, Grant had explained how his day went and how this new not quite dead body seemed to tie into it. The call he had received was from the Santa Clara Sheriff's Office. They had picked up the incident due to the anti-terrorist shared information system and immediately saw the connection with the cedar chest and knew Lieutenant O'Connor was working on the case. The man's murder had been picked up by Santa Clara County because of another emergency in Santa Cruz County. They often reciprocated on issues that occurred on the crest since it was the dividing line between the two counties, but technically it was Santa Cruz's problem. Since the first had been picked up by Santa Clara, the decision had been made for them to work on the second as well, which was partially why it had taken so long for the crime scene personnel to be dispatched. But this third time they weren't working with a dead body, the woman had been alive when found, if just barely, and she was hospitalized in the City of Santa Cruz.

"I don't think it will matter much," said Grant. "She isn't dead yet and the report so far indicated that they had her stabilized though she is apparently in a coma. I thought it might not hurt for you to check things out. He grinned. "Besides, it does give me some time with you."

Just then they reached the crest in the mountains just past Los Gatos when the first sliver of the waxing moon shone through the break in the trees. "Well, I can't really complain," she said admiring the moon. It is a beautiful drive, even at night. And how often do I get to cruise in such a beautiful car? If it weren't for it being work, it would be very romantic."

Grant smiled and put his arm around her shoulder. "Hard to do this in bucket seats."

Sarah noticed that the car had a center seat belt. She carefully unlocked the belts she was secured with, slid over and buckled herself into the center where she could lean her head on to his chest. Her fine blond hair spilled down his front and the perfume of her was intoxicating. "I love this car," he said.

In another fifteen minutes they were at the 101 turn off. Left would take them south about seven miles to Capitola, right only about a mile to Santa Cruz. They turned right and Sarah sat up and slid back to her original seat showing a slight pout. "I guess its back to business again."

When they reached the Emergency Room Lobby, Grant went to the desk, showed his badge and asked where they had taken the Jane Doe that had been brought in earlier. He was directed to the Intensive Care Unit. The two of them walked into the waiting room of Intensive Care and found it in chaos. There were two police officers and a half a dozen reporters standing around occasionally

attempting to stop some of the various hospital staff that were rushing in and out of a door that separated the unit from the public.

In the far corner from the entrance sat two men and a woman alone as if waiting for information about a loved one. The three were talking quietly to each other and would look up anxiously whenever someone came through the doors that were the center of activity. Grant recognized one of the officers from a case he had worked on about six months before.

He remembered his name, Charles Jefferson. Approaching the officer, Grant said, "Hey, Charlie, has this circus been performing long?"

The officer looked up at Grant with recognition. "How have you been Lieutenant?"

"Not too bad. This is Dr. Hamilton with the Santa Clara County Coroners Office. We are trying to find out what is known about the victim. You know her status?"

"She's still in a coma, looks like she was overdosed on something. If she hadn't been found when she was, she would have needed the box they found her in permanently."

"Yeah, I found one of those already today," Grant replied. "What else can you tell me about the situation?"

"The ones that seem to know the most are the folks that found her. That's them in the corner," he said pointing at the three psychics.

"Thanks, I guess we'll have to have a little chat with them. Who took their original statement?"

"Actually, I did," the officer said. "It sounds a bit far fetched to me, but they did find her and they did call it in. We haven't been able to corroborate their story yet so we are holding them here but the office is trying."

"Thanks."

Grant and Sarah worked their way through the press people and positioned themselves in chairs on the opposite wall from the psychics. Grant watched them for several minutes purposefully unnoticed by maintaining a conversation with Sarah. They didn't seem particularly nervous aside from the slight anxiety he would have expected from people waiting for news. The two of them rose and approached the three. "Good evening," Grant smiled. "It seems you have had a busy evening."

He held out his badge and introduced first himself and Sarah and asked them if they would mind going over everything they knew, again for him and Sarah. As it turned out, Merrill was more than happy to talk about it and within about 15 minutes, Grant who was a confirmed skeptic of the occult world was critically re-evaluating his prior judgments.

He had heard of psychics cracking cases before, but always discounted the authenticity of even the most convincing tale. But unless these folks were really a part of the crimes, which he didn't think likely, there was very little other explanation for them knowing enough to find the victim. Though he didn't comment on it, he was also surprised that they knew about the black duel drive truck. That fact alone seemed to tie the murders to this case. He and Greg would have to go up to Half Moon Bay and talk to that storeowner. There were a couple of loose ends that he thought he needed to clear up with them before letting them go. "Do you still have the sunglasses and the statue?"

"No," Jan said. "I gave them to one of the detectives that came to the house where we found her."

"What about the name of the company where Johanna worked?"

"Alpha Gamma Engineering in Sunnyvale," said Merrill. "It's right next to the train station in the building that looks kinda like a mission."

"Ok, I know the one. One last thing, I would also like to know if you have determined what the 'worm' represented in your dreams?"

"We had been talking about that just before you came up," Merrill said. "That part is still bothering all of us. It makes me worry when I can't figure out something that dominant in a vision. It usually means that we aren't done. But we found her so as far as I'm concerned, that is the end for us."

"You realize what you did back at the house could be considered breaking and entering."

"Yes, but what else could we do?" voiced up Kalen. "We knew she was in there and we couldn't let her stay trapped, especially since Jan was picking up that she was in real trouble. You think anyone will press it?"

"No, I don't think that will be a problem. In fact if you all promise that you won't leave the Bay Area, I will try to get the officer to let you go home. Here are some of my cards, if you come up with anything more, please let me know before you do anything. You could get hurt if you poke into something where you aren't appreciated."

After Grant talked to Officer Jefferson again and convinced him to let the three psychics go on his authority, he and Sarah left the hospital to begin their drive back over the mountains. This time Sarah had immediately taken the center position of the wide bench seat. "What do you think?" asked Grant.

"I think this is really strange," she said looking up at him. He looked down into her face and her soft blue eyes held him captive. He wanted to grab her right there, but he quickly refocused on what she was saying and on his driving.

"I have gone to psychic readers a couple of times for fun, but I have never held much faith in what they have said. But if those three are picking up as much

as they say, and I *actually* believe they are, then it's no less than amazing. I also think we have a huge can o' worms on our hands. I'll check with the hospital tomorrow and see what their tox scan showed. I suspect that it is going to match the other victim." She paused as if thinking about something. "It *is* going to be a busy week." It was the last thing she said all the way back to San Jose, she laid her head onto Grant's chest as before and promptly fell asleep.

Chapter 9

It was nearly 10:00 AM when Jan finally got out of bed after a hell of a night. Not only was it after midnight when she got back to her little one bedroom paradise and had called with her excuses to work, but when she slept, her nightmares had persisted. She could tell there was something still going on with Johanna, the new dream revealed her in a hospital bed and there was a giant worm wrapped around her neck and beginning to squeeze. There was also a second dream of another person. It was the nice lady that was with the FBI agent that had talked to them at the hospital. In this dream the lady was forest and the worm was boring into her neck. She could hear her muffled screams.

She put on her robe and went to the kitchen to heat water. Thoughts of the dreams were vividly flooding her mind with images that she really couldn't shake out. Then like every morning she went back to her bedroom and lit incense on the alter she had meticulously assembled in the corner and lit the white three wick candle that sat below the slightly raised statue of a Goddess that ruled from the center of the low table. She went to the bookcase to her right and removed the firm round meditation pillow and placed it in front of the alter just far enough for her to comfortably cross her legs when she sat. Then she returned to the kitchen to finish preparing her ritual tea.

She had no sooner returned to the pillow with her tea and taken her first cleansing breath when the visions became intolerable. She had never been so intruded that she couldn't bless the morning, but the images kept coming. Frantically she went to her bedside and picked up the phone. The card wasn't there. She hung up the phone and went to the living room and picked up her wallet and pulled the card out. With a sigh, she went back and picked up the phone and dialed. While the phone only rang twice, it seemed like a long wait and she found herself shaking. "Lieutenant?" she heard her self say. "I have had more dreams and I think there is someone still trying to hurt Johanna."

"I know." Grant's voice was calming but Jan was in no condition to be soothed. "Your associate Merrill called me just a few minutes ago. I am not sure how much of this I can believe but I sent an agent over there to keep an eye on things."

"But, did he also tell you that your friend is in danger?"

"What?" Grants voice was no longer as steady. "What did you see?"

Jan gave Grant a description of both dreams and asked him if there was anything else she could do to help. He told her nothing other than to keep calling him if there were any changes in her visions. She felt a little better having shared her burden but she knew this was not over yet.

Once off of the phone, Jan returned to her room to prepare once again for her morning ritual. She removed her robe and nightgown. She could feel her auburn hair resting naturally on her shoulders and the cool air of the morning embrace her. She returned nude to her table to meditate and bring in her morning. She stretched with her arms reaching toward the sky, greeted the four directions and invoked Persephone to bring love into her day. It was then that she decided that it wouldn't hurt to ask the Goddess to look over Johanna and the other lady. She thought the lieutenant had said her name was Sarah.

As she sat on the cushion for her morning meditation and took a sip of her herbal mixture, a flow of warm energy filled her. She thanked the Goddess for being a part of her.



Merrill had hardly slept at all. When he tried he laid there with Cheryl cuddled up against him providing what little comfort he could absorb. It certainly wasn't her; she was the Goddess Herself in his mind. It was the images that enveloped his mind. He kept seeing the helpless naked body of Johanna stretched out as if posed in that cedar coffin. That's exactly what it was, he thought. What kind of sick mind would do such a thing? He felt himself shiver and carefully pulled away from Cheryl so he wouldn't disturb her sleep.

She had been in bed by the time Merrill had finally come home and woke only enough to kiss him goodnight with promises that he would tell her all about it the next day. But that had been an hour before and he was not even close to sleep.

He slipped carefully out of the bedroom and went down the hall to the living room. He just stood there. He didn't know what to do, what to think. He wondered what he had gotten himself and the others into. The uneasiness he felt throughout his body told him that it was far from over but there was no where to run, no where to hide. Then the thought occurred to him that the worm was getting closer.

What did that mean, the worm was getting closer. Hell he didn't even know what the worm was let alone what it had to do with him. But this lady he had known for a long time was almost killed and had it not been for him and his friends, she would not be alive now. But what did any of this have to do with him and what is this worm.

He began to pace and realized that he could really use a cigarette. They were in the kitchen on the counter he thought and went around the partial wall that separated the kitchen from the living room. He took one out of the pack and picked up the lighter. He would have his smoke he thought and then he would try sleeping again. As he opened the sliding door he realized that it was quite warm out. It seemed strange that he had not noticed that earlier. But, then what did strange mean then? That began a whole new conversation in his already fatigued mind. He concluded that strange depends on personal experiences. But the only part of it that seemed strange to him personally was that he had been looking for the woman. He looked down and realized that the cigarette had burned two thirds down and was about to singe his fingers. He really needed sleep.

He put out the cigarette and turned to open the sliding door only to find Cheryl standing there watching him. "Ok, what is this all about?"

It felt good for him to talk about what had happened. She listened patiently while he told her about stealing the Orisha, the trip to Half Moon Bay the search in Santa Cruz following the energy from sunglasses, the breaking into the house, finding the body and then the following interrogations. She knew the intuition that he commanded and the burden that it had imposed on him. Once he was done she just held him for a few moments and told him he needed to sleep. When he tried to convince her that he couldn't, she just led him back to bed and stroked him until he had drifted off.

When Merrill woke, it was with a start. It was nine thirty and Cheryl had gone to work. The dream had snapped him out of his slumber and the alarm would not have gone off for another fifteen minutes. But there it was. The worm again and it was wrapped around Johanna. This time it was not verging on the erotic but directly threatening to crush her. He had to call the lieutenant. Fortunately he didn't have to go into work at the bookstore until noon. It was his turn to close. So he grabbed the card that he had left on the kitchen counter with his smokes and lighter, took the cordless phone and went outside to have a smoke and to make his call.

Chapter 10

By the time Grant had updated Greg on everything he knew about the Oscar Thorndike case and the tentatively related murder of the one Jane Doe and the apparent abduction of the second woman, Johanna Johnson they both realized that they had a lot of questions, very few answers.

While they were going over every detail, Grant had run correlation inquiries from the federal database and pulled up a whole list of reports of possibly connected cases. They decided to limit their initial research to the most obvious correlations they found, the ice pick and superglue, and the cedar chests since there were already nine within those categories alone.

After printing the full reports on those cases, they decided to split the piles between them. Greg would follow up on the ice pick murders and Grant the cedar chests and then Grant would help with the ice picks since his pile was smaller, then they would try to compare the information for similarities. Even at first they both had thought it interesting that the division also divided the piles by the sex of the victim and it became very obvious that if this were the same murderer, he or she used different MO's depending on whether the victim was a man or a woman. Ten files, thought Grant. This guy had been busy, and this didn't include the three they had going there.

It was close to 2PM by the time they had sorted out the details of each case and were working on trying to work out the pattern when Grant's phone rang. He had received two calls about mid morning from two of the psychics, both suggesting that Johanna was still in danger so he had sent an agent over undercover just as a precaution. The second part of the woman psychic's dreams bothered him more; much more. She had indicated that Sarah was at risk. And even though he really didn't see how or really believe in second sight, it made him very uncomfortable. Grant's phone rang twice by the time he picked it up.

"This is Sarah." The familiar and sweet voice made Grant's heart seem to pause in his chest.

"Hi, how are you doing?"

"Pretty good, been a little groggy today after not getting to bed until after one and then having to be up again at five. Other than that I seem to be surviving ok.

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How about you?"

"Actually, Greg and I have been so busy that I haven't had much time to think about it."

"The reason I called is that I finished the autopsy on that woman you found yesterday and my lab ran an initial tox scan. At this time I can tell you that she died of an overdose of seconal, she had abrasions and bruising on the ankles and wrists and she had been raped. We have sent the rape kit over for DNA analysis and we should have a dental record report sometime tomorrow," she said in a voice that had changed to all business as she gave him her report.

"Sarah," he said in a concerned voice. "I have already heard from two of the psychics today. Both of them had visions that our victim out in Santa Cruz is still in danger. But one of them said that you were in danger as well. I am not sure why or how but I want you to be extra careful. Ok?"

"Well, with the psychic's track record so far, that is a little unnerving. I'll try to keep an extra eye out." She paused a second then said, "I love the fact that you are worried about me, but at the same time I really don't want you to worry. I hope that makes sense to you."

"It does," he said. "But I am going to worry just the same. Can I see you tonight?"

"Maybe for a little while, just for a drink or maybe some tea," she said in a soft voice. "I really need to get some sleep after last night." Then there was a long silence. "Tell you what, I will e-mail you my address and you can meet me at my house at around seven thirty and I will fix us some dinner instead. How does that sound?"

"A lot better than the can of chili I was going to have."

"Ok, I'll see you then."

After hanging up with Sarah, he refocused on the spreadsheet of facts that he and Greg had developed. "Did you notice that three of the four female victims occurred in the same cities as at least one of the male victims?"

"Yes," said Greg. "And I also noticed that they were found within a few hundred yards of their male counterpart."

"You know, the crime scene guys totally missed on finding the woman up on Skyline. I wonder if any others have been missed in the same way." The men's bodies were also all planted in such a way that they were found within a day of the murder."

"Whoever is doing this wanted the bodies found, at least the men. Let's take a look at the sequence?"

"Including our current victims, in the male group we have a political aid from Washington DC, three reporters, one from the DC area, one from Orlando,

Florida, and one from here, one Engineer from a Software House in Houston, Texas, one high visibility contractor from New York, a stockbroker from New York, and a cop from Brooklyn.”

“Lets arrange it this way,” Grant said while moving lines around on the spreadsheet and adding the new cases. “It looks like the wife of our earliest victim was found with the dead software engineer in Houston,” Grant said. “She was missing from Orlando, Florida for over a year.”

“So, she disappeared in November of 2000 at the same time her husband, another reporter, was found dead and then showed up in a box over a year later with the second victim?”

“No, actually she was found with the third male victim. There was a second one, the contractor that was killed in June of 2001.”

“But until they found her, they were looking for her as a suspect. It became obvious that she wasn’t when she was found.” Grant studied his chart trying to unwind all of its contents. “If you look at the dates, you can see that she showed up dead, just in time for the third male victim’s wife to go missing.”

“I see what you’re getting at. She shows up like the first one, with the body of a cop in September of 2002 who was killed the same way. But the killer broke his pattern after that. There is no female victim for five or six months after that. Not until the stock broker’s wife goes missing with her husband’s murder in New York during the end of May 2003.”

Grant looked again, analyzing the dates and places. “It picks up again there, when the reporter in New York is killed in July of 2004 and the broker’s wife is found there. At the same time a woman press secretary is gone and she shows up dead all by herself only two months later not far from where she lived.”

“Too many coincidences and too many exceptions in my mind,” said Greg.

“No, I don’t think so. If I am right, there is a cedar chest that has not been found in New York, not far from where they found the stockbroker. I think I will give them a call,” he paused thinking. “I will bet on something else too. I believe we will find that this new victim is missing out of New York.”

“Come on,” said Greg. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Because that is where the press secretary was found. The only real inconsistency is that there were no other bodies found there. Unless,” he pondered. “That’s unless the missing woman was the only target.”

“I looked over the women’s autopsy reports. It seems that all of them were restrained by the wrists and ankles, all but one of them could have DNA Screens done for the rape kits, all of those that could be confirmed by tests were sexually active with at least three different males before they died, all were killed by overdose and all were found naked and posed in either cedar or cedar lined

boxes.” He paused, “No, they were coffins. And I am going to speculate that you found that all of the men were killed by a long sharp pointed object, all had the wound patched by superglue and that they were all found in fairly accessible places.”

Greg nodded in agreement.

“This guy is a pro.” Grant dropped his head in resignation, “But he is also very strange. It seems that when he is called on to remove a woman, he does just that. Then he keeps them as a kind of sick prize until there is another ‘reward’ waiting for him. I think that is why there is so much time and distance between the missing person report and the body found. There apparently were months between the ‘right’ kind of assignments.”

“Ok, where does that take us?”

“Well, I’ll call on the detective in New York about that search, you figure out where our victim lives. I want to go over and pay the husband a visit and also drop in at Johanna’s work.” Grant looked up at Greg. He had concern in his eyes.

“Now what’s bothering you?”

“My theory... if I am right, then I am really wondering who he took this time.”



As Grant and Greg drove up to the home of Jerald and Johanna Johnson they were surprised by the presence of three police units that were half blocking the street in front of the house. There as a small crowd gathering about half a block away from the activity and Grant could tell that this was not a usual occurrence for this gated community of multi-million dollar houses.

They passed the units and carefully pulled the plain white government plated car to the curb. He adjusted his grey suit coat to assure that his shoulder holster was well covered before he got out of the vehicle.

He hated packing weapons, but once he had realized that they were not working with amateurs he insisted that both he and Greg arm themselves. Technically, they were supposed to carry their weapons whenever they were on duty, but in practice, he had only used his a few times since he entered this division and he had always known when it would be needed. Now was one of those times and he took no chances with his .357 magnum under his arm and his Berretta .25 at the small of his back.

The two of them approached the house and held out their badges to two police officers that were standing on the porch. “What’s up guys?” said Greg. “We got called in by the owner; apparently the whole place has been ransacked,”

said a somewhat portly officer rather flatly. "For more than that you will have to talk to the lieutenant." The officer looked over both Grant and Greg as if examining the enemy. "Wait here, I'll go get him."

A few minutes later the officer returned with a slim, obviously military trained officer wearing a starched uniform with a single bar as an insignia of rank. The man smiled and stuck out his hand to Grant. "Lieutenant, it is good to see you." Grant's puzzled look told the officer that he was not remembered. "You probably don't remember me, but I am Mark Swenson. I was in your anti-terrorist class two years ago. That was a really good class."

"Thank you, lieutenant. I tried to make it as interesting as I could. It's too bad that they still don't let us share a lot more of our experiences. They still haven't eased up a lot of the security protocols. Even if they are obsolete. But I am glad you enjoyed the class." Grant paused momentarily and then said, "Can you update us on what is going on? I think it is tied into a case I am working on."

"So far, all we know from the owner is that sometime between yesterday morning and this afternoon, this house was vandalized. It looks like who ever did this was looking for something. Come on in and have a look around."

As they entered the living room, Grant asked, "Did the owner say where he has been?"

"He said that he had been staying with a friend and that his wife had been reported missing and of course I confirmed that. I also told him that she had been found and was in the hospital. Apparently no one was able to notify him because he wasn't here. So, as soon as we can let him go, he would like to go out to Santa Cruz to see her."

The house looked like it had suffered a major earthquake. Bookcases and tables were lying askew with personal items, books and papers scattered everywhere. Grant noticed that even the electrical plates were ripped from the walls. Jerald was sitting a chair watching as the police went from room to room taking notes. His face looked numb.

With a nod from Grant, Greg knelt down to talk with Jerald while Grant went on to inspect the rest of the house. The kitchen floor looked like it had been through a snow storm of sugar and flour that was broken up by china and cookware. All of the cabinets were open and their contents strewn about the counters and floor, many broken from the mishandling. When he reached the pantry, it was an almost unapproachable pile of cans, dumped out cereal packages and appliances. He noticed that the only things not dumped or torn apart were either factory sealed or less than about three inches wide so he assumed that what ever they were looking for had to be larger than that.

In the living room where Greg seemed to be getting Mr. Johnson to talk

Grant noted that all of the cushions from the matching sofa and chairs were cut and their foam cores removed from the cloth covering and this further limited the nature of what had been sought. It had to be either fairly small or flexible for it to be hidden in the cushions. He went upstairs.

The rest of the house was in the same condition. Who ever had done this had taken their time to do a thorough job. And obviously they either knew they had the time or they didn't mind if they were intruded on. Grant was fairly certain that either case might be true. After seeing enough cut and rolled over bedding, dumped dresser drawers and emptied boxes, Grant went back downstairs just as his cell phone rang.

"O'Connor"

"This is Sarah"

"Hi, how are you doing?"

"Pretty well. I got the dental report back."

"That was quick. It must have been on a search list."

"Yes, she is a pretty high profile missing person and was on the watch list."

"Tell me she wasn't from New York."

"How did you know that?"

"I guess my psychic ability is showing up," Grant said with a chuckle.

"Actually, it fits a profile I am working on. So, tell me what you have."

"Ms. Roberta Sterling, she was an executive with Goldfarb Investment Company. According to the file, she has a net worth of several million. The report was initially filed by her significant other who is a fashion model and later followed by an inquiry from her company's key man insurance. She has been missing since September 5th."

"Thanks Sarah, I'll get the rest of her file when I get back to the office. I think we are about to head out that way now. See you at seven thirty."

"Ok, I meant to ask you, do you like lamb?"

"Only with mint jelly," Grant's smile could be felt through his voice.

"See you then."

Grant hung up the phone and approached Greg and Jerald. "We are about done here," Greg said. "I checked and found out that Casey and his partner John would be covering the hospital this evening and left word for him to let Jerald here through for a supervised visit. I think I am about done. Thank you for your time Jerald, the police should be done here pretty soon. I would call your insurance agent before you try to clean up. They may want to send out an adjuster. I know everything is a disaster for you right now and if you need anything or think of anything new, call me." He handed Jerald one of the cards he kept in his breast pocket.

Greg looked at his watch. "Almost five," he said as they went through the front door and started back to their car. "Don't think we'll have much luck at the engineering firm tonight, so I guess we will have to hit that first thing tomorrow."

"Actually, I think I'll let you do that, I want to do some more background work on our list of victims and look closer at what our Mr. Thornton was working on. What's the story with Johanna's husband? It seems strange to me that he would report his wife missing and then go out of touch."

"Talk about a soap opera... I really feel sorry for the guy. He had been a successful investment banker, a real over achiever type. You know the kind. He started out with nothing since his folks lived in the Ghetto, worked his way through college to an MBA and then got into securities. He managed to take several internet companies IPO and was literally worth millions."

Greg seemed to be focused what he was saying and analyzing it as he spoke with increasing speed. "He had that custom house built, met and married Johanna who was working as a producer for a game company that he had been trying to convert to public stock and up until a year later, everything was going great. Their company was even beating the web company collapse. But about a year ago his company decided that it was no longer profitable to have an office in the valley and overnight they let everyone go."

"Ah, so she was the only one working. I can see where things might have been a bit sticky with the cost of that house and all that high end stuff in it," Grant observed.

"Yeah, they had been trying to live off of his securities and her income ever since. Johanna turned out to be a real gold digger and when the cash flow went away, and so did she both emotionally and sexually. Since then he has been going out. According to him, for the past three months he has been having an affair. He didn't think Johanna knew about it, but when she just disappeared, he figured she had left him. Then he comes back today and finds his house totally trashed and that his wife had been taken and is in a coma."

Greg paused a moment and then continued. "He actually really loves her. After hearing the whole thing, I'm pretty sure you can take him off of the list of suspects. That is unless I have totally lost my ability to read people."

"No, I tend to believe your judgment," Grant said firmly. "But also, from some of the things that showed up in the statements from psychics, I think that assessment of Johanna is pretty accurate. It's interesting that those folks could be so right about so many things; they're starting to make me a real believer. Besides, that guy hardly fits the profile of the assassin we are looking for. So, at this point we need to be more concerned with what they were looking for in that house."

Chapter 11

By five thirty Grant made it back to the office and he had two hours before he was to meet Sarah. He sat at his desk considering the pile of paperwork sitting in front of him. But before delving into it, he decided he should check his e-mail.

He pulled up his main page and noticed the news banner. ‘Woman Found Alive in Coffin’ the first article header read. His case had taken on national importance. The story described the wooden chest, that it had been found in an empty house near Santa Cruz and that the unconscious woman was in critical care. Grant wished they wouldn’t do that. They are a bunch of vultures waiting for her to die for more sensationalism, he thought. At least they hadn’t picked up on the first coffin he had found, but he guessed that they would before long.

He went into his e-mail; Sarah should have sent him one with her address. He would finally know where she lived. And sure enough, there it was just a simple note stating that she was looking forward to dinner, giving her address followed by the statement, Bring Wine, and a happy face. Grant grinned and savored his anticipation of spending more time with her. From the address it looked like she lived in the NE corner of San Jose, but to be sure he brought up his Map Finder and printed up the directions. Probably a good thing he’d done that, he thought. Her place was tucked in a little pocket surrounded by a golf course and he would have taken awhile to find it even though he had played that course once.

After closing out Sarah’s note, he saw among the usual advertising crap that tended to fill his in box there was a note from the Santa Cruz Sheriff’s Office and another from the New York Office. The Santa Cruz Sheriff had tracked the owner’s of the house where Johanna had been found. The title was held by Jenre Investments, a Real Estate Investment Firm that had offices in almost every state. They had purchased it by contract about six months earlier and it reportedly had been empty since.

Not quite so empty, thought Grant. That isn’t much to work with. The New York Office note was encrypted as had been common practice back there since the September 11th disaster. Since that time all correspondence traffic from New

York and Washington DC had been secured. He typed in his password and viewed the note. The officer he had called earlier and his partner had driven out to the site where the locals had found the Stock Broker a year before for a preliminary look. He noted that the situation was just as Grant had described his find in the Santa Cruz Mountains. If the crime scene people had expanded their search radius by another few hundred feet they would have tripped over it.

This box had been slid under the roots of a tree and was more or less in plain view. They had found it in less than an hour. The body inside was not in the best of condition. The seal had kept the odors and the moisture inside and from Officer Caramel's description it had fermented nicely. He would send out the coroner's report as soon as it was available.

More puzzle pieces, but what they meant, Grant had no idea. Not yet anyway. What disturbed him more was that he had been right on his theory and that meant that if Johanna had been found, then there had to be someone else missing now.

He looked at his watch. It was already 6:30 and he had to make it over to the east bay and he still needed to pick up some wine. Guess this will have to wait until tomorrow morning, he thought as he shut down his profile on the computer. As much as I like a mystery, Sarah must take priority. He guessed that from then on, that part of his life would have to take priority at least if Sarah was to be a part of it. There would have to be changes and that would mean addressing other parts of his life that he had tried his best to ignore.

He went out and got in the Pontiac and headed down the 280 around the bottom of the bay and took the loop up the 680. Traffic of course was nasty and the distance that should have taken 20 minutes took 40. Getting off on McKee Avenue and heading east, he remembered a small market where he could take care of both the wine and also some flowers. He was clueless about what flowers to buy but settled on a vase with a half dozen red roses already arranged with just enough foliage to accent the young half opened buds. The wine he knew a little more about but just barely. He selected a merlot from the Napa Valley and from her reaction; he could not have done better.

When she answered the door, Grant almost choked. She was stunning. She was wearing a black shell over a black and white floral skirt that floated over her contour causing her body to flirt with his already excited mind. He could not help but to look at her from her eyes all the way to her sandaled feet.

Feeling a little self-conscious about being so obvious he coughed a little and handed her the flowers. "You look absolutely amazing," he said.

"Thank you, their beautiful," she said softly. Then she added, "I am glad you like it." She pulled her skirt out slightly in a flirting manner to show it off.

As he entered he found that there was only the light from two dozen

candles including the four lighting the dining room table that he could see to his right through the kitchen. She placed the vase of flowers on the table and then guided him beyond the door to the kitchen and around the wall to the small living room where she had set out glasses for their wine on the coffee table. "I thought we might sit for a few minutes before dinner," she said. "The roast has a few more minutes."

Grant set the bottle down on the low table and then looked in Sarah's eyes. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her close. "You realize that you are taking us somewhere new." Bending down slightly to accommodate her 5' 1" height, he kissed her and with her response it became a long exploration of both his tongue and his hands as they slid down and lifted her gently by her well-formed cheeks. When he finally released her, they were both slightly shaking. "I hope so," she breathed softly as a tear shed down her cheek. "You make me happy."



Grant woke suddenly to the sound of his cell phone. He didn't really recognize that he was not in his own bed. His sleep had been that of the dead and the fog of coming alive again was slow to lift. "O'Connor," he said groggily. It wasn't until Sarah rolled up against his back that he became fully aware of his surroundings.

"Lieutenant!" the voice on the other end sounded semi-frantic. "There's been a shooting. John is dead and so is a perpetrator," pause. "I think you better get out here."

Grant was suddenly fully awake. It took only another second for him to realize that it was Casey that was talking to him and that there had been an attempt on Johanna's life. "Is the package ok?"

"Yes, but she almost wasn't. We have to get her into higher security."

"Ok, I will be there in about an hour and a half." Grant looked at his watch, the digital display blared out into his eyes, three thirty. "Do your best to keep the media out of this. We need to think out what will be released, so lock it down."

"What happened?" Sarah was sitting up draping the sheet over her otherwise naked breasts.

"I have to go; there has been a shooting out at the hospital."

Sarah jumped up leaving the sheet behind and grabbing her clothes, just long enough for Grant to really regret having to leave just then. "I'm going too," she said and as fast as Grant could pull on his slacks and shirt from the day before, she had on tight fitting jeans, a button shirt, and deck shoes and was putting on a blue windbreaker.

Grant could feel himself sigh.



By five o'clock they were at the hospital. The only stop they had made was at a 24 hour espresso stand they saw as they headed down McKee on the way to the freeway. It looked like nearly every police unit in Santa Cruz was in the parking lot. "We have to get those out of here," Grant said urgently. "That will bring every newspaper in the world down on us."

As they went into the emergency room entrance, Grant approached an officer wearing captain's bars and showed his badge. He spoke to him briefly and obviously adamantly and the captain began giving orders to some of his men over the microphone he had clipped to his collar. By the time Grant and Sarah were half way down the hall there were half a dozen officers passing them the opposite direction toward the emergency room doors.

When the two entered door marked ICU/CCU they found one of the doors corded off with police tape and a plain-clothes officer standing outside to keep unnecessary eyes away from the scene. Grant flashed his badge and the two went inside. There was blood splatter everywhere. Two bodies lay on the floor, one near the door and the other near the now empty bed where Johanna had been. Grant turned back to the door. "Where is the patient?"

"Doesn't look like either one had much of a chance," said Sarah. "They both took at least one to the heart."

"They were obviously both excellent shots," said Grant. "Take a look at the gun over there." It was a .25 caliber revolver with an extra long silencer attached. "There is only one purpose for something like that."

They found Johanna and Casey in a room three doors down. Johanna, though unconscious looked much better than when Grant had seen her a day before. Casey rose from a chair where he had kept vigil and proceeded to give Grant a full report. John had gone into the room to check on Johanna when he apparently had discovered an orderly that he didn't recognize holding a pillow over Johanna's face.

Casey wasn't sure if the man had intended to suffocate her or shoot her with that a heavily silenced .25 caliber pistol. But, John had apparently gotten a fatal shot off before the man finished Johanna off, but sometime in the process the man had shot twice, killing John. "If John hadn't gone in there, the man could have shot her and we would never have known it until we *did* check."

"Was there any ID on the perpetrator?"

"No."

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“Ok, let’s get *her* moved over to San Jose... quietly. Put the word out that she died. I’ll talk to that captain and the hospital administrator.”

A doctor had come into the room and over heard the last part of the conversation. “You can’t move her,” he said in a loud voice. “I don’t think she can make the trip.”

“Sorry doc, those are my orders. If we don’t move her she probably won’t survive anyway and I don’t think you want even more bodies lying around here.”



“Feel like having some breakfast? It’s almost six.” Grant said as they pulled out of the hospital lot. Sarah nodded. “I had decided to take today off anyway, since I worked through my day off. I left a message at the lab yesterday before I went home.”

“I want to thank you for the most wonderful evening last night. That lamb was wonderful and ...”

“Actually, I cheated,” she said cutting off the last part of what he was going to say. “I got the lamb pre-aged and seasoned at Draeger’s, all I had to do was bake it and the rice dish was out of a box. But I figured you knew that since I was working yesterday.”

“Didn’t matter to me,” he said in a matter of fact manner. “It was still wonderful.”

Sarah found herself once again laying her head on his chest. “Breakfast sounds wonderful.”

“I know the perfect place,” he said and headed up highway 17. It was a route that was starting to feel familiar with Sarah near him, even if it was in the middle of this mess. When he reached Los Gatos he caught the 85 and then got off a few miles later in Cupertino and stopped in a little mall across from De Anza College.

As they walked to the entrance of the small restaurant he asked her if she had been there before. She said that she hadn’t and Grant told her that she was in for a real treat. He had found this place while teaching a two-day class at the college. “All natural foods,” he said, “But none of that inedible stuff they try to give you in a regular health food restaurant.” Then he said in an exaggerated and silly voice, “This is plenty good.”

While taking his last bite of his vegetable scramble that was perfectly prepared, Grant looked around the quiet little restaurant. “I always wanted to share this place with someone. I would kinda like to make it a special Sunday morning spot. What do you think?”

She smiled, “I think that if you would like, I would be happy to share those

mornings with you.”

“But you know,” he said sadly, “When we are done here I am going to have to take you home. I have a whole pile of those dreadful police reports to go through and they will take most of the day.”

“Tell you what, if I were to go with you, you could tell me what you are looking for and we could split the stack. Then, we could maybe have the afternoon together.”

“If you want to, that would be great. But it doesn’t seem like a very good day off for you.”

“If it is with you, it will be a wonderful day off.” She smiled and Grants heart felt as if it were going to melt. It would be a wonderful day, he thought, it has been already.

Chapter 12

They spent the whole morning into mid-afternoon together, searching through cases and comparing notes. Work had never felt so rewarding to Grant in his whole life. Normally no one would see the files he had, but since Sarah was the forensic scientist working on the case and none of the files had been flagged as sensitive he figured she was just as interested a party as anyone and she knew how to investigate as well as any of his staff. Together they figured out at least some connections between the seemingly isolated hits.

The most obvious were the first and second. Sarah had seen it even before Grant. Charles Delfson had been a reporter assigned to cover the voting scandal in Florida during the 2000 presidential election. It was a fair guess that he must have stumbled on something that he shouldn’t have. Strangely enough the file didn’t have a hint of that direction of inquiry. That absence alone was enough to run shivers down the spines of both of them. It could have been shortsightedness of the Orlando police, but that was a bit much to believe. It also wouldn’t be too big a guess that his wife, Loreen, might have known what he was working on and became a liability to someone. The question there became who?

For now the third murder was still a mystery, Tim Culver. They could not understand why a contractor would be important enough to be taken out and the file did not list the projects that the man was working on. Grant made a note to follow-up on that.

The fourth file was George Pritchard, a software engineer in Orlando, and

again the file was horrifically vague on what he had been doing prior to his death. Another follow-up and like the reporter his wife, Beth, had been taken.

The fifth was Stanley Gregg, a police officer in Brooklyn. He apparently had been following up on a domestic dispute of some kind when his radio went dead. They started looking for him when he didn't report in. That was several hours after he had acknowledged his assignment. The high end home he had been called to was empty when the police went looking for him and his motorcycle had been found ten blocks away. He was found in a neighborhood park four hours after they had begun their search. The neighbors said that they had seen a moving truck parked outside for a few hours that day and the person who made the original call, Mrs. Geraldine Cavanaugh, the beautiful wife of Senator Cavanaugh, could not be found and was reported missing that evening.

"How much do you want to bet that the smelly stew they found in New York today is what is left of the Senator's wife?"

"Yuk," Sarah grimaced insincerely understanding the irony of his words. "What makes you think so?"

Grant explained how he had seen the break in the MO and how he had sent the New Yorkers out to look for the missing box and how in his mind there must be someone else missing at this point in time. Sarah looked at him somewhat astonished, "You mean there is someone else being held somewhere?"

"Afraid so, and unless we can solve this puzzle, I don't think we have a chance of finding her."

"What about the psychics?"

"I haven't heard anything from them on that, and I don't think it works quite like that. If we can figure out who it might be, they might be able to help us find her, but unless they have made connection with the person, it is outside of their sight. Besides, I still don't trust them enough to bank on them for the solution."

They continued down the list. The next was a stockbroker, Jonathan McKenna, who worked for JK Madison Investments. As far as they could tell from the file, this was considered a case of a distraught client reacting to the recent stock crash. But they were never able to figure out who it might have been. There was a list of clients and some transaction histories included in the report. They noted that transactions that showed a history of large losses had been underlined.

"I wonder if they had been approaching this one wrong," thought Grant out loud. He stared at the numbers for awhile. "I don't see it here, but what if this was a case of someone buying up instead of losing?"

"If there were some big winners, wouldn't they have followed up on that?"

"You'd think so. Especially since the Bureau got involved because of the securities implication. And you're right. They should have looked at it. In fact,

notice the transaction sequences, there are some that have been omitted. That's really strange, if we called for a report from a company the first thing that would have been checked would have been missing entries. This definitely needs looking into. So, I guess we better add this to our research list. Notice that his wife, Susan, was taken and this is where they just found what I suspect is what is left of the Senator's wife."

The next was another reporter, Michael Rogner, he was also in New York and even though it was over a year after the last one again his wife had disappeared and they found Susan McKenna. The file also had very little information on what assignments the reporter had been working on.

"It's starting to look an awful lot like I am going to have to spend a couple of days in New York. There are too many loose ends here and I can't believe that this much information is not available on these people. So, I will start with the federal files and then branch out to the state ones if I have to."

"Wouldn't you normally ask someone out there to do it?"

"Yes, but I just have a gut feeling about this. There are too many missing details. I really can't explain it better than that, it's just a feeling."

"Now you are starting to sound like your psychic friends."

"Could be, but so far they are having better luck than I am."

"Well, my gut is telling me something too."

"What's that?"

"I think you should book that flight for two. I have never seen New York."

Sarah looked up at Grant with eyes that could consume him. He felt as much as saw their deep blueness that pulled him into a different place, a different time, and a longing that he had never felt before. "Can you take vacation?" he asked and then embraced her.

They stood that way for several minutes until the phone rang. It was Greg. "I just came from talking to the office manager at Alpha Gamma Engineering. The news is out that Johanna died and they are a little panicked because there is a second person missing from there. She is a software engineer named Carolyn Bayers. She didn't report for work yesterday or today, she hasn't called in and they haven't been able to raise her on the phone. It sounds like her cell phone is offline."

"Did you find out where she lives and what she has been working on?"

"According to Kathy, the office manager, Carolyn had just finished debugging part of a game engine they sent out for production review with the buyer company three months ago. That was the final submission for that project. She lives out in Santa Cruz and by the address the house is only a few blocks from where we found Johanna."

“Ok, follow up on that. I have some leads to follow myself and I’ll be out of town for a couple of days. I will be accessible both by cell and e-mail.” Grant paused and then added, “Greg, do me a favor. Go back to Alpha Gamma and see if you can find some small personal item of Carolyn’s and get it to Jan or Merrill at the psychic house and tell them only that I asked that they see what they can get from it. We don’t need to get them involved any further unless they find something.”

Grant hung up the phone and looked at Sarah. “Maybe it will be good for you to come along . . . I mean, in addition to our being together. If you don’t mind, there are some things you could follow up on while I check out these records. And while we are in flight, we can review these articles by Thornton.

“And until then?” she asked coyly.

Chapter 13

“That damn worm again!”

Merrill stood up from his chair in the dim lit consulting room and stared down at the crystal ball that sat on its velvet pad illuminated only by the single candle flame whose glow was the only source of light. The incense was his only comfort at the moment. The startling vision still lingered in his mind. It was the Space Needle with the accompanying arches from the science pavilion in Seattle. The Needle was being crushed by a giant worm. He couldn’t understand.

The last time the worm showed up it had been around a man, which made little sense since that very night was when they learned about Johanna’s disappearance and the worm had shown up again in Jan’s dreams only this time wrapped around Sarah, the lieutenant’s friend.

Grant’s new relationship seemed to be the one of the few really positive things going on right then. Merrill had done something that he never did. He had read the cards for people without their permission. He felt he had to because he was trying to figure out what they had gotten involved in. He read for Grant right after he had done a reading for Johanna. Both were without permission. He justified the one for Johanna because Jan was having dreams showing that she was still in trouble.

Even though they had both tried to give Grant warning, they heard that Johanna had been killed by an assailant who was also killed along with a federal agent. This was all just too much for Merrill to grasp. The strange thing was that the

readings all came out wonderfully. Grant was apparently a master of his trade, he was going through a huge change that involved romance and by his readings, Johanna was very much alive and apparently getting better and all would be fine except that he could see her relationships falling apart.

He told Jan about the readings and she had confirmed that her dreams had been similar. So, everything would work out. Both of them figured they must be mistaken in their interpretations so they let it go.

But then the worm came again.

"Merrill?" It was Wendy, the new gal that worked the counter. She tapped lightly on the door. "Merrill?"

"Come in, I am done now."

"Sorry to bother you, but a gentleman came in and told me to give this to either Jan or you and Jan is in a reading. The guy was a real stiff in a gray suit coat."

"Looked like a Fed, right?"

"Yah, like the Men in Black except not in black," she said half laughing and handed him two small dangling earrings and a business card.

"He said to tell you to see what you can get from these and get back to him or Grant."

"Thanks Wendy."

Merrill sat there looking at the earrings in his palm. They were wire with a small oval pendant attached. Within each oval Merrill recognized the image of Thoth, the Egyptian God of Astronomy and Science. He closed his hand softly over them, closed his eyes and immediately smelled cedar.

Oh my, he thought, jumped up and headed out of his office onto the showroom floor and looked down the length of the store to see that the curtain to Jan's reading room was still closed. He turned around and went toward his own office but instead of going straight he turned right and knocked on Kalen's door. No answer. He opened the door carefully and found it dark inside. Kalen had not come in this evening.

He went to the front desk and found Wendy and Charlie talking behind the counter. The rest of the store was empty. "Hey, Charlie... would you let Jan know I need to see her when she gets out of that reading?"

"I knew that," Charlie laughed. "After seeing that ah... 'Gentleman' I figured you'd want to see Jan right away. Don't worry... we've got it covered. I blocked the two of you out for an hour."

"That's cool, I doubt I could focus on a reading right now anyway. Thanks."

After a half hour had passed, Jan peeked into Merrill's office. "You awake?"

"You bet. Come on, let's take a walk down to Starbucks and get some

coffee. By the way, you're buying. You have had three readings tonight and I haven't seen anyone. Though it shouldn't surprise me, it's always dead on a Friday. That's why I rarely work them."

"Charlie, we'll be back in about half an hour," Jan said as they started out of the building. As they went out of the door, Merrill handed Jan the earrings. "See what you get from these."

Jan immediately turned white and her body went stiff. She felt a tremendous rush of emotions and sensations. She felt a combination of fear and sexual excitement; she could hardly breathe, then in her mind she opened her eyes and saw an arm extended from her throat, felt a hand crushing one of her breasts and felt harsh and forceful thrusts into her pelvis, over and over and over. She tried to get away or fight back but her arms and legs were restrained.

Merrill saw her body begin to convulse wildly. He grabbed her wrist and forced the earrings from her tight grasp. As the earrings fell, Jan came out of her unsuspected trance and fell into Merrill's arms. She staggered for a moment and then caught herself. She looked up at Merrill who gradually released her. There were tears in her eyes. She threw her arms around Merrill's neck as if needing the hug of her life. "I... Ah, I mean *she* was being raped!"

"Do you want to go in and sit down?"

"No, I need that coffee now. And I need to talk this out... I hope you don't embarrass easily."

They walked the quarter mile in silence while Jan grounded herself and continued to make the separation from what she experienced and from her own reality. After they bought their lattes, they sat at a table outside as far from other customers as possible. There was only the dim light from the café interior and a distant streetlight. Jan looked at the sky. "Figures, we're getting no protection from the moon, the clouds have hidden her light."

She began to talk, slowly at first and then picking up almost faster than Merrill could understand. It was so intense that he almost burned himself by forgetting a cigarette burning between his fingers. She talked for at least a half hour. She began crying half way through but he let her go on purging the feelings caught up in her. He couldn't understand fully the horrible shock she had experienced but he could feel the anguish emanating from her aura. Then, she was done. She and her aura became calm. "One other thing," she said. "I saw his face."



After they returned to the store, Merrill told Charlie to close Jan's book for the night. She wouldn't be doing any more readings. There were only two hours

left any way and there had only been one call. Merrill had a reading half an hour later.

They went into Merrill's office and sat. Merrill took the chair next to Jan instead of his normal seat. "I want to try again," she said. "I need to prepare first."

"What can I do to help?"

"Just hold me for a few minutes and let me draw from you. I need to charge up to handle the wards I need to set for myself. I know you have a reading coming. It will be enough time. Just ground yourself and cross energies with me."

The two of them sat on the floor, he behind her with his arms around her and they experienced a cone of energy surround them both, warm and soothing and growing. They stayed this way and to them hours had passed in the real world it had been only a few minutes. Then she let go and rose. "I'll go into Kalen's office and meditate. Come get me when you are done with your reading."



The reading was routine for a new client. She came in expecting the usual novelty reading and was shocked when Merrill correctly identified that she was in the middle of a divorce and that she had just come out of an unsuccessful fling with a guy she met at a bar.

He told her that going into any relationship at that time would be futile if not damaging. She needed to take the time to get to know who she is and what she wants before trying to share herself with another. As usual, the reading had extended to forty-five minutes instead of the fifteen minutes the woman had signed up for. The desk personnel were used to this routine. They always scheduled a half hour so that any other customers would not have to wait long if the reading did extend.

Merrill went to Kalen's office as soon as he said his goodbyes and given her his card with promises to be there to support her along her way. As he went quietly inside he found Jan was sitting in a full lotus position on the floor behind the desk. She was fully in trance. He lifted himself up to sit above her on the desk, grounded his energy deep within the earth goddess and waited. A few minutes later without lifting her head she said, "Hand them to me and ground me, I'm gonna try something that I have only done once before."

He saw Thoth lying on the desk. He looked different somehow. Gently he picked the earrings up by the wires and placed them into her hand. After a few moments in a seemingly disembodied voice, she began to speak. "I am in her now. She is alone. The room is small and brick. It looks more like some kind of building of its own instead of a house. There are windows, but they look like heavy plastic of some kind. There is bed here and there is a small separate bath,

even a shower. I am trying to look out of the window but it is cloudy like the plastic is a little old. I can make out the shape of huge trees. There is a different chest here made all of cedar. I am trying to find something to see myself. Maybe there is something in the bath. Yes, there is a metal mirror. I don't know her."

Jan went silent for several minutes before she opened her eyes. Merrill felt drained. He hadn't realized the amount of energy he had been wielding for her. He slowly got up and sat in one of the two chairs in front of the desk and waited. When Jan was fully conscious she got up and sat in Kalen's chair. "I could see but I blocked all of her emotions. I didn't think I could handle them just then. But whoever she is, she is in really bad shape."

"I think we need to get a hold of Grant. And I can't tell you why, but I sense that it has to be Grant himself, no one else."

Chapter 14

Grant and Sarah arrived at San Jose International Airport at 7:30. Their flight wasn't until 8:40 but Grant knew the new security protocols and going onboard as an armed air marshal took some time. He knew that they had to verify his credentials and his weapons permits. These days, nothing was left to chance.

He had packed his .357 and harness and was carrying only the PB3 since it was small enough to keep discretely in his coat pocket. And of course they had placed them toward the rear of the plane where it would be easy for him to view the other passengers. The special training he had taken had paid off, not in fares because the government paid for his flights anyway, but it got him on flights on short notice. This was one of those times. Even so, they could not get a direct flight. They would be stopping at LAX for a couple of hours before their longer flight to JFK Airport in New York.

"Sorry about the poor arrangements. It was the best I could do. But, I did manage to get us first class coming home," Grant kept his voice low while they waited in the security office. Unlike the expansive and new feel of the main terminal, the security office seemed more like the waiting room in a police precinct. Steel case half walls created small work areas for the half dozen or more agents that were busily making calls and questioning those passengers who had been pulled aside for additional screening. "When we come home, we won't have to do this. I'll only have to go to security baggage."

“Glad you know what you are doing. I would have found this very intimidating.”

Grant looked at Sarah who was obviously feeling intimidated even with him taking care of everything. “Don’t worry, we’re fine,” he said and put his arm around her. He could smell the soft smell of her amber perfume and feel the softness of her hair as it brushed his cheek. He really didn’t know how to handle the feelings of protectiveness that rushed through him. She was quite capable of handling herself.

While they were getting ready to leave she had asked permission to look at his weapons. She expertly cleared each before trying their action and had been very careful not to dry fire the revolver. When he asked her where she had learned to do that, she explained that while she was in high school, her father used to take her shooting twice a month. She said she had experience with pistols and rifles both double action and semi-automatic. She was actually a pretty tough lady in her beautiful package. Could he really be this lucky? He wondered how.

Since they were going to be changing flights, Grant had everything checked except for his laptop and Sarah’s purse. He preferred not to drag a carry-on around the terminals. He was actually looking forward to having some time at LAX; he remembered they had some nice shops last time he was there. He had scheduled them to return on Tuesday night, he wasn’t sure just how much real work they could do until Monday so he thought since they were going; they may as well have a nice weekend. “Oh,” Grant said, “Did I tell you that this is going to be a paid vacation for you? I am logging you in as a consultant.” Sarah grinned.

The flight was as he thought it would be, very uneventful. They took their first leg down to Los Angeles and had about two hours before they had to check through security. This time they had already verified his credentials so it was only a few minutes and they were pre-boarded. As it turned out, there was already a marshal on that leg and there was a cancellation in first class so they were given an upgrade.

Sarah had never flown first class before and was amazed with the attention they received. They were served wine, a very nice dinner of roasted pork and had deluxe seating. It was more like sitting in a nice restaurant with an amazing view of the stars than sitting in an airplane. She looked at Grant sitting next to her, his strong and vital face with soft caring brown eyes and his strong but not overly muscled body. She already knew how intelligent and how caring he was but with the excitement of the past week, their first night together and the romantic setting they now shared, she thought she might swoon. She didn’t understand how she could be so lucky. He seemed to be everything she ever dreamed about. They went to sleep holding hands and watching the stars above and the soft cotton of the clouds below. The attendant gently woke them at 6:30

AM and told them they were landing in an hour and offered them coffee and a light breakfast. They both felt as if they were still dreaming.

After retrieving their bags they took the Air-Porter to the Paramount where they were to stay. The room would not be ready until after 2:00 PM so Grant took his bag to the restroom, unpacked his gun and harness and then checked their luggage into the hotel storage with instructions that they be taken to their room when it was available. Obviously the town never slept because even at nine in the morning on a Saturday the sidewalks were filled with people. Sarah, who had never left the west coast, was overwhelmed.

It wasn't until they had walked at least six blocks that Grant remembered to turn on his cell phone. There was one message. He pressed the mailbox button and then dialed in his password. "You have one message, sent yesterday at 10:29 PM, to play this message press 1," the automated female voice reported. "This is Merrill," the man's voice said urgently. "Jan and I need you to call one of us as soon as you can."

Grant stopped and looked at Sarah sadly. "I have a feeling that our weekend just got cut short. That was the psychics. Let's go get some coffee and I'll call them. I hope they don't mind an early call, it's only about six in the morning back there."



Grant woke Merrill as he had anticipated, but also as he expected, Merrill had not minded at all. During the first part of the long conversation Grant could hear Merrill moving about obviously getting coffee and cigarettes and going outside where he could smoke. These were sounds he was well acquainted with from his own morning activities. In fact, Sarah and he had selected a café with outside tables so that he could do the same. Sarah stayed attentive trying to understand as much as she could from Grants responses. By the end, she knew they were not going to have their relaxing weekend.

"I have to call him back," Grant said. He explained to Sarah what had happened with Jan the previous night. "Oh my God Grant, how fast can we get back there?" Grant shook his head. "About as long as it takes to arrange flights I guess. How do you feel about going to Seattle?"

It took three hours to finally book flights back to San Jose and they couldn't leave for another four hours after that, but he had pulled some strings and gotten a direct flight. That took a good three hours off of their flight time. He also booked four tickets from San Jose to Seattle. Unfortunately they couldn't leave until 7:00 AM the following morning. He called Merrill back and asked if Merrill and Jan would mind going to Seattle for a few days and that they should meet at the

Psychic House at 5:00 AM if that worked for them. Of course Merrill would have to check that out and would get back to him. It was an hour before Grant and Sarah's flight that Merrill finally called him back. They would be ready to go when they met.



Merrill and Jan were waiting for them outside on the covered entry to the Psychic House when they arrived. They each had a bag and both looked a little lost. Grant shook their hands and thanked them for their cooperation. Of course there was no doubt that they would like to help, but Merrill was unclear what part he was to have since it was Jan who had the ability to link on to the victim with such clarity. Grant explained that his understanding from their conversation was that Merrill could ground and give energy to Jan and that he did not want to take any chances of Jan going into some kind of convulsions. And of course that was true; between the two of them the energy was much stronger.

"I didn't think you were all that into this psychic stuff," Merrill said. "I mean enough to want to take us up with you."

"Honestly," Grant replied. "I am not sure that I am, but right now you two are the only leads I have and from what you said on the phone, Miss Carolyn Bayers may be in real trouble."

Two hours later they were on a flight to Seattle.

"I have a confession to make," said Merrill sheepishly, looking at Grant across the aisle.

"What's that?"

"I did a reading for you without your permission the other day. I am really not supposed to do that but we were trying to figure out what was going on. I hope you don't mind."

"No, that's ok; I probably would have done the same thing if I were you. Did you see anything interesting?" Grant said in a taunting tone.

Merrill laughed. "Actually I did. I was going to congratulate you on your new relationship. From what I can see, you two are going to be together for a very long time."

Grant looked to his right to see Sarah beaming and then also laughed. "Well, I guess neither of us is sorry to hear that one. I suppose we will have to invite you to the wedding."

"Grant! You haven't even asked me yet." Sarah said while hitting his shoulder playfully.

He looked over at her lovingly. "Well, maybe it seems a bit soon, but I am in love with you so, I guess I'm asking now. Will you?"

“What?”

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes, of course I will.”

“Do you have any family you would want there?”

“No, as you know, my grandmother died last year, she was the only one.”

“Well, guys what do you think about a little trip to Vegas when this is all over?”

Sarah pulled Grant to her and kissed him deeply. “I love you.”

Jan who had been listening to this pulled Merrill toward her and whispered, “What about my vision? What about her and the worm?”

“Well,” Merrill whispered back. “My reading says reading says everything will be fine for them, so we will have to see. He knows about it. Besides, it isn’t often that you are with people that are so happy. Let it go.”

Jan nodded, but Merrill could feel her mixed emotions. All they could do is hope that his cards were right.

Chapter 15

“How are we going to approach this?” asked Sarah. The rental car was cruising almost silently up Interstate 5 passing Boeing Field. “This area is really spread out.”

“I’m not sure,” said Grant. He had been thinking about the weekends he spent in Seattle when he was at Fort Lewis. It was a pleasant time for him and he really liked the city even though it was rapidly changing. From what he knew of then and now, it was not changing in a good way. In his mind, the unplanned destruction of the area’s beauty was just criminal. “I was going to head us up to the Seattle Center and start from there. I figured it was fairly central and at this time of morning on a Saturday there won’t be many people out there. What do you think, Jan? You’re the one who has to guide us.”

“I’m going to need a place fairly private to meditate. A park will do, preferably with a table, like a picnic table.”

“Would the side of a fountain work?”

“Perfect!”

They arrived at the ‘Park and Ride’ across from the Seattle Center and began their short walk to the base of the Space Needle. They looked like a group of typical tourists except for Jan who looked a little like someone out of the sixties

with a fringed skirt and muslin blouse that looked like it should have come from England during the late middle-ages. She carried a small canvas bag with her.

"I thought we might want to pick up some coffee at the food court before we head down to the fountain," Grant said.

What is that building that the monorail tracks go into?" asked Sarah. "That is really ugly."

Grant laughed. "It's quite a controversy here. The Experience Music Project or EMP is either really liked or really hated depending on who you talk to."

"I can see why," said Merrill. "When you look at the futuristic shapes of the Space Needle and the Arches from the Science Pavilion then look at that, it just doesn't fit here."

"You've been here before?" asked Jan.

"I actually half grew up here," said Merrill. "I went to West Seattle High and to the University of Washington. I used to spend a lot of time down here."

They walked past the huge bolts that secured the base of the 'Needle', through the arcade and into the food court. "Now that is strange," said Merrill. "The Bubbleator is gone. There used to be an elevator in the shape of a glass ball, right over there."

"I heard something about that," said Grant. "It was here for about forty years and the city removed it not too long ago. The guy who built it has it now and is using it as a green house."

Just then, Grant's cell phone rang. "O'Connor." Grant said opening his phone. "Hello, who is this?" He could hear the hum of a completed signal but there was no one there. "Well, either you are just not talking or this is one lousy connection. Better try again." He hung up and then looked at the call log. It said unknown source.

"What was that?" asked Sarah.

"Not sure, wrong number maybe."

After they each got a large latte' then Merrill led them on a path around the arcade into the pavilion of flags and down the long path of cement stairs to the edge of the then dormant international fountain. The fountain dome in the center looked like a strange metal sea urchin with each of its spines being a nozzle.

"Have you ever been here on a summer night, Grant?"

Grant took on a look of pleasurable reminiscence. "Yes, it's wonderful. The fountain is constantly changing with lights and music. It is really a show to see. Will this work for you Jan?"

There was no answer because Jan was already unpacking the five votive candles, red, blue, yellow, green and white from her bag and laying them out on the ledge that bordered the fountain. She placed each according to the four

directions with the white taking the center. Then she took out a tiny crucible and filled it half way with sand, placed a piece of charcoal in the center and lit a wooden match. When she touched the match to the charcoal a swath of sparkles shone out from the darkness of small briquette and a small plume of grey smoke rose from the cauldron. She then removed a small pillow from her bag, laid it on the ground in front of her newly constructed alter and sat.

She lit the each candle while murmuring an incantation and finally added a white stone to the cauldron. The smell of frankincense rose with the new plume of white smoke as the resin began to bubble on the charcoal. Finally she took out the earrings she had been carrying in the pocket that was sewn on the inside of her skirt and placed them near the center candle.

"I am sure glad there is no one around down here," said Grant looking around a little nervously.

"There will be plenty of people here in another hour, but relax, people do this down here all the time," said Merrill. "Or at least they used to back in the seventies. I can't imagine that it has changed all that much."

"Oh yes it can," said Grant with a knowing look.

Merrill walked over and sat on the cement next to Jan and the two greeted the day while Grant and Sarah stood back and watched. After about ten minutes, Jan picked up the earrings and held them in her hand. The two meditated for another five minutes and Jan extinguished each candle in the order she had lit them while thanking each guardian for their participation and the goddess for being ever their guide.

Once done, she got up, put the earrings back in their hiding place, emptied the charcoal into a cement ashtray on the outer edge of the path and packed everything else into her bag. She then turned to Grant and said, "She is that way pointing out toward the water, but if I could get somewhere higher I could probably isolate just which direction better."

"No problem," said Grant just as his cell phone rang again. Just as before, there was no one there. "These things can be a real pain sometimes," he said and put it away.

They followed the path back up around the arcade and across to the Space Needle. It had opened only a half hour before and there were still no lines waiting for the elevator. Grant went to the window and handed the attendant \$60. Looking at Merrill, Grant said, "Well if nothing else has changed, the prices sure have."

Merrill laughed when he saw Grant handed the \$4.00 change.

The view from the observation deck was incredible. It was one of those rare clear mornings where the mountains on all sides looked as though you could touch them. To the south Mt. Rainier shown like a huge white monument with

only a small cloud halo that rose just above its peak.

The city stretched forever to the north, and south. To the east they could see the house covered hills back dropped by the towering Cascades and to the west the channels of the Puget Sound wrapped around the many inlets of Vashon Island, the Kitsap Peninsula, Blake Island, Bainbridge Island and Magnolia. The Olympic Mountains, still white with snow, commanded their attention in the far distance. The blue-green water was speckled by sail boats, the occasional freighter on its way to or from the Tacoma to the south and by the ever present ferries that traversed the sound in several places. Both Sarah and Jan, who had never seen the view before were astonished. It was breath taking.

Jan took out the earrings and began studying the scene to the west. After only a few minutes she asked, "What is that over there," while pointing to the largest landmark across the water.

"That's Bainbridge Island," replied Grant. "Why?"

"Cause, that's where she is."

"Ok, sight seeing is over, let's go."

They entered the elevator and hit the down button and with a feeling of freefall the elevator quickly descended. Seeing Sarah's nervousness, Grant said, "These elevators have always had that reaction with me. They were designed to impress people during the World's Fair. Don't worry, they are perfectly safe."

As they stepped out of the doors of the glass foyer that held the elevator waiting area, suddenly the glass of the door Grant was holding open exploded. It was only after the glass had fallen that he recognized the whiz the bullet had made as it passed just behind his head. "Everybody down," he yelled. "Go this way."

The four of them ducked in behind the ticket booth where the man inside was looking around trying to figure out what was happening. "Hey, guy... hit the floor, they're shooting." Dumbfounded, the man hit the floor like a rock. Grant took out his .357 and looked around the corner. He saw the bright reflection of a scope shining from beside the carousel and ducked back in time to be showered by brick fragments from the edge of the ticket booth. He turned and looked at the three others that were huddled behind him. "Stay here and stay down."

Grant spun to his right, went around the others and then staying half crouched ran to the far side to the cover of a large tree that shaded part of the path. Moving once more within the carefully maintained garden he moved up even with where he had seen the reflection and then out near the walkway where he would have a clear shot.

The man had apparently not seen him move because he was still posed with his rifle supported by the saddle of one of the metal and plastic horses. "Freeze, FBI!"

The man spun with his rifle toward Grant who squeezed off a round just as another shell left the barrel of the heavily silenced sniper weapon. The rifle round impacted a white garbage can to the right of Grant whose round found its mark. With the hollow pointed ammunition Grant carried, it only took one. The man was thrown back and down.

Grant rushed the carousel to see that his gun had done its job. The would-be assassin was dead.

With a sigh, he started back to his party, took out his cell phone and dialed 311. "Name and City Please," the pleasant voice inquired.

"Seattle Police Homicide please," he said as pleasantly as he could.

"For your reference the number is (206) 555-5555, you will be automatically connected, please hold."

"Homicide, this is Sergeant Miller can I help you."

"This is Lieutenant Grant Forester with the FBI, and you're going to want my badge number."

When he reached his friends and made sure they were all ok, Grant signaled them to head toward the car. He was still watching all directions while still on the phone with the Sergeant. After five minutes of explaining that they had a body that would need to be picked up, where the shooting happened and that he was not sure that he and his friends were safe so they were on the move and that he would be in contact with them later to fill out a shooting report. He finally hung up.

The other three were visibly shaken. It was not an everyday experience for them to be shot at. For that matter it wasn't for Grant either. In fact this was the first time where it had come completely unexpected. Quite a different experience than rounds being shot from someone they were trying to arrest and knew the danger in advance. And it was not something any of them would like to repeat.

"Who was it?" Sarah asked as soon as Grant got off the phone.

"My guess is that our assassins knew we were coming somehow. The question is how they knew and how they knew exactly where to find us."

"I bet I can answer the second half at least," said Jan.

Grant looked at her in amazement. "How's that?"

"Your cell phone, remember the calls?"

"Shit," he said and took the battery out of the cell. "That means whoever they are have access to a lot more than we really want to be up against. Damn."

"What'll we do?"

"We still have to find that woman."

They all piled into the rental car and headed for Coleman Dock and the Bainbridge Ferry. "I really don't like the idea that they know we are after them," Grant said. He was gritting his teeth. He sighed deeply and said, "We got lucky,

but now we know we have to be more careful.”

They left to the sound of sirens coming their way.

Chapter 16

Any other time the trip across the Sound would have seemed like a fantasy. The water was as smooth as any lake. The only waves were those generated by the normal tidal action and from the numerous boats of people enjoying the rare treat of a perfect day. It was warm for late April being in the mid eighties. The city behind them glittered in the sunlight and the forest in front of them was beautiful, broken only by scattered houses.

It really hadn't changed that much thought Grant. He felt sorry that none of the others could enjoy the paradise of the moment. They were all still suffering from the earlier trauma. He couldn't blame them. It certainly came out of nowhere. That part bothered him too. He still couldn't figure out who would have enough resources to track them in that manner and he wasn't sure how to find out. He would have suspected someone within the Bureau but he hadn't told anyone where they were going. There were only the four of them that knew. Even if someone was tracking his cell, they couldn't have done it that quickly unless they already knew they were in Washington. He hadn't used his cell since they had landed. He knew that the signal could be tracked if the phone was on at all and it had been off during the flight. He had turned it back on when they got to the car. The calls had to be for the assassin to identify them. This meant that the assassin didn't know what the group looked like in advance. Then it occurred to him. He had been using his Bureau Credit Card to book everything including the flights and the car. Odds were that whoever *they* were even had a description of the car.

“When we get over there I need to get to a bank,” he said to everyone. “We also need a credit card other than mine or even Sarah's for that matter. Do either of you have one with you?”

“I have one,” said Merrill. “But it only has about \$600 open on it.”

“That'll work; I can give you a check to put back in.”

“What are you thinking, Grant?” asked Sarah.

Grant explained his conclusions about there being a leak in the Bureau and that they would be driving back to the airport in a different car. They all

seemed a little amazed by the possibility but realized that was one of the very few possibilities. Grant looked at Jan with the look of someone who had lost something and then suddenly found it. "Jan, Merrill said that in your episode, you saw the assassin's face. Can you still envision it?"

"Are you kidding, I wish I could forget it. But I really doubt that I ever will."

When the ferry landed Grant drove directly west to the small Scandinavian town of Poulsbo, went to a gas station and got the directions to the nearest Washington Mutual. They found it three blocks away. "I'll be back in a minute," he said.

After he left, Jan reached up and touched Sarah's shoulder. "Are you ok?"

"Yes, I'm ok, why do you ask?"

"Well, it has been quite a shock on all of us, but you were so high with the romance of it all that I was afraid that you could be in a bit of shock."

"Maybe a little, but as a forensic scientist I work with the dead all the time, so that part I can handle. It is a bit extreme when you know someone is trying to make you a part of that statistic though." Sarah paused as though thinking and then continued, "But you know, I *can* handle it when I am with him. It feels really strange but somehow I know we will be alright."

"How long have you known him, Sarah?"

"Actually we have known each other professionally for almost two years. But we just started going out and it has been like..." she grinned. "In your words, it's been like magick."

"I think it is a kind of magick. I was just concerned that things might be happening a little fast for you."

"No, actually I'm thrilled. Don't you ever tell him, but I had been dreaming of this for over a year. And I don't mean wishful thinking. I mean real visualizations. Isn't that what you call magick?"

"Actually it is," piped in Merrill. "We call it visual magick and something as big as this typically takes a year and a day."

"Hmm, I would have to think back a bit, but actually I wouldn't be surprised if that wasn't almost exactly right."

Grant got back in the car. "Ok, we are in business. I only wish I had a cell phone so I could line us up a car."

"Like this one?" Merrill said as he handed his cell phone up to the front seat.

"Perfect. Ok Jan, where do we go?"

Jan took the earrings from the hidden pocket and held them gently in her hand. This time Sarah thought she could see what looked like heat waves emanating off of Jan's filled hand. Jan looked a little anxious and focused harder. The waves became even more emphasized to the point where Sarah's eyes went wide with

surprise. Even Grant seemed to see something, though he would never be able to explain what he saw. After a few moments, the waves of energy ceased and Jan opened her eyes. "I know we have to go that way, pointing northwest, but there is something wrong, her energy is getting very weak."

They worked their way out of Poulsbo and started up Hwy 3. Everywhere they looked the four lane freeway was surrounded by tree covered hill tops. The highway followed what had been a long river valley between the rising hills. Jan kept indicating that their destination was further northwest and that was taking them across the Hood Canal Bridge. Once across the bridge, she realized that what she was sensing was coming from even further north. They continued on, the highway now going almost due west, and then came to a junction. Grant pulled over. "Ok Jan, see what you feel now. This one doesn't loop back, see what you feel."

Jan held the earrings and focuses strongly once again with Merrill placing his hand on her back between her shoulders and focusing on her. "It's definitely up that way," she said pointing west towards Port Townsend. "I'm sure of it."

Fifteen minutes later they were in the center of a quaint little fishing town. Obviously, the town was originally a shipping port with many bare pilings still present from where long wharfs had extended out to dock ships. There were old and restored Victorian houses throughout the town that overlooked the Strait of Juan de Fuca providing the owners with unsurpassed views of the water and Oak Harbor's forested coastline. He continued to drive north until they reached a small lake. "There isn't anywhere further north to go," said Grant. "Where do we go now?"

Jan pointed west. "I don't think it is far from here. I think you should follow this road north." The road went west for a few blocks then turned north and west again until it turned into Seaview Drive. The houses were for the most part, up in the trees and overlooked the water. Many were large houses and obviously high end. "Stop!" Jan said.

They pulled over while Jan examined each house. Finally she pointed. "See the small yellow house? The one we want is to the right of it."

Grant noted the location and made a u-turn. Within seconds they took a right turn, headed up a hill and then turned left. "Is that it?" He pointed at a large white house that overlooked the cliff. There was a For Sale sign in front.

"Yes, she is in that small building," Jan said while pointing at what appeared to be a large boat shed.

"Ok," said Grant as he maneuvered the car further down the road until it intersected a small dirt road that leading up to an isolated house on the side of the cliff. He turned the car around and parked on the side of the road.

"I have to take this on by myself," he said. "I can't take the chance those guys are there. If there is any trouble, go into town and find the police station. I should be back soon."

He climbed out of the car, reached to the small of his back and pulled out his PB3. "Know how to use this?"

He had directed his question to Merrill in the back seat. Seeing an affirmative nod, he handed him the weapon. He reached under his coat and removed the .357, checked it and then put it back. "Take the wheel and be ready just in case," he said to Sarah.

Merrill got out and took the shotgun seat while Grant disappeared into the woods across the street. "I hope nobody is around," he said. "I really don't want this to get any uglier than it already has."



The houses were set back far from the road. Grant was fortunate to find that there were paths throughout the woods that kids had apparently used as routes to the road from the few houses. He crossed the driveway that belonged to the yellow house that Jan had used as a reference, making sure there was no one out side that might see him. Then he cut deeper into the woods to diagonal himself to the boathouse. It was a smaller building on Grant's side of the house, about the size of a large garage with three windows along the side he approached.

The windows were not quite clear so he could not readily see what was inside. He could see that the driveway extended to the side of the building facing the house so he assumed correctly that bay doors opened on to it and there might be a door in the back. Cautiously, he approached the building keeping it between him and the house and then realized why he could not see in before. The windows were not glass but an almost clear plexi-glass. He could barely see in, but enough to see the chest.

He went to the back of the building and found the door he had imagined was there. It was unlocked so he quietly slipped inside. It was empty except for a six foot long cedar chest up against one wall. It had a hasp on the front like the other one he had found in California except there was no lock on this one. Something inside his gut told him that something was wrong. He carefully examined the lid and the seam. There was nothing so he carefully slid the chest away from the wall and found a small hole near the bottom. Taking a small pen light out of his coat pocket he peered into the hole. He couldn't see.

He sat back from the chest a moment and thought before trying anything else. He reached into his pocket and took out his lock tools and carefully reached

into the hole. He found something. As he slowly pulled out his pick there was the slight resistance from the wire he had snagged with it. He continued very slowly until the wire was visible. There was black tape wrapped around the wire. He realized what that meant and carefully unwound the tape to expose the hand wrapped connection. It had not been soldered, only twisted. That had to be the answer he thought, the final connection to a bomb. The next question he had was whether the woman was in there and there was only one way to find out.

He held his breath while disconnecting to two wires. Nothing happened. He let out a sigh. I'm still here, he thought. Next he went to the lid and slowly lifted. Lying between the woman's legs was a small block of clay like material that Grant assumed was C-4 and a detonator. One of it's wires ran to a square battery like you might use in a lantern and the other to a plunger switch mounted next to one of the hinges and then back to the battery. It was not sophisticated, but the trap might have been effective if he had not been alert.

He removed the detonator from the plastic explosive, disconnected the battery and then finally placed his attention on the woman who was posed in the same manner as the others. She was dead but still warm enough that Grant knew that she had died only moments before.

Grant heard the sound of tires over gravel and then the near silence of tires going over paved driveway. He quietly closed the chest and carefully slipped back out of the door. As he made his way back to the far side of the boat house he heard voices. He kept low to the ground and moved toward the front. He could see two men on the porch. "You saw them where?" he could hear one of the men's voice at the point of yelling. "Pull the car around."

Realizing the danger to Sarah and his other friends, Grant dashed back through the woods. Just after he crossed behind the driveway of the neighbor he heard a car pass by on the other side of the trees that separated the path he was on from the road. He kept running. He would be there in less than a minute. He backed off his pace to capture his breath and to see what he was getting into. The car he had seen in the driveway had turned sideways effectively blocking the narrow dirt road. Sarah was backing the car down the road but the entrance to the driveway was fenced. They were trapped.

The three emptied out of the car and dove for the brush as a bullet pierced the front windshield. Grant pulled his .357 from his shoulder harness, aimed and shot the shooter before he could fire again. A second shot hit the man from the front almost simultaneously with a crack from the brush ahead of him. He went down. The other man took cover in the trees on the side of the dirt road away from Grant.

All was silent for a few moments that felt like an hour. Grant had been working

his way back through the woods until he was across from the rental car. He spotted Jan and waved her across. He watched as she moved in a crouched position, slipped around behind the car and then flew across into the woods where Grant was. Motioning with his hand, he instructed her to stay flat. Then he looked for the other two. Merrill had settled behind a wide tree trunk and was looking toward the other car, gun in hand. Grant could not see Sarah. He waved Merrill across and simultaneously they exchanged positions.

Now on the side of the road he had seen the other man dive into, Grant began a slow and calculated path trading trees for cover. "I would rather not kill her this way," he heard the man's gravely voice say in a very calm manner. "It would be such a waste." Grant spun to his right and raised his weapon and stepped sideways from the tree that had protected him to find that he was pointing the gun straight at Sarah. She was being held by a single hand that covered both her mouth and nose. She was silently struggling as the lack of breath was quickly relieving her of consciousness. Grant could see the gun pointed at him and the piercing eyes of the man behind it. "What is the solution?" Grant asked.

"Drop your weapon and we will talk about it," the rough voice replied.

The sound of a .357 being fired is deafening, especially in the quiet of the woods and especially when the listener is full of adrenaline.

Time slowed as the black spot appeared on the forehead of the man followed by the spray of blood, brains and shattered bone that misted the plants behind him. Sarah drifted to the ground as the man was slowly thrown back and away from her and the sound of Jan's scream finally reached Grant's ears. It was over.

Chapter 17

The sun was rising when Merrill gave up trying to sleep. He had been tossing and turning despite the grand accommodations they had managed to find. Another month and there would have been nowhere to stay in the area aside from the motel 6 back on the highway. But the Hilltop Bed and Breakfast had three of their rooms available and it had seemed to Grant only fitting that they have a night of luxury to sleep off and recover from the day's events. The surroundings were not the least bit comforting to Merrill, however. It had been bad enough to have been shot at twice and to have found two bodies and another captive, but for him to actually shoot someone, was almost more than his mind could absorb. They had

found another woman in a second coffin that was still in the house. At least she had been still alive. The man they found in the trunk of the car had not been so fortunate.

He had never seen a dead body before. Even in Seattle he hadn't seen the man who had tried to kill them. So the first dead body he had seen was the man he shot. Of course he understood that his wasn't the only bullet to hit the target and likely his would have only stopped the man. It was Grant's round that killed him instantly. Then Grant had Jan identify the man he killed in the woods as the man she saw in her dream. He felt sorry for Jan having to view the man with half his head gone.

Fortunately, the secretary was alright. The drugs she had been given wore off a few hours later and they were able to find out what happened. After the police arrived they had walked back to the scene of the shooting and then had to go through two hours of debriefing before they were allowed to leave.

Grant had taken them out for dinner at a very nice seafood restaurant and had borrowed a phone book to find lodging. They arrived at the B&B by about eleven and everyone had immediately retired. Fortunately, the owners had been able to accommodate them that late.

Merrill called Cheryl from the police station and apologized for not calling sooner, and took at least 15 minutes explaining what had happened that day. He unfortunately had to also explain to her that they were going to have to stay in Port Townsend at least through Monday to be available for additional questioning. He knew that Grant would have to write a police report that outlined all of the assassin's activities.

At least Grant and Sarah had brought all of their notes with them. Cheryl had listened to his story in disbelief until near the end when he told her that he had shot someone, and then her reactions were all of concern and compassion. She told him to take whatever time he needed and that she was fine. She would have a drink and a rub for him when he got home.

All of these thoughts kept racing around in Merrill's head. He could have really used the drink and back rub right then, but was at least reassured by her patience. Now that it was dawn he figured he might as well get up. He put on his pants and shirt went into the large living room that adjoined an almost as large dining room. The table would accommodate twelve comfortably. Breakfast would not be for two more hours but there was fresh coffee waiting for him.

Trying to grasp some normalcy, he grabbed a cup of coffee, added cream and sugar and then went out to the front porch for a cigarette. There was a swinging lounge for two. Jan sat on one side of it and was drifting back and forth. She looked preoccupied.

“How long have you been out here?” he asked. His voice held concern. He knew how hard all of this was on him and with her sensitivity it could not have been easy on her.

“About an hour I guess. Oddly enough, I feel better today than I have in a week,” she said. “I had a dream of going to Vegas for a wedding. And no more worms.” She sighed and continued her gentle swing in the chair. “I’m not sure we are completely done, because we don’t know what the worm is, but I feel like we have really helped. So I feel a kind of satisfaction.”

“Think we should do a reading?” Merrill suggested while taking another drag off of his smoke.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt. I noticed a nice big coffee table in the living room that should work for that. I doubt you should light any incense though.”

“That’s ok; I really doubt that they would complain about lighting a candle. Let me finish my smoke and drink some of my coffee and we will give it a try.



When Grant and Sarah came out of their room they found the two psychics sitting across from each other at the coffee table. Merrill was laying out cards and explaining what he saw to Jan. Grant asked if they could join in and they had fun examining each others immediate futures until other guests began coming from their rooms for the well anticipated breakfast.

The owner, who was also the cook began spreading dishes of fresh fruit, glasses of juice, and plates of fresh baked bread and muffins. After everyone was seated she and a helper brought out individual plates for each guest with their orders prepared to perfection. The table had been set with antique silver candelabras, butter dishes, silverware and cloth napkins that had Hilltop B&B embroidered onto the corner. It was a feast for all of their senses. Merrill thought he would like to bring Cynthia here someday both to enjoy the surroundings and to be able to show her where he had been but then decided that she probably wouldn’t enjoy it anyway.

“So, what happens today?” asked Jan after the other guests had retired to their various rooms.

Grant sipped his coffee and nodded toward the living room where they regrouped among the generously padded chairs and couches. “I have to go back to the station this morning to fill out their report and relay what has happened to the Seattle Police. We did leave them in a rush yesterday. Anyway, I’ll probably be hung up there until late this afternoon. Why don’t the three of you go wander downtown. It looked like there were some nice little shops down there.”

"I think I just want to kick back here and try to rest," said Merrill.

Sarah looked at Jan and said, "It's been a long time since I went shopping with just the girls, what about you Jan?"

"Ok, it's settled then, how about meeting back here around six. We can have dinner and maybe a show. I noticed a theater in town."



Sunday had been pleasant for Sarah; her personal fantasy was more than being fulfilled. She was engaged to who she saw as the most loving and protective man in the world. He was a creative and fearless hero in her own romance story. She also now had friends that she knew would always be there. She had been wined and dined, treated to the finest accommodations she could ever remember and made love more passionately than her reserved nature had ever allowed her to imagine, all in the middle of a storm of intrigue like she had never encountered. It was surreal and she loved it. It didn't even occur to her how close to a tragic end she had been nor would she have admitted it. After all, he was there. He gave her strength. He gave her courage.

On Monday morning when she woke, he had been still asleep beside her. So, she drew herself a warm bath in the luxurious garden tub that was part of their suite. Grant had changed their room for the bridal suite when the other guests had checked out. He had not said a word, only guided her into the beautiful room with frilly netting that draped from the ceiling down to the floor surrounding the bed. The room had a small separate drawing room with table and chairs where the two of them sat and just appreciated each others company while sharing some cognac after they had returned from a pleasant afternoon and evening where they had a meal that would make personal history and a movie. While she soaked in the fragrant oils the owner's provided she reflected on the rush of emotions that had run through her as they made love the night before. She realized that this time was more than any honeymoon could ever live up to. Grant knocked softly on the door and poked his head in.

"Care for some company?" He was dressed only in pajama bottoms and a robe that hung open in the front. "Please, come in," she said.

"I think it is time we sent our two friends home now." He sat on the closed toilet next to the tub facing her. Then he stopped and his expression changed from conversational to one of adoration. "Do you realize how beautiful you are?"

She laughed and said teasingly. "Well, you might see a little better from in here."



Jan woke refreshed. She had not realized how tired she had been until after she and Sarah had gone browsing through all of the little shops in town. They had fun looking at all the antiques and sexy women's apparel. Together they made a pact that when they all got back to the Bay Area that they would have to spend time together and see all the little places that the beach communities offered. They had found a part of their lives that had been neglected, girl time.

She had even relaxed enough with Sarah to reveal how she had avoided relationships because of her gifts. Since she never felt that she could live with someone that couldn't relate to both her psychic ability and her shared time with the goddess, she had kept her distance from people. The only men she had ever found with those qualities had been Kalen and Merrill. She was never attracted to Kalen and sadly Merrill was a devoted husband to a woman who, by her visions, was not so devoted.

Sarah had asked her if she was in love with Merrill. But on this Jan only gave her a blank look as a tear formed in the corner of her eye. She had told Jan that she understood.

Jan explained that she really had no close friends because most of the women she knew, who understood her beliefs followed Wicca but she never felt like any of the groups she had met were a good fit for her. So, that had left her with just herself. Somehow it was different being around her and Grant. The two of them seemed to just accept who she and Merrill were and did not seem to judge them at all.

Sarah had appreciated that and told her that she was interested in learning more about the pagan way. Hearing that had made Jan feel like the journey they were on had many levels to it. In fact, then she was sure of it.

She dressed in the new skirt she and Sarah had picked out for her. It was long, all the way down to her ankles and made of denim. She matched it up with a tight white shell and denim vest. She combed out her shoulder length hair and admired the contrast between the auburn and the blue. She felt good, she felt she looked good and she felt as though her life was changing.

The sun had appeared above the trees when she went outside the back of the building. She raised her hands into the air and reached up into the sky, stretching up on her toes as if she could reach forever. Then she raised her skirt, knelt on both knees and felt the earth ground and fill her. She had greeted the morning and the morning had nurtured her. She was one.



Merrill had waked in sadness. He could not shake the fact that he had shot

someone. He had always known that he was capable of it. He had learned to use every kind of weapon he could pick up when he was young. His grandfather had insisted that everyone had the responsibility of protecting themselves and their family. That was a hard thing for him though. He lived the pagan way, 'Harm None' and even though he was not formally a witch, he valued the teachings of the past and it was hard for him to get over his brief session of going warlock. He also knew that it had been necessary and that it was in the past. He needed to visit his sacred space and be cleansed of it.

While everyone else had gone to town, he had remained alone. He didn't feel that he should be around the others because of his being tainted with the actions of the day before. So, he had bathed and gone off by himself to the beach to ground and become one with himself again. It wasn't until dinner that he rejoined the party and then only through dinner. Then he excused himself and went to his room. He had never felt so alone.

He dressed in his normal Dockers and sandals with a polo shirt and went out for his morning smoke and coffee. It was his turn to greet the day by swinging in the chair.

Jan, being finished and refreshed from her brief ritual walked up to the porch and saw Merrill swinging silently. She could tell that something was punishing his heart and so she asked. "What is making your heart so heavy Merrill?"

He explained the feelings he had been harboring since they arrived at the B&B and how he felt unclean. She stood in front of him listening and acknowledging the expressions of his pain. "Come with me," she said. "We can take care of that right now."

She led him into her room went into the closet and came out again. She laid out her five candles. Lighting and invoking each of the guardians and the goddess, she then told Merrill to sit on the edge of the bed. She removed her vest and blouse and bared her breasts. Reaching high into the sky like earlier she called on the goddess to become one with her. Her posture became weakened momentarily as her expression changed and Merrill could see her aura become brilliantly white. He was mesmerized. Her firm body tantalized him and the energy within the room became electric. She approached him and took his head and pressed it against her small breasts. He became instantly aroused. The voice that came from the young woman was not her own, it was the mature voice of Athena, goddess of the hunt and war.

"Be calm my young warlock, your actions were founded in love and therefore one with me. Place your lance within my body and be cleansed." She laid him back opened his pants, lifted her knees on the edge of the bed, and her full skirt over his head, placing him in darkness. She came down on him enveloping his

engorged organ. He instantly exploded and then fell into a deep but calm sleep.

When he awoke, he was laying on his back. She was gone as were the candles. His clothes were in tact as they should have been. All he was left with was a peace of mind and the mystery of his dream.



When Merrill came out of Jan's room breakfast was just being served. They were all in good spirits and ready to begin the day. Grant explained to Jan and Merrill that they would be traveling back to the bay alone and that he and Sarah would call them as soon as they got back to town. They had to go back to New York and finish what they had gone there for to begin with. But it was still going to be a long drive before they would be on the last flight back at about 9:30 that evening.

They had been the only residents that night so they were alone at the table. Breakfast was just as fulfilling as the morning before and they shared that time together. Merrill asked Jan in a whisper what had happened. She simply said only that he had been blessed by the goddess, and it was not something to speak about.

After breakfast they packed their belongings into the rental car. The rental company had sent someone out and replaced the windshield and they were ready for their journey home.

Chapter 18

For Grant and Sarah the day went well into the next morning. They had seen Merrill and Jan off and an hour later they were on their flight back to New York. Grant had filled Sarah in on some information that he had found out on Sunday while at the station. He had visited the woman they rescued and found out that she was Cynthia Strong, personal secretary to the man they had found in the trunk. His name had been Carlisle Mandicott. He was an executive with an important construction firm in the northwest.

They had not been so lucky on their flight this time, there had been no need for a flight security officer and there were no openings in first class. So they sat next to each other and did their best to juggle files on their two fold down tables. They could both see that there were connections between the individuals that had

been killed, but nothing that gave them a clear picture of the motive. One possible piece of the puzzle came from some things Ms. Strong had told Grant. Mandicott's company had been working on some huge project proposals over the past three months. One of them was to be a new housing development in Gig Harbor involving an entire shopping district and close to a thousand new homes. They had spent several months coming up with access plans, wet lands plans, school proposals, energy plans, and even more time lining up investors. Another was the replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct. That project was being debated at all levels of government because of the size of the project and there was a general call for alternative plans to rebuild it.

She said that Carlisle had put together a subway plan that might avoid a lot of the problems as well as beautify the Seattle Waterfront and Market. They had spent months attending meetings and lobbying for the city to move forward on the project and were just starting to have some success. They were also revising their monorail plan, since the winners of the proposal three years before had basically taken a nosedive and the city was starting to consider new ideas.

The biggest problem with any development project in the greater Seattle area was because of the local government and it isn't because of insane laws, though there were plenty of those. Those were clear enough. The problem was with the politicians and their inability to make a decision and stand by it. Carlisle apparently thought that they needed stronger personalities in the local process. Their biggest competitor, MRH Enterprises, seemed to thrive on this snarl which frustrated Carlisle. MRH had so much money they could use this to their advantage. They simply waited everyone else out.

"You know," Jan said, "That could tie in with our contractor in New York somehow. That is if we assume that it relates to the work they were doing."

"We need to find out more about this MRH Enterprises. I also found out that the house they were staying in was another investment company buy out property and it was already scheduled for sale in another two weeks."

"Let me guess, Jenre Investments."

"Yes and not only that. They had purchased the property only a few weeks before and it is only a quarter mile from our victim's summer home. When we get into New York, I'm going contact Greg and have him see what he can find out about both of those corporations."

Sarah looked at him in surprise. "You're going to open communications with the Bureau? I thought you said that they could be involved."

"No, don't worry. I won't let anyone know where we are. Not yet at least. But we need the information and I need to let them know I have gone deep."

Grant took a deep sigh. "I'm starting to get concerned that we are way out

of our league here. And I'm worried about you." He paused and took her hand. "Before we left, Jan had told me that she had a dream that showed you in danger. That's partially why I thought it best if you came with me on this. Now, don't get me wrong, I really like having you with me, and I really love you. In fact that is why I am having problems right now. If something should happen to you, I mean like already almost happened I..."

Sarah cut him off. "Look, if you remember it was me who jumped in about going with you. And as you know, with my being a coroner I knew all too well the risks you take. But, I also know that you and I cover each others backs really well. So, knock it off." She kissed him lightly on the lips. "Besides, I already knew about Jan's vision. You don't remember but you told me before we left and then Jan told me on Sunday while we were out shopping together." "You knew?"

"Yes, and she also explained to me that there is no such thing as a set future. She said that our best chance at a bright one was by staying together."

Grant smiled sheepishly and put the files away. "We'll work on this later."



Merrill didn't make it home until almost midnight. He felt exhausted. The almost five hour drive to the airport and then the security check and finally the two and a half hour flight home had made for a very long day. He still felt a little confused from the strange dream he had that morning. It had been so vivid, so real. But he felt stronger emotionally from the experiences the past few days than he had ever felt. He was much more alive. It was like he was living life instead of drifting through it.

When he finally drove into the parking lot, he noticed that the Subaru was not parked in their stall. He thought that was odd, but maybe Cheryl had parked somewhere else in the lot and left the stall open for him. So, he parked and walked in. He left his things in the van. He could deal with them when he got up. As he walked up to the condo, he noticed that the porch light wasn't on and neither were any of the interior lights. Anxiously he inserted his key in the lock and opened the door. The sound of the door opening echoed in his ears, a sound that threw anxiety through his entire body.

Rushing in, he found the apartment empty. He went from room to room; there was nothing there except his clothes still hung in the closet and a single dresser containing his underwear and pants. Nothing until he went to the small dining area that set off from the side of the now empty living room. There was a card table with and a chair. On the table sat a bottle of Scoresby's with a blue plastic cup on

top. Under the bottle there was a note. ‘Here is the drink I promised you, (I think you’ll want one now) and the rub. The rub is that even though I love you, I don’t love us. I am fed up with trying to live in your fantasy and now I am gone. You remember Charlie from the Christmas party last year? Well, he and I are off to Denver. I’ll send you the divorce papers when I get them. Have a wonderful life. Cheryl.’

He took the glass and went to the refrigerator. He wasn’t surprised when the only thing inside was the ice he was looking for, he took three pieces. The ice and a couple of shots of scotch and he was outside lighting up. He didn’t understand what had happened.



After Merrill dropped Jan at her apartment she went directly to her alter. She opened her circle as usual and thanked the goddess for looking over them during the perilous trip. She also thanked her as she did each day for her gifts then went into a deep meditation. She saw Merrill lying on the floor. She knew immediately that what she feared for Merrill had taken place. He must feel the most alone he had ever felt.

She had been sitting there in meditation for close to an hour but for her it had been but five minutes. There were tears in her eyes. She knew she must go to him now. Bring him here, let him talk, let him feel.

It was almost an hour walk, but she was used to walking. Many times she would walk to work because depending on the time it might take nearly as long to take the bus. Sometimes Merrill or Kalen drove her home but she could never depend on it. She just wrapped herself in the invisibility of her own energy and walked home in complete security. Now would be the same. She still had on the denim clothing which was more than adequate for a spring evening in the valley so there was nothing left to do but walk.

Almost as though carried in a dream, she walked contained within her thoughts and her will to comfort Merrill. She arrived in half the time she anticipated. As she walked in-front of the townhouse complex she could smell the acrid odor of cigarette smoke emanating from the patio of his unit. She waded her way through the ivy that covered the slight knoll that rose up to his fence gate and knocked.

Merrill heard tapping but it did not register at first. He was sitting on the ground, leaning against the wall with his drink in one hand and his cigarette in the other. He was not drunk; in fact he had hardly touched his drink. The tapping came again. There was someone at the gate. He could not imagine who it could be. Then the familiar feeling of Jan’s energy wrapped around him.

He stood and opened the gate to find her standing there. “I thought you might like some company,” she said. He wrapped his arms around her and cried. She put her arms around his neck and they stood that way for several minutes.

“Come on,” she said finally. “Get your van, you can stay with me. We’ll sort this out in the morning.”

Chapter 19

The clouds had been thick as their plane dropped through them on final approach to JFK. The landing field lights streaked eerily on the wet pavement as the plane’s engines roared against their reversers. Grant could hardly wait to get off the plane and through the terminal. It had been over six hours since his last cigarette. Fortunately, Sarah and he had slept most of the flight but now to his body it was morning and his body was demanding that attention. He squeezed Sarah’s arm that was intertwined with his while she too looked out of the window toward the terminal. His urgency was something that he knew that a non-smoker like her would never fully understand even though she had already gone through his morning ritual several times. He had observed not smoking in buildings for sometime. With Sarah, he had learned not to smoke in the car. He was definitely reducing his habit. But when morning came, it was more than he could endure. Maybe he would be able to quit soon. Yes, maybe that time would be soon, he thought, but that time was not then.

The two of them disembarked and went to the secured baggage area, retrieved their bags and went out to wait for the Air-Porter. While he smoked his first cigarette they looked around, a different world from the one they had left only a few days before. Then everything had seemed bright and exciting. This time it was grey and wet and they were exhausted. Fortunately when they reached the hotel, unlike the previous time during the weekend, their room was ready for them and the gracious desk clerk allowed them to check in early.



When he awoke, Sarah was still asleep and nuzzled up against his chest with his arm around her. Her skin felt smooth and cool to his touch under the satin sheet that covered them. He could feel the caressing breeze of each of her breaths as he lay there and he realized with certainty what he had been missing all of his

life.

He wondered how he could have waited so long to be with her. All he had to do was ask. But how could he have known. He found it hard to imagine that they were engaged. He couldn't believe he had asked especially in the way that he had after only seeing each other for less than a week. And he'd done it with witnesses. After all, she could have refused and then he would have felt foolish, but she hadn't refused.

He smiled to himself. But I guess we have known each other for almost two years, he thought. What did it matter anyway, they were getting married. As soon as they can put this mess behind them, they would have a life together.

Grant gauged the time must be early afternoon, maybe 2:00. That would be about 11:00 AM on the west coast. He needed to make his call. Slowly and cautiously he slipped his arm out from under her and lowered her head onto one of the satin covered pillows and slid out of bed leaving her in her peaceful slumber. He went to the small closet near the bathroom door, put on his slacks, shirt and shoes. He wrote a note on the small note pad provided by the hotel then grabbed his wallet, cigarettes, lighter and the prepay cell phone he had picked up in the gift shop at SeaTac and went downstairs to the coffee shop to order a small coffee.

Once fully equipped, he went out the back door to a small courtyard that extended out to one of the boulevards. He wasn't sure which one, only that he had noticed the seats when they had come in the night before. He was thankful that the storm had blown over during their sleep and the sky far above the buildings was blue. He lit a cigarette and after a few puffs he dialed the phone.

"Stoddard."

"Greg, I need to have you check a couple of things out for me."

"Grant! Where the hell are you buddy?"

Grant could hear Greg's breath as he shuffled something in the background. "I've gone deep. Gonna have to get back to you on that part. But write this down."

"Ok," said Greg. "But Division has been calling every two hours. They got reports on the two shooting incidents in Seattle and want some answers."

"That will have to wait. Besides I gave all that to the Port Townsend Sheriff's office. They can get the full report from them. What I need is all you can dig up on a company called MRH Enterprises, they're in Seattle. I don't know where their headquarters are. Also see what you can find on a company called Jenre Investments."

"Ok, got it," Greg replied. "Anything else?"

"Yeah, get a hold of the police up in Port Townsend and see if they have gotten a line on those two we had to take down there. The one I shot in the

forehead was our serial assassin. I want as much as you can get me.”

“No problem, where can I reach you?”

“I’m afraid you can’t. I’ll call you tomorrow morning. I’ve gotta go, but I will talk to you then,” Grant said and then hung up. He sipped his coffee and finished his morning smoke. Then he went inside to take his waiting beauty her morning coffee.



Three thousand miles away in San Jose, California Greg’s hand clicked a mouse that caused a map to appear on a computer terminal. “Damn only a partial,” his voice exclaimed. The map showed the City of New York.



Sarah was sitting in front of a gilded mirror that was attached to a dressing table combing her hair out when Grant came in the door with two coffees. She turned and smiled her most adoring smile as he came up to her. He bent down kissed her deeply. She was wearing only a towel and was still damp from a steamy shower. He felt a little betrayed by the fact that his hands were full but appreciated what he saw all the same.

“Thought you might like some coffee,” he said handing her a cup.”

“I’ll be done here in a couple of minutes. A woman can’t go out in New York without *some* make-up on. From what I hear, that’s a real no no. People would talk,” she giggled.

“You don’t need make-up.”

“You’re sweet, but I am going to put some on just the same.”

Grant sat in an adjoining chair, took another sip of coffee and then sighed. “Are you sure about what you said about marrying me?” he asked. “I know it was sudden and in front of the others and I don’t want to think I am pushing this on you. Ah, I mean...”

Sarah looked at him amused, “Don’t think you are going to get out of this mister. I accepted your proposal and I am now determined to become Mrs. Grant O’Connor, so don’t go back-peddling on me.”

Grant laughed and then playfully got down on one knee in front of her. “I will ask you once again my lady. Will you marry me?”

Sarah threw her arms around his neck, her towel falling away onto the ground and kissed him with passionate abandon. “I love you and I want to be with you always.”



The time was nearly 4:00 PM when the couple finally made it out of their room. Grant went to the front desk to ask the concierge for directions before they went out the front doors. They took a left turn onto the crowded sidewalk of 46th Street and crossed 7th Avenue heading east. Sarah was amazed by all the little groceries, bakeries and sundry shops that lined the overwhelmingly busy walkway. They walked two blocks that seemed to Jan to go on forever to the corner of 5th Avenue and took another left heading north.

Sarah looked perplexed. "Where are we going?" she asked while they weaved in and out of the flowing foot traffic. "You'll see," he said playfully. "It's special."

Grant continued to walk without saying another word. After about nine blocks they turned right and crossed 5th Ave. Sarah had noticed that about halfway through their hour long journey the composition of stores had changed dramatically. The stores and boutiques that occupied the street level of the endless stream of buildings they passed some of the most elite. She recognized most of the area. She'd never been there but she realized that this area had been the feature of countless movies and television programs. They had passed by Saks Fifth Avenue and St. Patrick's Cathedral and though she couldn't see it, she knew from those shows that they were within blocks of Rockefeller Center.

She was fascinated but after almost an hour of battling the unending waves of people she was becoming increasingly frustrated.

After crossing the street, Sarah stopped near the corner. "Are you sure you know where you are going?" she asked. "I've never been here and I got the impression that you hadn't spent much time here either."

Grant grinned and said nothing. He looked at his watch, almost five.

"Alright," said Sarah, "I'm going to stop right here until you tell me where we are going."

Grant turned, looked at her and laughed.

"Ok, are we lost now?" she asked a little sarcastically.

Grant moved to the street side of the sidewalk and pointed. Sarah's eyes followed his finger to above the door that stood in front of them where a sign had been carved into the white stone facing. "Oh my God!" she screamed. The sign said Tiffany & Co.

The couple went in like many thousands had before them and were greeted by a well manicured salesman. He walked them through the rows of sparkling security glass cases displaying diamonds and other gemstone rings ranging up to around fifty thousand dollars. The man explained that for security reasons if they would like to view any of the more expensive gems that they had a secured area

in the back.

Neither Grant nor Sarah had ever seen such gems. When the salesman asked what her preference was while showing her brilliant, oval, heart, marquise and pear shaped diamonds; Sarah told him that she would prefer a marquise cut pale blue sapphire.

The man looked taken back but took her to another case. She only took seconds to look and tears had come to her eyes. She saw a three quarter carat marquise presenting a medium-pale blue color, much lighter than one usually associates with such a stone and it was cut in perfect facets. No flaws were seen anywhere in the gem. The gold ring was thin allowing the stone to ride close to the finger but vented to allow light to shine through the bottom of the stone. This was the ring she had always dreamed of, and it was real.

The salesman took the ring out of the case and extended his arm to take her hand. "May I," asked Grant.

"Certainly," the salesman smiled and handed Grant the small box that displayed the ring.

Grant removed the ring from its padded holder and then took Sarah's left hand. He looked at the beautiful stone and then looked in Sarah's eyes. The match in color between her eyes and the stone was uncanny. "Now, I understand," he said and placed the ring on her finger. The fit was precisely as if made for her.

After Grant settled the bill, the couple strolled back toward the hotel, looking in all of the shops along the way. He wasn't sure how much Sarah was taking in because it seemed all she could look at was him and the new ring that adorned her wedding finger. He was a little afraid she was in shock. Unlike the fast paced walk they had getting to the store, their return took much longer and it was almost eight by the time they reached their destination. Grant suggested that they eat in the hotel's mezzanine restaurant that turned out to have as fine Italian cuisine as either of them had ever experienced. As they returned to their room, Grant thought that Sarah glowed.

Chapter 20

The sales floor of the Psychic House was experiencing a flurry of activity that was more typical of a Wednesday night than had been the case in several weeks. The belly dancing class that was normally scheduled had restarted after a three week suspension because the instructor had a pulled abdominal muscle.

Scantly clad women of all shapes and sizes came and went during their frequent breaks. Their costumes varied greatly from simple gypsy style cloth top wraps and slit skirt covered with veils to silk or velvet bikini style tops and hip wraps that featured intricate sequin or bead work with silver coins strategically placed to catch the eye. Each costume sensually enhanced the gifts of the individual performer.

Merrill was always entertained by the distracted male customers during these events. Some would stand at the jewelry counter or discount book table and pretend to be heavily involved with the merchandise, trying to hide the fact that they were gawking at the mesmerizing partially bare hips that would sway as the women walked to and from the conference room. Where others were obviously caught off guard and would receive scowls from their female companions when they stood there half drooling on themselves as a dancer walked by. He was not immune to the spell these sexy bodies cast either and on that particular evening their presence was a welcome distraction for him between readings.

The evening had been eventful for the readers as well. Along with the distracted husbands were the many clients that had scheduled with the four readers that were working. Merrill had looked at the scheduling chart that hung in reach behind the restricted counter and saw that Jan had seven readings that night. Three of these had extended into half hour sessions so aside from the brief visits to the counter to hand off one client and greet another. She was in her small reading booth all evening.

Kalen had several readings including one that had extended into over an hour and a half which had caused some of the congestion in the store as other clients either waited for a later appointment time or were reassigned to Merrill or Thena. Thena took the majority of the phone readings which were ranging from fifteen minutes to a half hour and then accepted clients in her booth in between. She had a record of ten readings that evening. Merrill himself had read for five people in person and taken three phone readings.

By the half hour to closing all of the last clients were either signing out, in readings or had left. Thena was checking out for the evening and both Kalen and Jan were still in session. After Merrill had read the schedule and calculated his earnings for the evening, he had been standing in a corner of the store near the entrance that led to his office for several minutes waiting for Jan to finish. He noticed a man in a blue suit come in through the entrance foyer and go to the front desk. The man looked out of place. His entire presence seemed to contradict the mystical air the store emanated.

"Merrill," Wendy's pleasant voice broke Merrill's thoughts and he looked up. "You have a reading."

He approached the desk in his usual manner of taking the long way around the jewelry counter while sizing up his perspective client. When he approached the counter, Wendy introduced the man in the dark suit as Greg Stoddard who immediately extended his hand. "Good to meet you Merrill." His shake was warm and friendly but Merrill still felt himself overly reserved. "Have time for a reading? It should be a fairly short one."

"Of course," Merrill said courteously, "Come with me."

He felt uneasy with the man though he didn't sense any malice. Something about the man however that screamed trouble. They reached Merrill's office and he offered the man a seat. He must have been showing his uneasiness because the man immediately told him to please relax. He was Grant's friend.

"You won't need your cards," Greg said. "I need to get word to Grant."

"I don't know if I can reach him."

"My guess is that he will contact either you or one of your friends. In fact I am banking on it. I am being watched so I can't contact him directly. At least I can't with what I need you to pass on."

"Ok," Merrill mumbled under his breath as he listened to the man. He felt a little numb. It was one more thing to add to his life that was seemingly spinning out of control. "What can I tell him?"

"First off, you and your friends must never let anyone know that you know me. If you ever get confronted by the fact, then you can remember but only that I had come in for a reading and was asking about a future love life or something of that nature, never about the real reason for the visit."

"Ok," Merrill's voice had all the warmth of stone.

"Let Grant know that the Bureau knows that he is in New York. They don't know where yet but they are looking for him. Tell him they made me put on a trace when he called in and that they have the number of the cell he was on. Tell him also that the order came directly from Captain Croner. I don't know what it all means yet but they are very anxious to find him. Also, he asked about a couple of companies, tell him they are both subsidiaries of a conglomerate called CARM Corp located in New York."

Merrill finally got rid of his mind's resistance to take on more and asked, "You think he is in danger?"

"I'm not sure but I don't like taking chances. It could be that they need him to clarify his reports or want a shooting review, but I don't think so. There are just too many things that just feel wrong. Nothing I can tangibly put my finger on but yet they are there, maybe just out of reach."

"I'll let the others know." Merrill said and then with a grin added, "By the way, if you are going to keep the cover then you will have to pay at the counter."

Greg showed a partial smile as he reached out his hand to shake and Merrill rose to accept it, "No problem, I had planned on that." There was some paper in his palm that he transferred to Merrill's. As he opened the door to leave he said, "Thank you, it was a very enlightening reading."

Merrill sat back in his chair. He was still a little stunned that he and the other's were still in the middle of intrigue. He opened his hand and saw immediately that it was currency. But it was not the usual one or fiver. It was five one hundred dollar bills. Payment for the delivery of the message he guessed either that or a tangible show of the man's appreciation. He preferred to believe the latter.

A moment later Wendy burst into the room followed by Kalen who quietly closed the door behind him. "That's the guy... that's the stiff that came here the other day," she said. Then Kalen jumped in, "We haven't had a chance to talk since you came back, what's going on?"

The door opened again and Jan peeked in. Merrill waved her in and again the door was closed. "I don't think we should talk here," Merrill said. "And Wendy, I think we should keep you from getting involved." He paused momentarily and looked at the others. "Everything will be ok, and thanks for the concern." The others nodded in agreement. "The three of us should go down to Jan's place and talk there." Jan nodded and turned for the door.

"Jan's place?" Kalen asked looking totally confused.

"Don't worry about it Kalen, we'll explain later. Come on."



Half an hour later they reached Jan's apartment. They had checked out at the counter and were all thankful for the large payout they all received from the receipts. Not only had it been a busy evening but a profitable one. The drive to the apartment had been almost intolerable for Merrill because Kalen wouldn't let up on questions. From his perspective the two of them had disappeared after finding Johanna and then he had heard on the news that she was dead and he had been worried about them.

He kept his head poked between the front seats asking more questions. But he and Jan told him that they would explain everything in detail once they got to her place. All that did was stir more questions. Kalen was getting on what was left of their nerves.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity they got there. They went in and immediately Jan began folding and putting away the blanket and pillow that were left on the couch from the night before. Both Jan and Merrill had to rush out to work at their day jobs and had not taken time to tidy up. Kalen looked at Merrill.

“You stayin’ here?” Merrill hung his head and decided that it was just as well to start the explanations with that. That was the shortest part of the story anyway. He just told him that his wife had left him while they were gone and Jan had been nice enough to not let him be alone.

Jan went into the kitchen while Merrill spoke and returned with a decanter of pinkish wine and some glasses. “Might as well be comfortable,” she said, “this will probably take awhile.” She filled the glasses and set them out. Merrill picked up his wine and took a sip before continuing on. He didn’t notice that Jan sat next to him on the couch even though there was an empty chair.

He told them about the message that they needed to relay onto Grant and after making sure that they both fully understood, he went on with the history of their trip with Jan piping in periodically to fill in small gaps that Merrill overlooked. Two glasses of wine and about an hour later Merrill was almost done with his story when his cell phone began to vibrate in his pocket. He cursed as he struggled to get it out of his pocket. He had forgotten to take it off of silent mode when he left the store. He finally got it out and open. “Hello?”

“Hi there, this is Grant.” His voice seemed relaxed and he sounded happy. “Wanted to check on you two and make sure you got home alright and also find out if you have seen anything new.”

“Grant!” Merrill nodded at his friends to let them know who was calling. “We are all very happy that you called.”

“Why? What’s up?” Grants tone had changed suddenly to concern.

“I had a visitor tonight. He said he was your friend Greg Stoddard.” Merrill went on to tell him the message and how the visit went down in detail leaving out the huge tip of course, since the others didn’t know about that part. When he was done, there was silence on the line for a few prolonged seconds. “Are you there?”

“Yes, just thinking.” Grant paused again as if working something out in his mind. “I have to get off of this phone. I want all of you, especially the two of you to disappear for a couple of days. I will call you back in a couple of hours and fill you in. Ok?”

Merrill could tell by Grants rushed speech that it must be important and didn’t ask any questions. “Ok, talk to you then.”

After hanging up, Merrill looked at the other two. “We have to get out of here now!”

“Where will we go Merrill?” Jan asked. “What’s it about?”

Merrill shook his head. “I’m not sure, but we’ll work that out on the way, grab your stuff, mine’s still in the van.”

Jan hadn’t even had the chance to unpack so she picked up her bag. “Ok, I guess we’re off again.”

They piled back into the van, Merrill and Jan sat in the front and Kalen in the back and they headed up toward El Camino. "I think I know a place we can stay. There is a big motel not too far from here."

"I have my daughters place in San Jose where I can stay for a few days," Kalen suggested.

"Good idea, we can take you there and then swing back up. But remember; don't tell anyone where you are." Then thinking for a second, he added, "I'd better get your daughter's phone number."

After dropping off Kalen, the two of them went back up the El Camino, just north of Sunnyvale and found the Comfort Inn. It was almost midnight and Merrill hoped that there was a night manager. As they approached the office they saw a man just starting to close the door.

Merrill waved his arm up and caught the man's attention. "Just in time," the man said "another minute and I would have had the lights out."

Merrill went to the desk and checked them in. Just in case, he used the business credit card he had gotten back when he had his own small business. It was still active, but he had never used it. The business itself was one he had opened a few years before when he had tried to freelance his readings. Since that never panned out he had just allowed the business license to lapse. But he still had his credit card and it didn't come up on his name or his social security number except as guarantor. When he was done, he went and got Jan who was sitting in a chair waiting for him.

"We're going to have to share," he said apologetically. "I thought it would look funny otherwise."

Jan smiled and got up. "I'm sure it will be fine."



Sarah was still living in her dream. It was a dream she had harbored since she was a teenager and had put off until she finished college and medical school and had established herself firmly into her chosen field as a medical examiner. Until a year before, the dream had no face. There was only a vague figure in her dream until Grant. And even when she met him the dream didn't change until one day almost a year later when he had come in to see her about a child that had been killed during a drug related shooting. She had seen the remorse in his eyes and the true caring about the little girl that he never knew. That was when she realized that he was the one.

He was someone who could truly love, truly care and yet was strong, resourceful and intelligent. The only untested elements that she knew had to be in

place for him to be the man in her dream was whether he could handle having a woman who was equally strong, whether he could share his time and priorities with her and whether he could love her as much as she could love him. The past few days had certainly proved those to be true. He could handle everything else while under pressure. He could live the storm. To her amazement, she could live the storm as well. She wasn't afraid. In fact she found all of it exciting and even sexy. Sexy, passionate and romantic, she thought. She wasn't sure how much more romance and passion she could handle. She had been floating beyond her wildest of dreams since Grant had surprised her with their walk and her ring. She looked at it once again in the dim light supplied only by the small nightlight glowing from the bathroom. Warmth ran through her and made every part of her tingle each time she looked at it. Strangely, that specific ring had been prominent in her dream ever since she was fifteen. She still couldn't believe it actually existed.

Grant readjusted his pillow causing the bed to move gently. She sighed. Her thoughts immediately shifted to the very recent memory of their making love. He had been so gentle and yet so firm. It was a balance that took her beyond herself. At the height of it she felt herself momentarily leave her body and then snap back in sheer ecstasy. With these thoughts came a tantalizing wave that filled her body once again, she closed her eyes while reliving the surge of emotions and physical tautness that she hoped she could never become quite accustomed to. Then she felt as much as heard a tapping on a door. Her eyes opened and she realized that the tapping was not on the door of the room but was in her head. Without understanding why, she re-closed her eyes and visualized a door. As soon as she did this, the door slowly opened and Jan's head peaked through.

It had been almost like part of a dream, but she knew she was still awake. She almost disregarded the strange anomaly but then had second thoughts. Somehow she knew it meant something. She turned toward Grant and kissed him gently on each eye and felt him take her gently in his arms and felt his lips take hers once more. Her body flushed and she was almost swept immediately away with him again. But she knew that she had to tell him about what she had seen. Seen, didn't seem quite right but it was as close to what she had experienced as anything else.

She lay to one side of him and explained. At first Grant thought it strange but then he realized that he had not called them since their flight to see that they had made it home alright. He looked at his watch then decided he should call them.

He pulled on his pants and shirt and grabbed his wallet, cell phone, smokes and lighter. "I'll be back in just a couple of minutes."

He had gone to the courtyard to have a cigarette while he made his call. Though it was just after 2:00 by his watch, it was only just after 11:00 where his

friends would be. It shouldn't be a problem.

It had truly been only a couple of minutes and Grant returned to the room. When he came in he seemed fully awake and fully alert. "We have to get out of here now." was all he said and she knew that her vision had been for a purpose. While they quickly packed their belongings, Grant explained what he had learned from Merrill and the instructions he had given them.

She barely had time to dress and comb out her hair and they were on the move. She noticed that Grant purposely left the cell phone on and in the room. He had insisted that they leave the lights on, take the stairs down and leave the hotel by the rear through the courtyard to the boulevard behind the hotel. They went around the building to 8th street where they could observe the front unseen and as Grant suspected there was a plain black car parked across from the building. He could see two men dressed in suits sitting in the front seat. The driver looked up at the room where they had been just moments ago and then got out of the car. In the glow of the street lights they could see the man's face. Grant knew him.

They waited until the two men entered the hotel and then crossed the street heading south as they had the night before. They had only gone two blocks when they saw a couple of cabs waiting for the last stragglers to leave a hotel bar. Grant tapped on the passenger window of the rear cab. The cabby looked at them standing there holding on to their bags. "Heading to the airport?"

"No, just down to Greenwich Village," Grant said.

The driver loaded their bags in the trunk, got them seated, Grant gave him the address and fifteen minutes later they were sitting in a café having coffee. "This puts us only about five minutes away from the City Hall Library," Grant said. "I want to split our list up. You check on the business licenses and get as far through them on these companies as you can. I am going to check on some properties and some case histories. We should be able to get into the files at 10:00. I want to try to be out of here by about 2:00 so we're gonna to have to hustle."

Chapter 21

Mountain View was having a beautiful day like many spring mornings there was mist clinging to the grass leaving droplets as a promise of the next nourishing evening to come. Peaceful was not a concept easily come by near El Camino and certainly not during the week when streams of cars swept up the major boulevard

with anxious drivers hurried on to their workplaces and car dealership workers across the street sprayed down the cars on the lot in anticipation of potential buyers. They all seemed unaware of the beauty that they passed by daily. But for Jan it was soothing and nurturing. As she sat on the steps watching and experiencing the contrast of two worlds, that of nature and that of man she realized that for over a week now she had been living too far into the harsh realities of the world of man. She needed a vacation. There was no way to afford a vacation of course. Though she and her friends were going to be paid for their excursion and ordeal in Seattle, even trying to afford the motel was beyond her means. She hated having to use Merrill's money for their day to day existence but for now, there was no choice. Neither of them could go to work. As it was, she and Merrill would have to call the Psychic House and tell them that they didn't know when they would be in and Merrill would have to call his other work. She hoped they would all still have their reading rooms when they were able to return.

She got up from the cool cement step and starting walking around the motel to stretch her legs. At 7:30 she had been restless and had risen nearly two hours before. Merrill had gone to sleep in the second bed and had been tossing all night. She could understand why but it really didn't help her get the rest she needed. Having him there so close, but still so tied to a woman that didn't deserve him when her arms begged to hold him seemed too ironic and too frustrating. She knew he liked her, maybe even loved her and she certainly loved him. Something had connected them for the three years that they had known each other but some barriers are just not crossed. Of course there was the indiscretion a few nights before, unplanned but wonderful.

She stopped walking and bathed in that memory. Merrill, of course, could never know it was not a dream and for her, whether it was the goddess who acted through her or not, she still experienced the ritual's magick and it had cured Merrill of his unfounded guilt. She carried a little guilt herself. When she had got out of bed and performed her morning ritual, she had almost wished that he would have waked to find her sky-clad reaching for the sky. What would have happened, she wondered. She supposed it didn't matter. She had always done her morning ritual naked and she was not about to stop then regardless of who was there.

She continued her walk, occasionally smelling the fragrant daffodils and wild flowers that had been carefully planted to adorn the contrasting stucco building. When she arrived back at her starting place, Merrill was sitting where she had been only moments before.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning Merrill, how are you doing?"

"Better. I came to some realizations last night." He stopped until she was close enough to talk in a quiet voice. "While you slept, I sat up for awhile thinking about everything. I read Carolyn's note, over and over and now understand that though she and I looked after each other, we really hadn't shared a life for a long time. She never did understand my spirit or my spirituality. In fact, I know it scared her. So, I have decided to let it go."

"Things like that don't just go away Merrill," Jan said sadly. "Right now, what you need is a chance to mourn and a chance to regroup."

"No, the mourning has been taking place for awhile. I knew it but I denied it. Actually, last night what I was mostly suffering from was guilt for not being the one to stop it much sooner. I knew she was out a lot. But I had my job during the day and my readings in the evening and my friends, you and Kalen. What I really need now is some time to relax and come back in tune with nature and with myself. I need to get up to the forest or the beach and have a real vacation."

Jan laughed. "I was just thinking of that myself. I would love to take a real vacation and recharge. I just don't see how we can afford it."

"Well," said Merrill, handing her the five one hundred dollar bills that Greg had given him. "Think this would help?"

He explained about Greg and his not really knowing why he had given that much to him. But getting out of town seemed like the reasonable answer.

They decided that the sooner they left the less likely they might be spotted and right after the morning traffic would be a good time. So, they returned to their room and sat on the beds facing each other and discussed different options and about the things that had occurred during the past week. For an hour they finally talked about the feelings they had experienced and at one point they both laughed so hard that they had tears in their eyes.

Merrill remembered a wonderful retreat in the mountains in the northwestern corner of the state that was based on a roadside attraction of Paul Bunyan, Babe the Blue Ox and odd tree formations. He couldn't remember the name but he could find it on a map. He also remembered that there were hiking areas there that he had wanted to try but when ever he had been there, like so many other places and things, they were only an evening stop on the way to somewhere else. He looked pained as he realized how many things had been that way so Jan moved over next to him. She put her arms around him to console him and told him that they could change that. "We?" he asked.

"Yes, we," she said and kissed him. "Come on, let's get moving."

"Where are we going to go?" asked Merrill a little confused.

"To that town in the woods you were talking about," she said smiling. "We are going to make it more than a place to pass through. Think it would be safe

enough to stop at a spiritual shop in San Francisco on the way through? I need some supplies.”

By 12:30 they were in San Francisco. They stopped at a little store down near the wharf and Jan bought some assorted incense, a few candles and some herbs. Some of them Merrill was unfamiliar with, like dried lotus and mandrake. Then she searched until she found the Kama Sutra Oils. Merrill looked at Jan as she picked up the last part. She just smiled her perky little smile, flipped her hair around, which made Merrill laugh and went up to the counter. From there they stopped for a quick lunch in China Town and then headed for the Golden Gate Bridge.

The drive up the 101 was breath taking. Though the weather in California had been mild, there had been high winds to the north causing abnormally active surf. The violent waves crashed on the shore and in some of the sheltered coves they saw surfers bobbing on the water. As they drove, they past miles of brown hills on their right that were broken up by broad fields of grapes and a variety of vegetables. The air was fresh and salty with the occasional assault of iodine from seaweed decaying on the shoreline. The van moved smoothly down the newly repaved highway. Merrill observed that the year before the trip would have been horrible with all of the road construction.

They talked more about their recent experiences, about clients that they had read, about things they would like to do over the next week, and how much they enjoyed each others company. It was a wonderful drive and by 8:00 that evening they were there and being the midweek, there were still plenty of vacancies.

Merrill didn't think that the town had changed much. The Trees of Mystery was still the central attraction though they had added what looked like a ski lift to carry tourists up through the trees and enjoy the natural beauty of the mountainside. The gift store still carried a variety of nick-knacks and locally produced treasures like jellies and honey. Most importantly they carried the visitor's guide that told where the various trails, roads and beach access were located. They checked in at a neighboring motel for the night with the thought that during the day they might look for a more quaint accommodation to stay. Merrill hoped that Grant would call with some idea of where they would get more money before the dwindling cash would run out. They didn't have long to wait. About 9:30, Merrill's cell phone rang. It was a good thing that he had changed it to auto because the analog light was showing.

“Merrill?” the familiar voice asked.

“Hi Grant, where are you.”

“We're on the move. I wanted to check to see how you guys are doing and where you are.”

"We left our apartments right after you called. Jan and I stayed in Mountain View for the night and we are now up in Klamath."

"Perfect. You should plan on staying there for a week or so. Is Kalen with you?"

"No, he is staying with his daughter. His name isn't on any of the reports and they don't know his last name at the Psychic House, so he should be ok. His cooking gigs move around all the time. So, he should be pretty much under the radar."

"Ok, that should be alright. I want you to capture this phone number. We won't be using it to call anyone but you so it won't change. Is there anything you are going to need?"

"Greg gave us some money, but I don't think it is going to last very long. I haven't used my credit card since we left Mountain View."

"Good, don't use it. What bank are you with?"

"My account is with Bank of America."

"Perfect. Give me your account number. I'll get some money in there for you. After you see it is in your account drive up to Crescent City and make your withdraws from there. Don't use the debit card."

Merrill took a spare check out of his wallet and read Grant the numbers, including the routing.

"Ok, that should take care of it. The money should show up either tomorrow or the next day. In the mean time, Sarah wants to talk to Jan."

Merrill handed the phone to Jan and watched her expression change from happy to fascination and then to laughter. Then Jan walked away, out of Merrill's hearing. What is that all about, he wondered?

After the call, both he and Jan realized just how long the day had been. They needed a good meal and some sleep. There wasn't much open that late in Klamath aside from the gift shop and a small twenty four hour diner.

"Well," said Merrill with a slight grimace, "I guess I know where we are going to eat."

Jan laughed and suggested that since they were so tired, it might be better to get something to go. The waitress at the diner was more than happy to satisfy their request so within ten minutes they were checking in at the motel.

Their room was small with few amenities. There was a writing table, one chair, a television that was bolted directly to the wall, a small two cup coffee pot with two bags of coffee, powdered creamer, sugar and styrofoam cups, a small separated bathroom with toilet and shower and what they had claimed to be a queen bed looked more like a standard full size.

"No, couch." Merrill said trying to figure out the sleeping arrangements.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” said Jan. “Unless you have any objections to sharing.”

Merrill started to explain that he was more concerned with her comfort than his own when Jan came up to him and kissed him. “It’s fine,” she said.

They put their bags in the small closet and sat down to eat. The salads tasted as poor as they looked but both of them were hungry from the drive and consumed every morsel. After dinner Merrill said he was tired and was ready for sleep. Since he never wore pajamas, in fact he didn’t own any, he stripped down to his boxer-briefs and slipped into the bed. It was then that he realized just how small a full sized bed really was.

Jan decided that she wanted to catch up on the news. She sat next to him on top of the covers and used the remote control. After two local stories, one about a lost hiker being rescued and another about the weakness of the tourist trade, Merrill had fallen asleep. Jan watched long enough to hear about new terrorist attacks by the AlQuida, the announcement of a juror of the Supreme Court retiring and raising tensions between the liberals and the Whitehouse. A new voting system was being introduced in Seattle and racial tensions arising once again in East Los Angeles. She thought maybe the news wasn’t such a good idea after all and changed to finish her day with some comedy. After ten minutes of looking for something suitable, she gave up, turned off the television, undressed and went to bed.



Merrill heard the first of the cars pull out as some travelers got an early start on their day. He realized that he was on his back and felt stiff from not moving. He was a little astonished when he realized that his right arm was wrapped around Jan’s naked body and she was cuddled up to him pressed against his side. He could feel her smooth skin brushing against him as she moaned softly and shifted her position. Her right leg was lying over his and her arm was draped across his chest. The soft scent of lavender alerted his senses and he could feel her breathing as her cheek rested against him. Only then did he realize how happy and contented he felt. He had no intention of moving and disturbing her sleep. Her soft auburn hair tickled his chest and he had to work at not moving. Then he also realized he had another problem. He was aroused. Oh great, he thought as a slight wave of embarrassment swept through him. But he lay there enjoying her presence and her energy.

They lay that way for another half hour until finally her eyes opened. “Good morning,” she said and tilted her head up to kiss him. He turned slowly to meet

her lips and they found themselves in a full embrace. It was another hour before they got up to greet the day, together.

Chapter 22

The sky seemed bluer and vaster than Sarah could ever remember. There were only a few cumulous clouds that drifted in the distance over towering rock faces with a slight darkening beneath them that told of their gradual loss of moisture to the thirsty red ground below. She watched as scrub plants of sage and succulents past by the window replaced only occasionally by small fields of corn whose stalks were dwarf when she compared them to what she had seen in California. The afternoon sun baked the tormented ground which looked mostly barren and shown deep cracks like a massive cutting board. She could feel the heat burning it's way through the double window panes even though she was being cooled by the train's air conditioning. There had been no one in the fields and only a few roads for many miles she had passed in the hour she had been sitting since lunch.

She would arrive at her destination in a few more hours. It had been the loneliest two days of her life and the previous few days were a blur. He would meet her there tomorrow he said, but she couldn't understand why he had sent her ahead. All she could get out of him was that he had to travel very light and the situation had become too unpredictable for them to travel together but not to worry. Of course she would worry, she thought. How could she not.

She had attempted to sort out everything in her mind over and again, but nothing made sense. When they had gone to the library, she went through the business licensing stacks. She had been shocked to discover the immensity of a task she thought would be easy.

There was a trail of course, there always was if you knew to look. She started with MRH Industries only to find that it was addressed to a post office box. So she looked up the corporate documents. She had found that it was owned by three other corporate entities. One of those companies had gone out of business and the other two were also owned by multiple companies. There were names of officers at each level of course but they had been changed multiple times by official meeting minutes. Fortunately she had kept notes because at the third level of companies she started to see a pattern of names appearing. About a dozen and a half companies boiled down to a half a dozen men and consistently the names of two men appeared. From the names they may have been brothers or at least

related, Joseph and Samuel Claymont.

She had just gone as far as she could with the research and was headed downstairs to find Grant when she spotted one of the men from the car the night before entering the building. Fortunately she had seen him before he saw her. She was able to find Grant and alert him before the other man found either of them. It was also fortunate the building had side entrances so they could leave without being seen.

They walked a couple of blocks and ducked into a bar. They had ordered a couple of beers and Grant reviewed the information she had collected. When he saw the name Claymont he said he understood at least part of what was happening and had carefully scanned down the list. He explained that the Claymont brothers had been under investigation, but he didn't offer any details. He said he recognized three others that had been duplicated in the passing of authority. He also said something vague like it was what they had been looking for and got really excited. There had been one more thing he had to check out so they caught a cab over to Brooklyn. By then the time was after 3:00 PM so Grant had found them another hotel. This one was less prestigious by far.

He asked her to stay there for a few hours and went out. She figured it had something to do with the senator's wife since he had confirmed that the property where the stock broker's wife had been found was not only less than two blocks from the Senator's house and was also tied into the companies they had been researching.

When he had come back he was in a good mood. He had said they were almost done. He had taken her to one of the neighborhoods for what he had considered the best lasagna in the world. And he may have been right, Sarah had never experienced anything like it and the antipasto was outstanding also. They had gone back into celebration mode. After midnight they had returned to the hotel and decided to call Merrill and Jan. And their call had been really fun.

Sarah had told Jan all about her ring and it was how she felt like she had found an old friend when she saw it. Jan had seemed to think it was a karmic thing, maybe even past life. Sarah knew nothing of past lives or karma other than the little quizzes that she had taken on the computer. But it sounded like something that had to mean something and if it tied she and Grant together, then it had to be right. Jan had also told Sarah about Merrill's wife leaving and her hopes that they might now have a relationship. Sarah had even joked about there being a multiple wedding.

After the call the rest of the night was filled with more passion than all others combined. There was little time for sleep and neither of them had seemed to care. Her life seemed to be total bliss and then the following morning everything

changed. Grant had gone out to get coffee and then suddenly returned. He seemed anxious and had told her to pack up quickly. They caught a cab and went back over to Manhattan. They found a small restaurant and stopped for breakfast. Grant had told her that they needed to go to a bank before they could go any further. So they had waited. Sarah wanted to know what was going on but all that Grant wanted to talk about was wedding plans. She tried to redirect the conversation several times but failed. He had suggested the idea of doing something unique for the wedding and Sarah had told him of another conversation with Jan who apparently had a friend who could meet them in Vegas and marry them peasant style and had recommended The Excalibur as the perfect setting. Grant agreed that it would be fun. All of this concerned her. Was he was fantasizing about a future that he half expected not to see?

They went to the Bank of America and Grant made a deposit for Merrill and Jan and then took money out for the two of them. Their next stop was to a drug store to purchase another prepaid cell phone for Sarah. Grant called the new cell phone and captured his number on it. Then they proceeded to the train station. Once there, he bought Sarah's ticket, gave her five thousand dollars, which seemed like a lot of money to get by on for a couple of days, and the cell phone.

He had told her that the extra money was just in case it would take him longer. He also told her not to call unless it was an emergency. He said he would call her once she reached New Mexico. That would be sometime that evening she assumed. The last thing he said to her as she boarded was "Remember that I will love you always." Then he kissed her so deeply and with such passion that she thought she might swoon there and then. It was not until she was half way to Chicago that she completely understood the finality of his gestures and it scared her. He had seemed so distracted. She wished she could understand but all she could do was to control her fear and wait.

The train jerked momentarily as it began its climb out of the valley. When Sarah looked up she saw hills begin rise around her and the green of plant life replace the broken soil. She felt like she and the other passengers were being reborn into a new and less tormented world and for her the passage would be complete when she heard from Grant.



"This place is amazing!" Jan exclaimed as she walked through their new temporary abode. It was a cabin that overlooked a valley covered with various ferns and other undergrowth and back-shadowed by mountains covered with green. From the deck patio, with its settee, marble table, chairs for four and gas

grill, one would never know there were any other people for miles. The small resort was designed with a tree line between each unit. To add to the illusion, the cabins were faced with natural log siding.

The interior was designed to be both cozy and luxurious. They featured a small living room with a fireplace, Early American furniture that included a sofa with chaise lounge, coffee table, end tables with lamps and an armoire that contained a television, VCR and DVD. There was a small dining room with a table set for four, a kitchen with all the appliances and dishes and two bedrooms.

The master bedroom contained a garden style bath whose tub would easily hold two that sat below a picture window made of one-way glass that, like the patio, overlooked the valley. On each end of the bathtub were tall candle stands which supported large three wick candles.

“Think this will do?” asked Merrill jokingly.

“Dear Goddess, what do you mean mister, I have never experienced anything like this. I could get used to this very easily. I would love to own it.”

Jan was looking out of the bathroom window, admiring the view and thinking about how wonderful a bath would be under the shade of the trees enjoying the wonder of the mountains.

“So would almost anyone, I would think,” said Merrill. “Did you see the bedroom?”

“Not really.”

She had of course, but the memory was immediately over ridden when she saw the bathroom. She came back in and once more took it in. In the center of one wall was a king size four poster bed with full canopy. The surrounding furniture were all made of hardwood and tastefully decorated with antique accents.

“Merrill, are you sure we can afford this?”

“I would never have thought so, but it is only \$150 a night. In another month there is no way we could afford it. I saw their chart, during the summer season it rents for \$350 a night. We just got really lucky that they had a cancellation.”

Earlier that morning after their ritual they went to a café next door to their motel for breakfast. It was an older café in desperate need of a remodel. The food was good. The large portions of fried potatoes, bacon, eggs, toast and strong coffee reminded Merrill that most of the local trade was based on travelers and truckers. After eating, Jan decided that they better check the bank to see if Grant had made the deposit. Merrill called the toll free number for automated banking and had almost choked when the automated voice announced that the account balance was ten thousand four hundred and seventy-two dollars. Not believing his ears he prompted the program to read transactions to find a direct deposit of \$9,900 had been added that day and was available.

Since they had checked out of the motel, when they left the café they drove the 20 miles to Crescent City, found the bank and withdrew half of it. Merrill didn't want too much cash on them but also knew that it might be awhile before they got to a bank again. He felt it would be much safer that way.

By noon they had taken the drive back. They both realized they had not noticed the beautiful views they had past on the way down the mountains. Rustic mountain peaks rose steeply on one side while white ocean beaches passed them on the other. As they drove into Klamath, Sarah had noticed a sign near the highway. 'Vista Resort, Next Right, Vacancy'. Even though Merrill was sure that they couldn't afford to stay there, Sarah insisted that she would like to see it anyway. When they had seen the way the resort was laid out and the then current pricing, Merrill prepaid for them to stay for a week without even seeing a unit. "What could be better?" he had said.

They went from room to room and the more they took in, the more they felt that the hand of something greater had guided them to this marvel. "I think we should do some readings," Jan said. "Get your cards and I'll get my alter tools, we can set up on the patio table." She paused. "Merrill."

"Hmm?"

"Thank you."

"For what?" Merrill looked confused.

"Thank you for all of this. If we had not been working together, had not found each other... well, none of this would have happened." She started to cry.

"What's wrong?" He went to her and lifted her face that was streaked with tears. Her eyes met his and in a sudden burst of emotion, she threw her arms around his neck and choked out a laugh. "Nothing, it's just that for the first time I can remember I am really happy."

They just stood there embracing for several minutes when Merrill suggested that they should get things set up. Jan reluctantly left his arms and went to get the small box out of her suitcase and they took it out onto the patio. She handed Merrill the candles, incense burner, bottled oils, charcoal and incense that he expertly arranged on the table. At the bottom of the box she found something small and smooth. "I forgot I had this," she said, holding up the small statue of Shango.

"I thought you had given that to the police."

"No, I wanted to give it to her when she woke up. And she never did. I put it in here while we were traveling. I wanted to give it to her myself. Then after we heard that she was dead... well, in all of the confusion, I forgot it was there."

"Well, my cards said that she wasn't dead. Do you think you could use that to figure out what happened?"

"Maybe," she looked at the little figure doubtfully. "I can give it a try."

Together they formed the circle. First he lit the charcoal and added frankincense. Then as she moved around the table to each of the four directions inviting the guardians to join them, he lit the candles as they came. She raised her arms to the sky and called on the goddess and the white candle in the center was lit. The circle was formed. She then anointed her forehead with oil. Merrill found the fragrance of the oil mixed with the smoke of the frankincense was intoxicating. She raised her arms once again, grounded herself and asked the goddess to become one with her. He then raised his arms and called on her consort and invoked the god. They were one. Once complete the god provided energy to the goddess and the power within the Shango was called upon. The glow of the aura that surrounded the circle and emanated from Jan and Merrill seemed to penetrate time and space. Then Jan spoke. Her voice sounded vaguely like her own but somehow foreign.

"I'm with her," she said. "She is living in a dream. I asked her if she would return and she told me that she would but only when safe. I asked her why it was not safe and now she is showing me an object. It looks like a small cigarette lighter. She is putting it into a container that looks like a large saltshaker filled with snow. She says that it is still there. She says that it would set her free. Now, she is showing me a large worm. It is wearing an American flag as a cloak and it is wrapped around the Space Needle."

Merrill felt the draw of energy flowing through him. Jan was fighting. He grounded himself more fully to accept more energy from the god and focused it on Jan calling her with his mind. Then the pull was gone. Jan was back.

They were both relieved at the release and rested in the warmth of the divine presence. Then they thanked the god and goddess and bid them stay or go and let their energies pass on.

Do you want to try doing your readings in the circle or have you had enough?"

"I think we have done enough for now. We need to call Grant."

They thanked each of the participants and closed the circle. "I am glad that I didn't try that without protection," Jan said. "She made me want to join her in her dream and it scared me. If you hadn't called me I would have gone! Oh, Merrill, she is in an awful place. Neither in this world or the next, we have to get her out!"

Merrill went inside the cabin, took his cell phone off of the counter and dialed. After three rings there was an answer.

"Merrill," the voice was in a whisper. "I'm not in a good place to talk so tell me quickly. You got the money alright?"

Jan came in and began listening.

"Yah, we're fine," Merrill whispered. Jan looked at him oddly and he then

realized how stupid whispering was from his side he spoke out loud. “We just did a circle and Jan got through to Johanna. Johanna hid something. She showed Jan something that looked like a women’s cigarette lighter and she had hidden it in something that looked like an oversized salt shaker that was full of what looked like snow.”

“Ok, I understand,” the whisper acknowledged, “anything else?”

“Only that the worm has appeared again, this time it was wearing an American Flag and was wrapped around the Space Needle again. Also, Johanna let Jan know that she is unconscious purposely until it is safe and that the small object she showed Jan was the means to setting her free. I hope that all means something to you, because it really doesn’t mean anything to us.”

“It just might.” The voice had broken into normal at least enough that Merrill could recognize that it was Grant. “Great, you two stay low. I’ll get back with you in a few days. Just relax and have fun. When I get back I have some ideas I want to discuss with you both.” Then the line went dead.



Grant put the cell phone into the inside pocket of his coat. For the first time in months he was in business attire. He had stopped the day before at the Men’s Warehouse and found everything he needed to fit into the New York landscape. He now sported a black suit, off white shirt and black tie that he tied into a full Windsor. The attire was suitable for an executive, a field salesman or a politician. The latter was the role he needed to emulate.

On Thursday he had made arranged a meeting with Rebecca Landsfield, the owner of Azus Engineering to meet on Friday, made an appointment with Senator Frederick Cavanaugh for Saturday afternoon and talked with Mike Ainsworth, owner of JK Madison Investments.

Mike Ainsworth had been hesitant to share information with Grant since he felt the necessity of client confidentiality but Grant pointed out that the same records had been subpoenaed once before and that it wouldn’t take much to get a judge to reinstate it for a second look.

Ainsworth compromised and said he would examine the records and let Grant know of any unusual trades that had occurred in McKenna’s files and if he wasn’t satisfied with the result then he would allow Grant’s examination. Grant agreed with warning that any tampering would result in a legal and publicity nightmare for his firm.

On Friday early, Grant had called Ainsworth to find that his suspicions were right. There had been a few major winners during the trading that had lost many

others millions. Those winners had been Joseph and Samuel Claymont, Charles Cavanaugh and Dwight Clemins. He recognized the second two as senators from New York and Louisiana. He arranged to get a copy of that part of the report from Ainsworth the following morning.

Grant knew he had to start closing the net. The evidence was still weak but the connections were there. The hardest part for him had been to put Sarah on a train to keep her out of danger. He hoped she would understand his reasoning once he talked to her. Since their trail had already been picked up by the bureau more than once, he didn't want to take any unnecessary chances. He just wished he knew for sure who was putting that much attention on him. Soon he could drop the pretenses and leave his alias behind.

Rebecca was an attractive woman in her forties. She was wearing a dark blue pantsuit that was obviously not off the rack. She had the look of a woman who would feel comfortable heading up any board meeting and Grant thought she would have had more success than most men he had met. She was surprisingly more than cooperative when he had asked to discuss George Pritchard. She had been far less than satisfied with the police investigation of the murder of one of her lead engineers and the abduction of his wife. She hadn't been shocked to find that Beth Pritchard was also dead but it was obviously painful news.

She and Beth had been close friends. Grant noted George's expertise that had conveniently been left out of his file. He had spent many years working with database file management and security. Rebecca told Grant that both George and Beth had been uncommonly distant with her for the couple of weeks before the incident and that she was afraid they had gotten into something that they shouldn't have. She said the two of them were very close and the police assumption that Beth had killed her husband and run off wasn't a reasonable conclusion and that she had told them so. Grant had empathized with her feelings and had promised to let her know the truth when everything was uncovered and he hoped that would be soon.

Grant had been sitting in the waiting room for Senator Cavanaugh when Merrill called. That was an awkward time but he *had* been left waiting for over an hour. He walked up the secretary's desk and excused himself to the restroom. Once outside of the office, he positioned himself at the end of the isle near the top of some stairs and dialed Greg's cell phone.

"Hi Grant or should I say Lawrence?"

"Not yet, but it'll happen very soon. I need you to go back to the Johnson house. What we are looking for is small. I would guess by the description I got that it's a memory stick. It should be hidden in a large saltshaker with something white. Who ever tore the place apart was obviously looking for something bigger.

See if you can find it and call me back. I have my laptop and I can get to an internet café if I have to. After that I think it will be time for you to head east making as much noise as you can.”

“You think we got them this time?”

“I have enough to get at least part of them now and I suspect that there is more on that stick. If we are lucky, it’s what we need. They wanted her really badly for there not to be a strong reason. If there isn’t, then I have a big enough fish on the hook to find out real fast.”

“I got part of it here too” Greg said. “I got information from Port Townsend on the assassin. No good name but they did find a debit receipt in his car. We tracked the transaction back to an account that was set up with another bogus name, but we found some healthy electronic deposits to it. And guess which company was paying him?”

“MRH Industries,” said Grant.

“No, but close. It was Genre Investments which is a hidden subsidiary of MRH,” said Greg.

“Figures, that’s the company that was arranging his houses,” Grant said, but I am a little surprised that it was coming out of one that close in. We found several layers.”

“They must have felt pretty secure with him. Well, I’ll go find the memory and get back with you in around an hour. Stay light on your feet. They have the whole fleet out now. The only reason I am not on the hunt is because I *was* your partner and they didn’t think they could trust me.”

Grant saw two men in suits enter the hall from the far end. Anyone could tell from a distance that the one on the left was packing by the way his arm hung away from his body. He must have been inexperienced since he was obviously wearing the weapon too high. Stepping back further into the stairwell he watched as they approached the senator’s office.

Well, they know I’m here, he thought. Guess I’ll have to pass on the interview. He turned and went quietly down four flights of stairs and then crossed the building to the side where the other agents had come from and continued down. When he reached the mezzanine he noticed that it was exposed on one side to the foyer below. Carefully he positioned himself so that he could see down and would not be seen. The front was covered by two more agents. He went to the back of the mezzanine lobby and noticed men’s and women’s restrooms that were facing the outside wall. Time to visit John again, he thought and entered the one marked men.

There was a window with a fire escape. It was guarded by an alarm. He took his knife and cut away some of the surrounding drywall. He was lucky. The two

by four that the panel was connected to was on the far side of the box. He pulled out the wires and carefully separated them. Then he took the pair that went to the panel, stripped them and then twisted them around each other completing the circuit. He opened the emergency window and stepped out onto platform. From there it was only a ten foot drop to a very clean and empty alleyway. Fortunately, on a Saturday the alleyway wasn't filled with people.

There were no signs of surveillance so he successfully took the drop and walked to the front. He waited less than a minute when the two agents covering the front went into the lobby allowing him to cross the street and make a clean exit.

Once clear of the area, Grant went into a neighborhood sports bar and chose a seat near the back where he could watch the door. After ordering a beer, he took the cell phone out of his inside pocket and called Sarah's number.

"Hi," she said anxiously. "Are you alright?"

"Other than some dust on my suit, I am fine."

"Suit?" she asked. "Since when do you have a suit?"

"There is gonna be quite a few things to explain," he said. "Do you think you can make your way to Washington DC? That's where I am headed now."

"DC?"

"Yes, right now we are all being hunted. I figure the best thing to do is keep you moving and bring you in here."

"How do you want me to travel?"

"Take a bus. I will be there by the time you are. It should be about a two day ride. I'm sorry that you have to drag yourself all over, but I am really trying to be careful."

"That's ok. I will be fine long as you'll be there this time."

"Trust me. I miss you and our next stop will be Vegas. I promise."

"I love you, Grant."

"I love you too."

Almost as soon as Grant hung up his other cell phone rang. "Yah, whatcha got?"

"More than you ever dreamed my friend." Greg sounded excited. "It's time to spring it. There are some code segments, some notes and some interesting e-mails. I'm headed back to Alpha Gamma I want to see what else Carolyn Baers had access to. In the mean time I suppose you are going to head in."

"You bet, it is getting a little hot out here."

"Ok, then I guess I will see you tomorrow."

Grant sat back in his chair, loosened his tie and slapped away the dust he had collected on his new suit pants. He looked around the dimly lit room. The brightest

light came from the half a dozen televisions that were suspended from the ceiling strategically around the perimeter of the room. The same pictures of Yankee Stadium flashed across the screens with the sounds of a commentator talking about their upcoming game. He sipped his beer and took a deep breath. Time to go inside, he thought. They wouldn't be looking for an arrest this time. He had touched too many of the foundation stones and they knew it. He opened his wallet and from behind his credit card he took out a New Jersey Drivers License and a credit card. His picture was fairly recent taken only two and a half years before. The name that appeared on both documents read Lawrence Grant Forrester. It would be good to have his real name back.

Chapter 23

The room was a blur as Merrill opened his eyes to the dim morning light. It felt earlier than it was because of the shadow of the mountains east of the resort. The air felt cool and fresh when he breathed in. He got out of bed, put on a robe and slowly worked his way to the living room.

The fog was slowly lifting and he saw an image that both excited and soothed him. Jan. He could see her silhouette against the brighter light of outdoors. Her slender feminine form standing naked with her legs apart and hands rose forming a slightly imperfect pentagram with her head as the northern direction. She was greeting the day. Quietly he removed the robe, laid it on a chair and joined her.

She had let him sleep. The night before they had fallen asleep holding each other on the chaise lounge and watching the sun retire. Well into the early morning hours Merrill had awoke and moved them to the bedroom. Too many hours of worrying, too many hours of excitement, too many occurrences had taken their toll. They wanted nothing but to relax and feel the new love they had discovered between them.

Merrill had sensed that some things had changed since he had talked to Grant the night before. He decided that it might be wise to park the van somewhere that it would not be seen yet was accessible if and when they should need it. So they had walked up to the tourist convenience store and found out that there was a storage facility just outside of town, only about a mile away. The owner was pleased to give them directions and asked if the two were planning to move into town. They had looked at the man and then each other and said simultaneously,

“We hope to.”

They had both laughed and thanked the man leaving him looking a bit puzzled.

By the time they walked to the storage facility, signed up for a month of indoor storage for a vehicle, and walked back to the resort it had been almost dusk. Neither of them wanted any sounds of the outside world so they decided to watch the sunset. They lay there holding each other hoping that nothing would disturb the moment and sleep had taken them.

After the morning blessing, Merrill made them coffee. The aroma filled the rooms with familiar comfort. It was a waking dream. They took a bath together and watched the squirrels playing between the trees and frequent little birds landing on the bushes outside of the panoramic window and put on a show, just for them. While they were surrounded by the warmth of the scented water, sipping on their coffee and enjoying the view Jan told Merrill about her long time wish for them to be together like this. He had to confess that where he had found her attractive, he had never thought of it as a possibility. At this response she pulled herself up to his chest, kissed him and explained that she would not have it any other way. He cared enough about things to try to make them work.

When they were done bathing and were getting dressed, Merrill teased Jan that he had never made it in a tub before. She threw a towel at him and laughed.

They drove directly to the storage facility and locked the van into the locker they had rented the night before and walked back to town for a nice breakfast in the café where they had eaten the morning before.

Jan ate only about a third of her crepes when she began more pushing around her food than really eating her eyes seemed far away.

“Is something wrong?” Merrill asked softly as if trying to console rather than distract her from her thoughts.

“No,” she smiled. “Everything is wonderful. It’s just that last night while we were watching the sunset I realized that we *would* live here. This is going to be our home. You may think this strange but when the man at the store asked us if we were moving in, I... Well it just felt right.”

“I noticed that myself, but I had not really owned up to it until now. But I think you might be right.”

“Would you mind if after breakfast we went back to the motel and you did a reading for us?”

“I don’t usually do readings for myself because I feel like I bias the cards or my interpretation of the cards to much. But, I could do a reading for you if you like.”

“That would be great!”

They finished their breakfast walked back to the resort holding hands and

appreciating the clear blue sky and gentle breeze that kept them from being overly warm. This was really the first time that they began talking about the future, really the first time that Merrill really thought that there would be a future.

When they reached their unit, Merrill went to get his card box. Jan wiped off the table on the patio and he sat next to her began to read the cards.

“This is a powerful reading Jan. It looks like there is going to be some more trouble before we are done here. I’m not sure what will happen but it looks like you might be running away from someone. The thing is though that this is in your fears so either this is premonitory or you’re worried about why we came here. But look here at the crowning card. The Ace of Pentacles says that there is a new beginning concerning money. Usually in that position it means a complete change in economic status. It could be a big job opportunity maybe. In the future position is the Ace of Wands and the outcome card is the two of cups. The Ace tells of a new beginning especially in the form of relationships and the two of cups is a partnership. In your wishes is the card I think of as a happy home. In this configuration those two cards work together with the self position which is the death card, meaning change. The reading looks very favorable to me, almost too favorable. Things appear so good I would question the accuracy of the reading.”

Jan seemed almost giddy. “That’s what my dream said last night. Merrill do you think you could handle being with me and being wealthy?”

“Handle? If that is what this is talking about, then I am more than ready. I want you to know that I have never enjoyed myself more than during the times we have been together. Even when we were being shot at I felt it. I felt guilty for shooting someone but at the same time there was this rush within me forcing me to protect you and Sarah. I have never felt anything like that before. And the past few days we were supposed to be on the run, but it felt more like we were running to something rather than away from someone. I guess I don’t know how to describe things better than that. As for the money, well I don’t see how that part could happen.”

Jan leaned back in her chair and then pointed up. A single cumulous cloud had appeared and was providing just a slight cool mist momentarily. “She is washing us clean,” Jan said. “This is a sign of changes to come.” She stopped and looked at Merrill who was still appreciating the tall but contained column of moisture. “I love you Merrill.”

For the first time as the words formed in his mouth Merrill realized that it was true. “I love you too, Jan.”



The next bus out of Albuquerque hadn't been until 10:30 that evening. Sarah had begun to feel a little anxious about her surroundings so she had stayed in her motel room the entire time aside from a walk to a supermarket that was on the adjoining property where she found they made sandwiches and had a salad bar. That was just as well she thought because she was still feeling a little wobbly from the train ride. The train station and the bus station were next to each other and the motel she chose was only a couple of blocks away from there so hadn't had far to travel.

She was on the move again and was trying to remain as cautious as she could. Even at the regular stops the bus made she tended to stay onboard except to use the facilities or get some fresh coffee or a snack. As soon as the sun went down she was asleep as the fatigue from travel took hold but would awaken with each stop. She had never traveled so many miles nor been so far from home. She began to wonder if it would ever end. Grant of course was ever present in her mind. She wanted to be with him. She wanted to know he was safe. At the same time, she did know. At the same time, she also knew she felt watched like she was being followed. She couldn't shake the feeling.

She began watching the behaviors of the others on the bus. The music and lyrics of an old Paul Simon song kept circling in her head. 'She said the man in the gabardine suit was a spy. I said be careful his bowtie is really a camera....' She wondered who *was* watching. Then she noticed that there was a man who had gotten on the bus a stop after hers that never seemed to get off unless she did. Once she noticed this she kept an eye on him for the next few hours. He did seem to be watching her.

She wasn't being paranoid. At least she didn't think she was. She wasn't sure what to do. She tried to sleep. She figured the man wouldn't do anything as long as there were people around. When the bus came to a station, she watched. If everyone was getting off, she got off and stayed with the crowd. She noticed that there was an older woman that tended to go to the rest room every other stop. So she waited for her to go. She would not be alone.

By morning she was feeling more at ease with the process and had found that as long as they were moving, she could sleep or read or watch the scenery. It was only at the stops that she stayed on her guard. Night came again and her unwanted companion was still there. Finally she decided that she had to let Grant know. Otherwise how would she leave the bus station on that end? That idea scared her. For now she figured she was safe. But once away from this familiar crowd she might be in trouble.

About mid day they arrived at Nashville. This was a longer lunch stop. She decided to make her call. She followed her unknowing lady friend to the restroom

and took out her cell phone. There was no answer but she left a message saying where she was, what bus she was traveling on, and when it arrived at Washington Station. She also described the man that she thought was watching her. She hoped he would get the message in time.

Chapter 24

The table was designed to accommodate 20 people and Grant had always felt it awkward when there were only three or four of them taking up one end. But that was how it always was when they met Rusdorf. He guessed that was part of the reason it was used. It projected power and prestige. The heavy table and chairs looked as though they had been made in the 14th Century and Grant guessed that they probably had been. Everything in these offices from the fine tapestries that covered most of the walls to the Renaissance artwork that filled the empty spaces would be authentic. He nodded with approval when his friend appeared at the doorway and then crossed the floor to take his place directly across from him shaking hands with him just before sitting down.

“Seen Rusty yet?” Greg asked?

“No, I didn’t get a chance to. I just got into town about an hour ago. Did you have any luck on figuring out that code?”

“Not yet the geeks are working on it, but the e-mails ... or maybe more importantly the people who were sending the e-mails make the purpose pretty obvious. She did a great job collecting evidence.”

“Who did we bag?”

“Jennifer Fielder, administrative advisor to Senator Cavanaugh. She was checking on the progress of something called Project Worm. Another interesting note, I had some of my contacts do a little snooping and rumor has it that there is more to Fielder and Cavanaugh’s relationship than just business. That might explain the demise of his wife.”

“Either that or she may have figured out what he was doing,” posed Grant.

“When I checked out Alpha Gamma, I found out that game software had become a past enterprise for them. They got forced out by the bigger companies so they are working on data applications now. A big one that they just shipped out was for the State of Washington. It’s voting software. Apparently the type of hardware that will be used is similar to arcade games so Alpha Gamma was selected since they understand the memory parameters. Carolyn was working on

finishing up one of their old projects but apparently that wasn't all she was doing. Obviously we still don't know how Mrs. Johnson caught on to what was going on but this one is liable to be pretty big in the news if it gets out."

"That's gonna be up to Rusty." Some movement at the door caught Grant's attention. "Speaking of the devil himself."

"Good morning, gentlemen. I understand that you have some information for me." Rustorf Gammel, head of internal affairs took his place at the head of the table. He was at least 25 years senior to Grant and Greg and wore the silk suit and office slippers of an important executive. His face showed the experience and coldness of a man who worked as a field operative during the cold war which was where he and Lawrence had originally met. There was unusual warmth in his demeanor when he shook their hands. "I am very pleased to see you both, but I hope you have enough to warrant bringing you in. As you know, it wasn't easy placing you both in the Western Division but at this point we had little choice but get you out."

Rusty always conducts his meetings in the same way, Grant chuckled to himself. No sense trying to say anything until he's done.

"What I've received so far looks promising. As you know we have been monitoring communications on Croner for as long as you have been out there and haven't been able to get anything on him. We had started to consider pulling you out but then you put in your request to investigate the Thornton case. We thought it rather odd for him to deny the case so we had him over ridden. After that, he started making some mistakes. We heard about the pickup put out on Grant O'Connor and when that became an unauthorized stop order, we knew you were pushing in all the right places. There were some short but distinct e-mails between Croner, two Senators offices and Stanley Gravely, who works with the election committee in Washington State."

"Stop order, so I was right. Those guys were getting pretty creative on keeping up with me over the last two days." Grant stood up and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator that was hidden inside an antique liquor cabinet near the corner of the room. "I might even have something to learn from some of them. I almost didn't shake them."

"Sorry," said Rusty, "We couldn't intervene and risk them knowing we were on to them partly because there were a couple of e-mails that we have not been able to track from someone called The Traveler. The e-mails were unfortunately sent through blind IP addresses accessed by tapping into a wireless network with an unsecured mail server tied to it. All that tells us is that it was generated in Florida."

"That's ok," Greg piped in. "Lawrence and I know our jobs and we know

the risks. When we show you what we have to add to what you already have, I think you will agree it was worth it.”

“Actually guys,” Rusty looked directly at Grant, “Lawrence, you earned your pay when you took out Stelling.”

“Stelling?”

“Your assassin, we made his prints from a file leading back to the late 1980’s. He disappeared after a series of key hits and never surfaced again. We didn’t have any photos, the only thing we really knew about him was that he came out of Germany and he was extremely efficient. He used a different MO back then and after that he never left any prints, so we didn’t make the connection until now. But now let’s see what we have.”

“Before we do that,” said Grant, “I have a question. Who is this Traveler?”

“That’s part of our dilemma. We don’t know who he is. But from the e-mails we intercepted, he seems to be running the show but it looks like we’re going to have to close the net with out finding out.”

The three of them spent the next three hours working through the evidence that had been collected that far. Near the end, Grant felt his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. That was just as they concluded that there was enough information to start an open investigation of both senators, the election committees in Washington and Florida as well as Croner. There was also enough to solve 16 open cases in four different states.

“Well,” said Rusty, “We certainly have enough to warrant having you come in. But now we need to coordinate a rather tricky pickup. I think we are going to have to pick them all up at once. There are probably a couple of others in Croner’s organization that will have to be found out, but that won’t be hard. In the mean time, I’m going to put security on you two and we’ll have to gather up your friends.”

“Sarah should be at the bus station by about 9:30, so that part is taken care of. What we should do is head back to California and meet up with the psychics. I think I’ll pass on the security, we’ll travel on my real ID and they won’t have anything to track except face recognition and I can get around that using security passage.”

Rusty pulled a cell phone from the inside pocket of his suit and pressed the send key. “Margaret, tell Tom to pick up those two agents that followed Lawrence here, quick and quiet and book two first class tickets on the first flight out in the morning for SFO.”

Grant interrupted with a wave of his hand. “Tell her to head us to San Jose. I want to pick up my wheels.”

“Margaret, make that San Jose.”

He put his phone back and turned to Lawrence. "Greg, you kick back for a couple of days while I set this up, I might need you. But stay as invisible as you can. They will be trying to follow your aliases so we'll kill those right now."

"Thank you sir," Grant said as the two got up to leave. He took out his cell and saw there was a message and immediately accessed it. It was Sarah. He turned to Rusty with a grim look on his face. "I think Sarah has picked up a tail. She's on the bus from Albuquerque and will be in here at about 9:15. How do you want to handle it?"

"Give me the details on the bus and you plan on picking her up as usual."



Sarah watched the sunset from the bus for a second time as they came into West Springfield. By her itinerary she thought this must be the last stop before they would arrive in Washington and she would have to figure out how she was going to get away from the man. The further she rode with him there, the more paranoid she was becoming. She was still certain in her own mind that it was not her imagination and that he was following her. But she also knew that really proved nothing either way. She might be wrong.

The closer to Washington the bus came, the more changes of passengers at each stop. She was beginning to suspect everyone. Fortunately the bathroom lady had traveled the entire way. She wished she would hear from Grant. He still hadn't called. She supposed he couldn't. Not knowing what to expect was driving her crazy.

The lights of the West Springfield Station filled the bus as it came to a stop. Sarah noticed that almost half of the bus emptied to be replaced by three final travelers. There was a young man in a golf shirt carrying a duffle bag. She guessed that he was between quarters at college and going home for a break. There was a woman who could possibly have passed as a fashion model with her long lanky well shaped body and contoured face. Her long black hair was layered around her face and then fell freely down her long back. Then there was the third. He was a man that she guessed as being in his early forties. He wore a brown suit and carried a rather tattered briefcase. None of them looked like a threat. But the man, the same man that had been there since the first stop of the journey, the same man she had been avoiding the whole trip was still there and he was watching. She could feel his eyes, damn him.

The final half hour felt as long as the whole trip. She didn't know what she was going to do. And then they were there, Washington Station. She glanced back at the man. He looked like he was trying to not look like he was looking.

Then as he stood up she saw it, just the tip of a handle flashed momentarily under his armpit. He was packing.

She didn't know what to do. She tried delaying by messing with her purse but the man stayed back by his seat staying equally occupied. The last of the passengers were heading off the bus so she decided to take her chances on the outside. As the beautiful woman from the last stop started to leave, Sarah stepped into the isle behind her and as she feared, he stepped in the isle right behind her. Dread filled her. She was lost.

She stepped off the bus and followed the woman to the where the bus driver was handing off the luggage. Sarah's luggage unfortunately came to her first. She noticed that the man was not waiting for luggage. He was just waiting. He was only about five feet away from her. She looked around wildly hoping to see Grant. Not seeing him, she turned and walked toward the terminal doors. The man approached from behind and she felt something hard pressing into her back. "Take it slow and easy. We will be taking the white car just outside the door straight ahead."

"You know," a woman's voice said so quietly that Sarah could barely hear. "I think that is a really bad idea. Why don't you and I go find out who's in that car, shall we?"

The pressure went away from Sarah's back and she saw the man discreetly hand his over coat and what it covered to the woman who might have been a model. "Sarah, go down to the other end, your friend is waiting for you," she said.

As she walked away, she looked through the windows and saw that the woman had then been joined by a man Sarah hadn't seen before. They were escorting the man to the car and then holding a gun on the driver. When she looked back to where she was going she saw Grant. They rushed toward each other and like a scene from a bad movie everything seemed to be in slow motion as they hurriedly embraced.

Chapter 25

A lone bald eagle soared high above the canyon floor. Its piercing voice and the occasional songs of other birds were the only breaks in the peaceful rushing sounds of the Klamath River. The great bird circled within the confined space between the tall redwoods that covered the hillsides that defined the valley. The

air was cool from the shade of the giant trees that filtered the light so only grasses, lichens and delicate ferns could make it their home.

Squirrels played and hunted for food on the ground and among the trees, hopping across the open spaces and leaping among the branches. The screech of the eagle changed in its pitch as it dove creating an eerie scream that caused all other creatures to freeze and be silent. Its body was nearly perpendicular to the ground until the last few feet when it suddenly pivoted exposing its sharp talons then swept away from the ground leaving an empty space where a squirrel once stood. There was another scream of triumph and then all was silent except for the ever-present river.

Merrill watched as the drama unfolded. He felt a little saddened for the squirrel he had seen hopping between the giant trunks of the redwoods across the river just moments before. He had been sitting, just relaxing and feeling like he was a part of the forest, at peace with the world and himself. The eagle's hunt for food was a reminder to him that peace was only an illusion in the fierce world where everything competes for existence. For he and Jan, who had been napping next to him in the soft grass, it had been a time of recovery, discovery and rest.

He was beginning to lose track of time. Even though it had only been a few days, it was more free time than he had ever experienced and the county side was breathtaking. He began thinking about the day before. That had been Monday he realized. They started out taking a trail down to the beach and wound up on another hike in the woods. On the far end of the beach they had found a trail that followed a creek up into a forest. The trees were not redwoods like the surrounding mountains but spruce heavily shaded and filled with ferns and moss. Later when they stopped at a store, they found out that the area was actually called the Fern Forest. It had been a wonderful walk but they both discovered how out of shape they were from living in the city.

His thoughts were suddenly disrupted. He became aware that it was too quiet. He lowered himself down to the ground and began scanning around him for any movement. He thought it might have been a bear. They had seen two of them yesterday at a distance. He thought it might be prudent to wake Jan, just in case. He gently shook her and put his finger across his mouth to tell her to be quiet and then continued to watch.

There was movement about 200 yards south of them at almost the same level on the hill as they were. It was no bear. There was a man and a woman wearing sportswear. He noticed they were not acting like hikers, they were actually moving quietly and in their direction. They were carrying rifles. By the time he realized that they were no ordinary hunters, they were within 150 yards of them. "Shit," he said in a whisper. I think they're coming after us."

“Why are they coming at us with guns?”

“Come on... let’s get out of here.”

They moved as if a trained commando unit. Merrill signaled her to keep low and they first went slightly down and then north across and away from the intruders. Then Merrill saw a way to move diagonally up the hill that stayed behind some denser trees. He could see that the others had not seen them move, they were still following the same line toward where he and Jan had been.

Jan could see them too. She looked frightened. They moved swiftly and silently until they reached the crest of the hill and hit a main trail that branched into smaller ones. They ran in the roughly northern direction away from the hunters and then took a branch that went first west, away from the hill and then doubled back to the south.

There was a trench paralleled the main path with adequate undergrowth to provide cover. Fortunately they had both worn rather subdued clothing so they wouldn’t stand out.

A few minutes later they heard the loud crunching of boots crossing unbroken ground and twigs. When the intruders realized that they were no longer where they were supposed to be, they headed straight up the hill. “Damn it,” the man said. “Where did they go? I knew I should have taken the shot from up above when I had the chance.”

“You know that wouldn’t have worked, I couldn’t get a clear shot at the other one. Our instructions expressly said not to take the chance of only getting one.”

“Yes, I know you’re right but where the hell did they go.”

Merrill heard the noise of them running down the main path right in front of them heading north. His eyes must have looked like saucers to Jan as he looked away from the trail and at her. Once the sound of their steps had faded, Merrill got up and looked down the trail. They were out of sight. He signaled Jan to follow him and they moved south as fast as they could travel. A quarter mile down the path it turned west and into a parking lot. They stopped short of the gravel and looked around from the trees. There was no one there, only a jeep. Merrill approached the jeep and the hood was still very warm.

He went to the driver’s side and looked in. “That idiot left his keys,” he said. “Hop in, we’re going for a ride.”

As if in a single motion the two jumped into the jeep, Merrill started the engine, thrust the gear shift in reverse. Gravel banged on the floor of the vehicle as he spun it out of the parking spot and then the other way when he shifted to first and put the accelerator pedal to the floor. “Hey!” the man yelled and Merrill looked in his mirror to see both rifles raised to shoot. “Duck!” he yelled. There

must have been two shots but they only heard the sound of one. One shell hit the back of the jeep making a loud cracking sound. The second Merrill felt as much as heard go by his head. The dust kicked up by the tires did their part in obscuring them as a target and neither the man nor the woman could get off a second shot before they were gone.

He drove like a mad man for about a mile up the back road that had led them from the main road earlier that day. Then came to the stop sign that told them they had made it out and then Merrill kept it at speed limit while they entered and passed by the town. He went about a half mile further and then parked the jeep in a parking lot designated for patients only.

When they got out Merrill put the keys in his pocket and they crossed the highway and followed a side road until they once again passed town.

“How’d anyone know where we were?” asked Jan.

“The only thing I can think of is that our waitress told us about that place this morning when we asked her about quiet places,” Merrill said breathing a little heavily. “They must have gone there looking for us.”

“What are we going to do?”

“The first thing I think we should do is go back to the resort and get our stuff. I don’t think they have found it yet and the car isn’t there so, they probably won’t find it very quickly. The other thing we better do is call Grant and let him know what’s happening. Maybe he will have some ideas.”

It was a very quick mile and a half getting back to the resort. The back road had followed the highway and it led them to a spot where they could cross to the entrance. When they reached the highway, Merrill saw the shapes of a man and woman walking toward them and the town and they hid until the two had passed. “Well, that confirms that they haven’t found where we are staying,” he said. “Otherwise you can bet that would have been their next stop.”

When they could see that the others were out of sight, they crossed the road and walked the quarter mile to their cabin. Once inside, Merrill opened his cell phone and dialed.



“Aren’t they going to be watching your place?” Sarah asked as they got off the bus a block from Grant’s apartment.

“Probably, and that’s why we aren’t going there.”

She gave him an odd look and then forward again. She could see the complex in front of her. She could see the fountain and the ducks and on the far side she could see his apartment. Once they reached the road that ran along the far side of

the complex Grant pointed to a man sitting on a bench just a few hundred feet away facing the apartment talking into a radio. "I think that answers your first question," Grant said and turned right following the road to a far parking lot. "I figure they will be watching for me to take the Pontiac as well, so I think we'll take my other wheels."

On the corner of the property were a row of garages. Grant approached the one nearest the road and opened the combination lock and hasp and opened the door. "Leave your bags here. We're going to travel real light this time. Here, I have an extra helmet and some adjustable leathers that should work for you," he said as he rolled out the Rocket.

While she put on the leathers and helmet and Grant dressed accommodating for his weapons, she looked at the motorcycle dubiously. "You know, I have never done this before."

Looking around to be sure they hadn't been seen, he locked the hasp in place and got on the machine. He took a cord that hung from Sarah's helmet and plugged into a socket next to the seat and his into a second socket on the control panel and flipped a switch, "Don't worry," she heard him half laugh through her headset. "Neither have I."

The engine roared and in what seemed like seconds they were on the 205 heading north.

They had stayed the night in a safe house that Rusty had arranged for them. She had cried in Grant's arms for the first hour they were there and she never left his touch until they were escorted to the airport for a 6:15 AM flight. It wasn't until they were half way home that she felt back to her normal self.

Grant brought her up to date on what had happened and she accepted everything except for the name. On this she would compromise. She could accept Forrester but he would have to continue to go by Grant. They both laughed about it but she made it very clear that she couldn't see herself calling him Lawrence or Larry. It just wasn't him.

They had arrived in San Jose by 11:15 AM it took almost two hours to clear security, take a courtesy to Mountain View and from there a bus to Grant's apartment. By 1:30 PM they were already flying on Grant's rocket three hours and Grant was about to suggest that they pull off and stretch their legs when he felt his cell phone vibrating in his pocket.

"I'm gonna have us take a break," he said. "I have to check my phone."

"Ok," she said. "I saw a sign for a view point coming up in about a quarter mile."

They stopped and Grant put down the kickstand before Jan got off. She was surprised when her legs almost collapsed beneath her when she stood. It was

only then that she realized that the custom seats were made so comfortable that she hadn't realized her legs stiffness. Grant squatted a few times to regain his circulation and then while she walked to stretch her legs he checked his messages.

"What's wrong?" Sarah asked. Grants face had taken a look of a stone carving. It was full of anger.

"It was Merrill, they're being tracked."

He hit the speed dial on the phone and heard it ring. Sarah could only hear one side of the conversation but she knew from what he was saying that they must really be in trouble.

"Ok, you did really well," he said. "Now just stay there and keep the curtains closed. Since your car isn't there it should take them awhile to find you. Now, tell me exactly how to find you." Grant stood silent while he listened. "Ok, I've gotcha, we're on our way. We should be there about..." Grant looked at his watch. "With a little luck we should be there before seven and its still pretty much light out by then. Keep calm and keep alert. See you real soon."

Grant hung up and put away his cell phone. "So much for the sight seeing. Now we are going to make some time."

They got back on the bike and Grant started it. "Hang on tight and keep your head down on my back. You're going to find out why they call this thing a Rocket."

Once back on the highway Grant went through the gears and the engine took on a high pitched whine. He felt fortunate that he had traveled the highway several times before, though never with the rocket. He knew where the speed traps were and where to watch for patrol planes.

During the entire ride they only got slowed through the small towns they passed, the two speed traps he knew about and had to stop once for gas, use the facilities and drink some water. Sarah hung in there like a champion though she occasionally felt like she might succumb to fear. They were averaging around ninety miles an hour and at times hitting over a hundred and ten on a straightaway and she was not used to what she would usually think of as craziness.

Grant had misjudged when darkness would fall on the resort because of the valley that surrounded it. It was very much into dusk as they turned into the driveway Merrill had accurately told him to look for. They were headed directly to the cabin when he noticed two shadows moving near a window in the back of it. They became still as the motorcycle approached so Grant turned as if going to another portion of the resort and then parked the bike.

They dropped their leathers and Grant gave Sarah the smaller of the two pistols. "Keep down," he whispered.

They used the darkness to their advantage and slipped around behind the intruders with the cover of the trees that lined the far side of the drive. They could

see that there was a man and a woman. Probably the two that Merrill had told him about, Grant thought. They had finished trying the windows and were now working on the door. Grant could see that the man had lock tools in his hand and was about to enter.

“Freeze!” he yelled as he noisily pulled back the hammer of his revolver. “Don’t make any sudden moves, I can use this very well and you *won’t* like the outcome.”

The two figures stopped and were silent.

“Now, set down your weapons, put your hands on your head and *slowly* turn around.” Grants voice not only sounded commanding but also projected a feeling of impatience.

The two slowly turned toward Grant expecting to see a Sheriff or Manager or anyone other than Grant. The woman gasped. “I thought you were dead,” she said. “That was the word put out this morning.”

Grant laughed. “Ok, Jenna what were your orders?” He still held the gun on them and approached slowly with Sarah just behind him. She had her weapon at her side but in a way that they could see she was ready to back Grant up.

“We’re not talking to you, Grant,” Jenna said in a sarcastic tone. “Not without a lawyer.”

Grant put his gun in its holster to approach the two captives. The man who had not yet spoken started to slip down toward his weapon and Sarah said in a commanding voice, “I wouldn’t do that. I *will* kill you if I have to.” Sarah raised her weapon and took a strong shooting pose and the man stood back upright.

Grant collected the handguns and tossed them back toward Sarah. “I guess we better play this by the book,” he said. “You!” Grant looked directly at the man. “Step away from the wall, keep your hands on your head and turn around.”

When the man complied, Grant roughly padded him down and found a small .22 caliber semi-automatic pistol attached near the man’s right ankle. He removed it, pitched it away and then shoved the man down to his knees. Then he turned to Jenna and repeated the process being no gentler with her than her partner. Her body cringed as his hands examined her chest and buttocks with crushing strokes. His search was not unfounded since she was carrying a small .25 caliber in the small of her back.

“Now that we are done with the formalities lets see why you are being so insistent.”

“Let’s go inside, shall we?”

Grant went up to the door and knocked. There was no answer. He pulled his weapon and stepped back with the barrel trained between the two. “Sarah, check the other side. Be careful, we haven’t secured the perimeter.”

Sarah held her weapon upright in front of her chest and went to the corner of the building, looked around and then disappeared into the shadows. She couldn't see anyone so she approached the patio door and knocked. There was still no answer. She turned around and surveyed the area. Beyond the patio she could see that the undergrowth provided more than adequate cover for anyone trying to hide. "Merrill? Jan? Its Sarah, come out if you hear me."

Two shadows rose from the foliage only fifty feet from the cabin and not being able to see, Jan raised her weapon. "Say something, I can't see. If you don't I will have to shoot," she cried out.

"It's us Sarah," Jan's voice called out. Sarah lowered her gun and few seconds later she could make out both Merrill and Jan. They looked very tired and very relieved to see her. And she looked relieved to know it was them.

"Did you see anyone else?" Sarah asked.

"No, there were just the two we saw earlier today," Merrill answered. "And then you two came and we couldn't tell who it was so we just stayed down."

The three of them circled around to find Grant still confining his prisoners. When he saw his friends come around the corner he told the two to get up and motioned them away from the door so that Merrill could open it. Then he motioned to Merrill to move away from the door. "Let's go inside, shall we?"

They all went inside, first the two captives then Grant followed by the others. "Sarah, grab me the bungee cords out of the bike would you, I think we want to make our guest a little less comfortable." Sarah handed her gun to Merrill and went out. "Jan, do me a favor and pull those two dining chairs and move them out into the open."

Jan moved the chairs out and then pushed the table away so that there was nothing in reach of them. Grant nodded to their unwelcome guests and they both sat. Moments later Sarah returned with four heavy-duty stretch cords. Grant handed her his weapon in exchange for the cords and strapped wrists and ankles to the chairs. Then Grant stood directly in front of them and said with a tone of satisfaction, "Now, let's have a little talk, shall we?"



By three in the morning Grant was getting tired of the same answers. He looked tired, he looked frustrated and he sounded angry. Since he already knew Jenna, he had put most of the pressure on her. He knew she was tough, but he also knew that she knew his reputation for getting the job done. Her partner Sidney wasn't talking and about all he had gotten out of either of them was that they were working the area alone, were following their orders and were supposed

to report in at eight in the morning or when they completed their mission.

“Ok, we’ll start again and I will warn you, I haven’t had much sleep, we had a long trip getting here and I am grouchy.” He crouched so that both could look him in the eyes.

“I know that you’re aware that a kill order is forbidden and wouldn’t be issued. So, I know you are working outside the bureau and I know you are working for Croner. I want a list of the others working on your team and I want to know its structure.”

The two sat in silence.

“Alright, I really don’t want to be doing this all night. Keep an eye on them, I’ll be right back.”

He left the cabin and returned a few minutes later. His hands were slightly soiled with grease and he was holding the coil from the rocket, the coil wire, a plug wire, some smaller wires, the motorcycles battery and some tape.

“I am going to give you one more chance to answer my questions. I don’t think this will kill you, but I don’t think you will like what it *will* do.” He paused and looked over at Sarah who was sitting on the couch in the adjoining living room. “This shouldn’t kill them should it?”

Jenna looked over at Sarah nervously. She knew what Sarah did for a living and so she waited for her response.

Sarah got up and walked over to examine the Jerry-rigged equipment and shrugged. “I don’t think so, as long as you don’t run it through the heart. But you can never tell with high voltage.”

Jenna’s eyes were suddenly as big as saucers and then returned to their original hardened stare. “You wouldn’t do that,” she said. “Not without authorization.”

“Look, in this case we are looking at national security and as a special agent with Internal Investigations that alone is enough authorization. It becomes my call and I am calling it. So unless you want me to cook part of you, you’d better start talking.”

Silence.

Grant set the coil on the table and plugged the coil wire into it. Then he taped the spark plug wire to the coil’s casing and attached two wires from the top of the coil and one of those to the battery. He did this slowly and deliberately so that the two bound agents could watch each move. When he was done, he slid the table over close to Sidney and took out his pocket knife. He grabbed one of Sidney’s pant legs, slit it open and then ripped it. Then he looked up toward Merrill, Sarah and Jan as if realizing something he might have forgotten. “Merrill, I could use your help if you would and you two might not want to watch this.”

Jan and Sarah got up and made a show of leaving as if it were more than they

would bear and went into the master bedroom.

Sidney looked increasingly nervous.

“Now, let’s see how well this works,” Grant said and placed the leads close together. “Sidney, do you know how a car ignition works?”

Silence.

“I’ll take that as a no,” he said conversationally. “Well it’s kinda like this. When you hook the battery on the primary coil it places a low voltage, about 12 volts in it which creates a field that crosses the secondary high voltage coil.” He looked at Sidney to make sure he was listening. “Ok, Merrill, touch the free wire to the battery.”

“See nothing happened,” he paused. “But when you break the connection it causes a sudden fall in the primary field causing the secondary field to collapse and release a pulse that is something in excess of 35,000 volts which rushes through the wires and ignites the fuel in your engine cylinders.” Grant looked up at Merrill, “Now remove the wire.”

SNAP! A blue arc flashed between the leads.

Sidney and Jenna instantly jumped. Both had eyes that looked like saucers.

“Naw, that wasn’t at all what I wanted,” Grant said, looking disappointed. “What we need is a better conductor.”

He set down the leads, went over to the kitchen sink, filled a glass part way with warm water and added salt to it. “Now, this should help.”

He took a paper towel from the counter rack, dipped it into the solution and wet the two areas on his leg. After drying his hands thoroughly he picked up the leads again. “Ok, do you want me to demonstrate it for you again?”

Silence.

Grant looked disgusted and touched the leads to the dampened areas. “Make contact again, would you Merrill?” He looked in the eyes of the man. There was sweat beginning to bead on his forehead. “You’re sure you don’t want to talk now?”

Again, silence.

Grant looked over at Jenna who was starting to squirm. “You know, I don’t really think you need to be watching this, I’ve known you a long time and I think I can spare you this little spectacle. “Hey Sarah,” he called out to the other room. When she opened the door and came out Grant said in a flat conversational tone. “Could you escort our female friend back with you, I don’t think she wants to watch.”

Sarah and Jan unhooked Jenna from her chair and refastened the cord tightly around her wrists. While Sarah marched Jenna into the back room, Jan grabbed the chair and carried it behind her.

In the bedroom Sarah looked concerned as she talked to Jenna. "I hope your friend starts talking soon. Grant gets into one of these moods and he doesn't care what happens. He wants the information and that's all that matters to him. So, if he doesn't talk, you can bet you'll be next."

Sarah had placed Jenna near the door so she could hear everything that was going on in the next room.

Once the door was closed, Grant removed the leads from Sidney's leg.

"You know, I really don't want you waking the neighbors let me find a towel," Grant said. He set down the leads again and went and retrieved a towel which he stuffed partially into Sidney's mouth. "Come on. Open your mouth."

He whispered something to Merrill and then taking his gun out of its holster and slammed Sidney on the back of the head with just enough force to render him unconscious.

"Ok, Merrill, open the circuit."

SNAP!!!

Grant rocked the chair containing Sidney making it sound like he was almost knocked out of his chair. Merrill who had placed a second towel in his own mouth shrieked a muffled scream.

"Tell me who and where the others are and we can stop this."

In the next room Jenna shows signs of becoming increasingly fearful.

"This isn't good; Grant's tone is getting dangerously stressed." Sarah warned.

"Don't make me really hurt you," Grant said just loud enough to be sure he was heard in the next room. "Ok, Merrill contact again. Now open it."

SNAP!!!

And again Grant rocked the chair and Merrill screamed into the towel.

"This isn't working," Grant said with no emotion.

Jenna looked up at Sarah. Her eyes were pleading.

Grant ripped open Sidney's shirt which made a tearing sound.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Merrill said with a voice of concern.

"You heard what Sarah said about his heart. That could kill him."

"The problem is that he isn't taking any of this seriously. Sidney, you don't know me very well but one thing you'd better figure out right now is that I don't bluff. Now, tell me what you know." Grant paused.

Jan had to hold Jenna down. She was kicking out and trying to flee.

"Tell me what you know!" Grants voice was louder. "Merrill, make the contact again. Ok, open it."

"Grant?" Merrill's voice sounded like he was pleading.

"Do it!"

SNAP!!!

This time Grant rocked the chair harder. Then there was silence for a moment.

"He's dead Grant!" Merrill wailed.

"So now I am going have to leave the decision to talk up to Jenna." Grant paused for effect and then yelled out. "Bring her out here."

When Jenna came out she saw Sidney slumped in his chair with his shirt torn open. He appeared to be dead.

"Well Jenna?"

Jenna screamed out, "Alright, enough!"

"Ok," Grant said in a patronizing tone while setting the leads on the table. "But we'll just leave this right here in case I don't like your answers."

Grant looked at Merrill and gave him a satisfied nod. "You can disconnect now. Go ahead and join the others if you like. We're just going to have a nice little chat now. Aren't we Jenna?"

Merrill, Sarah and Jan went to the bedroom leaving Grant alone with the restrained agents. Grant left the towel in Sidney's mouth and turned to Jenna. "Well?"

"There are thirty-five of us, I can give you the names," Jenna was crying. "You're right Croner heads us up but I don't know who he reports to. I figured it had to be a big organization for the amount of money they are paying us but for that amount I really didn't care."

"And when were you supposed to report in?" Grant yelled.

"They'd be on their way by now. Croner knew we had found those two and we should have called in three hours ago."

Grant got up and went into the bedroom where the other three had gone. "Merrill, how fast can you get the van?"



Within half an hour they were headed north. Grant drove with Sarah taking shotgun. Merrill and Jan were in the middle seats and their unwelcome guests were bound, gagged and riding in the back laying the plastic floor cover Merrill had installed for taking garbage to the dump. They were lying on their sides and the plastic stuck to the skin of their faces making it much less than comfortable. Grant had taken no chances and had tied them down so they couldn't create any problems for them. Merrill stayed alert to any noise coming from the back and held the smaller pistol on his lap, just in case.

They had just made it to Crescent City when Grant pulled over into a vacant parking lot and said it was time to call in. He realized that it was 7:00 AM in Washington and Rusty should be available.

"Rusty, this is Lawrence, we need an extraction. There are four of us and we are carrying two of the bad guys with us in a van and sitting in Crescent City, California," Grant said in an official tone. "Ok, Lawrence, we've picked up the Senators, Croner and four of his guys that were with him about an hour ago but we haven't located the others yet."

"I have a list, there were thirty-five of them, you already got the two that were following me and I have two so that still leaves too many of them running around. Gotta pen?"

"Ok, let someone else read the list, you get driving. Head south toward Eureka and I'll have someone along the way to meet you on the highway. What are you driving?"

"It's a black Kia van."

Grant handed the phone to Sarah, took the list out of his breast pocket and handed it to her. "Go ahead and read him the list and tell him which ones we have, I gotta get us moving."

Grant turned out of the parking lot and headed back the way they had come. He didn't like the fact that they had to pass through Klamath to get to Eureka but those were the orders and that was where their pick up was.

He should have felt rummy with so little sleep and no coffee but adrenaline had kicked in full force during the interrogation and had stayed strong the whole time. He knew he would totally crash when this was over. His body tended to want to speed but he forced himself to keep the van moving near speed limit. He didn't want to be pulled over with the two tied up in the back. But even with the reduced speed they were soon passing Klamath once again. Grant noticed headlights coming out of the driveway to the resort as they passed and realized when they pulled out behind them that his worst fears had materialized. They were being followed.

They passed through town and the street lights revealed a black Buick sedan with two occupants following them. As soon as the speed limit increased to sixty, he started cruising at seventy. The Buick stayed dangerously close to their rear bumper. "How fast will this thing go?" he yelled out.

"The highest I have pushed it is eighty," said Merrill.

"I was afraid you'd say that," said Grant as he stepped hard on the throttle.

The van's engine roared as it climbed steadily to ninety-five. "I don't think we will hold the road any faster than this," Grant yelled back, "Hold on this may get a little rough."

They entered some curves and Grant had to reduce speed but the Buick had to reduce more. "Well, there's our advantage, let's just hope we don't hit a straightaway soon." For the next mile they gained distance on the Buick leaving

the car a hundred yards behind them. There was a loud bang and they felt the van lurch as something slammed into the rear hatch.

"I think they're shooting at us," Merrill yelled and looked out the back window in time to see a rifle being raised a second time. He saw the flash and a second round hit its target. Merrill saw Jenna's body twitch and then go limp, and then he realized where the first round had gone.

"They're both dead, Grant!"

Grant pushed the engine harder and started using both lanes for his turns and again the Buick dropped further back. They came up to a straightaway and Grant pulled out his gun and handed it to Sarah. There was a turn to the right coming up, "See if you can get a shot. You two duck down."

Merrill and Jan both put their heads as close to their laps as they could while Sarah opened her window and rotated enough to aim to the right rear. As they entered the corner she had her opportunity. She squeezed off a round and the windshield of the Buick exploded into one huge spider web causing the driver to lose control and swerve off of the road into the ditch.

"Nice shot!" Grant exclaimed.

Merrill and Jan sat up just too late to see anything. They put their arms around each other and just held each other until their hearts stopped pounding.

Twenty minutes later they were almost to Big Lagoon when another black Buick eased in behind them and Grant's cell phone rang. When he answered it a voice said, "Rusty said you needed a pickup. There's a van waiting at the rest stop about a quarter mile down."

"Thanks," Grant spoke wearily into the phone. "There's some more garbage in the ditch about twenty miles back just beyond Berry Glenn."

"Ok, you go on ahead, we'll see about a garbage pickup."

"Sounds good, do you know if they have coffee at the rest stop?" Grant said facetiously.

Both sides laughed and they hung up just as Grant came to his turn off. He saw the large Dodge van with government plates and backed up to its rear doors leaving only enough room for the doors to open.

When the agents opened the back of the van and saw the mess, they just dragged the entire plastic liner into the other van. "Looks like you've had quite a night."

"Yeah, well just wait till Rusty sees the bills," Grant said with a smirk. "I think I go home now."

"Good idea, it's not *quite* daylight yet."

Chapter 26

When they woke it was almost two in the afternoon and even then none of them felt particularly refreshed. Merrill and Jan did their morning ritual in the privacy of the master bedroom and then joined Grant and Sarah who were already in the living room. Grant had decided on the drive back from their ordeal that he'd better take care of Merrill's van as a very first priority. He suspected that it was the only thing of any real value that Merrill owned and having it repaired right away would help put him at ease.

He rose first so immediately before the others came out he located a collision repair and set up an appointment. Of course the closest was in Crescent City. Grant was actually surprised to find there were several to choose from. He surmised that the town wasn't as small a town as he had assumed. They went out to breakfast and fortunately the little restaurant in town served breakfast twenty-four hours a day. Then Grant and Merrill went to see about the repairs.

"Don't worry Merrill," Grant said as they pulled back out on the highway heading back to the resort. The rental car seemed to groan reluctantly with every movement. "We'll have you back on the road good as new in a couple of days all courtesy of the government. In the mean time, we'll just have our own little vacation."

"Sounds good to me," said Merrill. "Ours got a little interrupted." He sounded vaguely sad.

"It's over now. Now things can get back to normal."

Merrill laughed. "You say that like there is a normal. I'm not sure what that means right now." He paused and looked out the window. "As strange as it may seem, this past week or so has been the most enjoyable I can remember. That's not to say I like getting shot at or having to shoot people. But we were on the move. Days weren't decided by someone else's schedule. The time with you guys and certainly with Jan was intense and even magick. I guess until now my life has been very routine. A little different from mainstream I suppose since I read cards and have moved around a lot but still. At this point I'm not sure what defines a 'normal' life. And actually, right now I'm pretty sure I don't want things to go back to what they were."

Grant was a little taken back with Merrill's disclosure. The four of them had spent a few rather dramatic days together but he and Merrill had never really talked. "You know, Sarah and I have been talking about making some changes

too. And I'm not just talking about getting married, and yes, that's something of a big change, but the two of us are thinking about starting our own business."

He paused and looked over at Merrill to see his reaction. He looked interested but didn't respond. "We had wondered if you and Jan might be interested in going into it with us."

"That's really generous Grant. But I don't know. First, neither Jan nor I have any resources to contribute and I know a lot of cash will be needed to start a business and second, we have decided we don't want to stay in the valley anymore. In fact, we have been trying to figure out how we might stay here in Klamath. Besides, what kind of business other than a metaphysical bookstore would want our skills? I know a lot about books and both of us do readings but I don't see you as the retail type. I'd see it as too boring for you."

"Well," Grant said, "You have a point, but that isn't quite what we had in mind."

By the time they got back to the resort, Grant had outlined his idea to Merrill and also had gotten more information from Merrill on other skills he had. He already knew about his psychic ability of course and that he could handle himself under pressure. The fact that he could use a weapon certainly didn't hurt either. What he hadn't known was that Merrill was fully capable of running a business. He had a wide range of management skills that had been literally left sitting on a shelf.

When they arrived, they sat in the car for a few minutes talking about the possibilities and then decided they better find the ladies. "I want you to think about it Merrill. I think it might be just the change you're looking for."

While they were gone, Jan and Sarah had walked to the store and picked up a few groceries. Between them they had decided that they had more than enough restaurant food to last them a year. They had found out from the convenience store owner there was a regular grocery about a three miles away so Jan bought a small backpack labeled 'Trees of Mystery' and a couple of bottles of water to drink and they were on their way. They were happily surprised to find that the little grocery had a great variety of meats and vegetables. The store even had a small gourmet section.

They picked out some wonderful looking rib-eye steaks, some baby red potatoes, a head of garlic, some fresh cilantro, butter, some foil and a bag of pre-made Mexican salad. Then they decided that they needed some things to drink. Jan picked out some organic, bird friendly coffee that the little store seemed to feature, she ground it extra fine and found some vanilla creamer while Sarah selected a bottle of Merlot that had come from one of the private wineries just south of where they were. She thought it was fun because it had an interesting

label that said that it was only sold to the local markets. That didn't mean to her that it would be particularly good but they wouldn't know that until they tried it.

Jan thought some desert might be nice and found that the store had bins of Mexican pastries that were brought up from the valley every other day. They had been fresh that day and looked wonderful.

The grocer packed up Jan's backpack while flirting with them saying that they were the loveliest ladies he had seen in a long time and made some other more suggestive remarks. They laughed together about the man's inept pickup attempt as they began their walk back. They were both flattered and amused. And then Sarah told Jan about the plans that she and Grant were putting together and asked if she was at all interested.

"But are you sure there would be enough for Merrill and I to do to make it worth having us. I'm not sure about Merrill other than I know he has had quite a few different jobs, but for me all I have is my education and my experience doing psychic work."

"What kind of education do you have Jan? You never mentioned it before."

"That's because so far I haven't figured out what I want to do with it. I finished my MFA in writing and literature about two years ago. But when I was done the recession had wiped out any of the openings that I would have been interested in and I really don't want to work for a newspaper. Besides, I was making better money doing readings and working part time in the book store than I could at a starter job and I don't have to wear professional clothes." Jan spread her arms to display her peasant skirt, blouse and bodice.

"Have you considered writing books?"

"Actually, that was going to be my next step. I've been collecting ideas and stories from the readings I have done. There is a lot that you find out about people when you do readings. They tell us things that they wouldn't even dream of telling a friend or coworker. That's one reason that I would love to live up here. Talk about a beautiful and inspiring area for a writer or artist."

"What about Merrill? The fire between you two has certainly ignited since we got back. Pretty suddenly it seems." Sarah just got it out of her mouth when she realized what she had said. "Hmm, that sounds a little strange coming from me, doesn't it?"

Jan gave out a smirk as she looked over at Sarah. "Yes, things do seem to be moving a little quickly these days don't they. And I personally have thought about that a lot. All I can tell you is that I love him, it feels right and I think you and I are both very lucky ladies."

Sarah smiled. "What would you say if all of the things you've been talking about could happen?"

“Well, I don’t see how that’s possible unless one of us was very rich,” Jan paused and looked at Sarah and then squealed. “You’re kidding. He’s handsome, daring, loving and rich too?” Jan felt herself almost jumping up and down. “How in the world did you manage that Sarah?”

“Just lucky I guess.” Sarah laughed too. But the real news is that Grant wants to start our own little community with land and facilities and the whole nine yards. And we both would like you two to be a part of it.”

Jan looked totally shocked. Nothing of this nature had ever even crossed her mind. She had never known anyone with enough economic clout to do what Sarah was suggesting. But then she stopped walking, stopped right there on the side of the road and looked at Sarah. “But what about you’re career? You must have worked like a madwoman to have achieved what you have by your age. I mean come on; you can’t be over 32 or 33.”

“Actually I’m only 27,” Sarah said.

“You’re the same age I am and I just finished college a years ago, how did you do that?”

“I finished high school when I was 16 and was an intern by the time I was 22. Between my folk’s encouragement and all the grants I didn’t have to work at all while I was in school so when I got out I just went full into it. The sad part is that I was forced to completely ignore relationships.”

“Wow,” Jan muttered. “Are you telling me that Grant was the first?”

“Yes, but don’t ever let him know that.” Sarah blushed and then laughed a little laugh. “I think his ego is big enough without that knowledge.”

Jan laughed and then asked, “I still don’t see what a forensic scientist is going to do way out here in the middle of nowhere. What about the career you worked so hard to get?”

“Grant figured that out for me,” said Sarah. “He said that I would have my own lab and I can do the company’s case work and I will have time for the one thing I never thought would be possible or even really thought I wanted until now. Grant and I want to raise a family.”

“I haven’t said anything to Merrill yet, but I would really like to do that too. We just haven’t gotten that far with our talking yet. It’s something I need to talk to him soon about because even now I would be heart broken if he said that wasn’t what he wanted.”

Sarah put her arm around Jan’s shoulder. “Somehow, I don’t think that’s going to be a problem. I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“There is one strange thing I wanted to ask you about. I haven’t said anything, but have you noticed that neither of them has been smoking?”

Sarah looked a little bewildered. “Now that you mention it, they haven’t

been. Have they?" Her expression went blank as if trying to think back. "The last time I saw Grant light up was just before I left New York."

"The last time I saw Merrill light up was before we left for Seattle. What's with that?" said Jan. "I mean I'm not complaining cause I really hate the smell, but it seems really weird that they both should quit like that."

They continued their walk back to the resort and when they arrived they saw Grant and Merrill just getting out of the rental car and they went into the cabin together.

"Jan and I had a great time," Sarah said. "We found the most wonderful little market a few miles up and we bought dinner." She took the pack from Jan and put it on the counter.

"Sounds great," said Merrill, "but what I could use right now is some good coffee."

"We got that too," Jan said excitedly and took out the small bag of ground coffee and held it out for Merrill to smell.

After putting away the groceries, Jan made up a pot of the special brew and they went out on the patio. It was refreshing. The sun had mostly retired behind the trees that topped the hill they faced and a slight cool breeze soothed their skin. "You know Grant" Sarah looked at him with questioning eyes. "I think Merrill and Jan are right. This is a wonderful area."

"I was just thinking that myself," Grant said. "And I have been thinking that maybe the best thing to do is to go ahead and build our facility up here and try things out for a year or two and see how we all feel about it. At the worst case it will give us some different experiences and a really nice place to be. What do you think?" He looked from face to face and each had a smile and was nodding.

"Ok, then what would you think about us using tomorrow to talk to a realtor and see if there is any developable land around here. I would think about 10 to 20 acres with access to water and electricity should do the trick."

Merrill and Jan looked at each other both seeming for the first time to recognize the implications of this whole plan. They wouldn't only be committing to the project. They would be committing to each other. Simultaneously they threw their arms around each other and kissed deeply. Then they looked up at Grant and Sarah and with smiles on their faces said, "Yes, Absolutely yes."

"I think this deserves a toast," Sarah said. She got up and went inside and came back with the wine and four wine glasses. After she poured the wine, Grant stood up. "To our grand enterprise," he said and they all touched glasses. "I think we should call it 'The Retreat' or 'The Farm'." Then he paused seeming to think about what he had just said and asked. "Does anyone here know how to grow anything? I don't."

Merrill, Jan and Sarah all looked at him quizzically and then all nodded. Seeing each other responding, they all laughed. Then Merrill jumped in and said, "I think it would be a lot of fun to do the landscaping ourselves between cases. Maybe even have a big vegetable garden."

"I'd like to have a tea garden," said Sarah.

"I've always wanted to design one of those," said Grant, but I'd need a lot of help putting it together.

Jan looked around the circle and was amazed with the enthusiasm being generated by all of them. She had never experienced anything like it before. "Somehow I don't think you'll have any problem getting help with it. I don't think any of us will ever need help again."

Soon after some more discussion Grant went about firing up the gas barbeque. It was plumbed in to the gas main so there was none of the usual problems with tanks like worrying about running low or with testing for leaks each time. He mentioned to Merrill that he thought that having a gas tank on the property would be a good idea, not only for the appliances but for Sarah's lab.

Sarah and Jan had gone into the kitchen and while Sarah prepared the meat by rubbing the steaks with fresh crushed garlic. Jan laid out some foil, cleaned and sliced the small potatoes in half and placed them on the foil. Then she added some pats of butter, a little crushed garlic, and some cilantro leaves and sealed up the foil like a pouch. When they came back out, the grill was hot and within minutes they could hear steam escaping from the foil and the smell of grilled meat and garlic filled the air. It was a wonderful dinner.

While they ate they began telling each other about their own personal experiences of the past week. They had fun comparing their reactions and solidly laughed about the times when any or all of them had been scared out of their wits. But they had all performed and they knew it. They had all survived and had done it with style.

"A couple of things that puzzle me," said Merrill. "How did those guys keep finding us? That was just crazy."

Grant nodded his head. "It seemed pretty spooky, huh?" He took a last bite of his steak, sat back and swallowed. "Well, they picked Sarah up at the library because of the security cameras. As soon as they had a pickup order on us, our pictures were added to the face recognition system. I knew that might happen but was really counting on it taking them longer to respond than they did. Then they picked us up again at the train station. I didn't find out until later that the station had been tied into the same system. That had been a recent improvement that I was unaware of. As for you two, Merrill's bank account was being monitored. So as soon as he took money out, they knew to look around Crescent City. They

just got damned lucky when they asked the waitress at the restaurant about you and she remembered recommending the trail.”

Grant stopped for a moment and took a sip of his wine then continued. “That’s one of the ideas I have for our company. I think I can get us a contract to figure out ways to defeat those security systems and then act as consultants to the Bureau among other things. But don’t worry. I’m not planning on relying on your psychic abilities for that, there will be plenty of other opportunities to use those. You said there were a couple of things.”

“Yes,” Merrill said. “Did you ever figure out what the significance of the worm? That seemed to be the center of everything in our visions but then for us it just vanished.”

Grant chuckled. “It wasn’t an actual worm of course. It was a computer worm, a subroutine that Carolyn Baers wrote into the voting software. It had been designed so that someone from the outside could activate the program with a coded ballot. It would alter the results and then go dormant again. It was done in such a way that I doubt if we hadn’t caught it, no one would have known that the elections were a fraud. It’s pretty scary stuff.”

By then it was dark and seemed a little cool to sit outside so they decided to go in. It was still early but Merrill and Jan excused themselves. Even though it had been a short day, the strain on the night before had made it seem long.

They decided to take a long warm bath together and watch the stars before going to bed. The soothing water and the feel of their bodies against each other calmed them. It turned out to be a shorter bath than they expected because they were falling asleep. They decided it would be better to go to bed. Both fell asleep almost as soon as they lay down.

For Grant and Sarah, the evening was much the same. Though they didn’t have the advantage of the big tub, they showered and lay on the bed talking about the future. That lasted less than a few minutes when Sarah looked over and saw that Grant was already asleep.

Chapter 27

Thursday was a full day. They went to a local realtor and found that there were four different areas where there was land available. The first one they had eliminated before even seeing the property because it was almost 60% wetland that was neither attractive nor usable. They were taken out to see the remaining

three.

The first was about 12 acres that had already been cleared for a campground project that had failed economically and had the advantage of having available power and there was already a well. Merrill had pointed out that the way they had cleared the land for the campground sites, they would have to almost tear out all the rest to make it configure to what they wanted to do.

They went on to the second. It was on lowland that was half taken up by a hillside and had a running creek at the bottom. Out of the eight acres that were available, only about three would be usable for building and there was some question about putting in a drain field. They all thought it was a beautiful location but it definitely had problems.

The realtor had told them that she had been holding back on the third property because it was in a 40 acre block that couldn't be separated and she knew that was bigger than they really wanted. Grant told her that it probably wouldn't matter if the property was good. So, they went and looked at it. It had only taken a matter of seconds for all of them to know they were standing on their future home.

The property was still forested with a flat area of about 20 of the acres that was on the ridge of a large hillside with mountains beyond that. The front of the property was a gradual hill that butted up to the paved road. Grant pointed out that if they were careful what they cleared they could put everything on the top and it would be completely hidden from the road. All they would have to do is put a few switch backs in the driveway and it would all but disappear into the forest. The realtor pointed out that they would never have neighbors because they were surrounded by national forest. Jan noticed that there was a creek that passed through one of the corners of the plateau.

The realtor hadn't even mentioned the asking price when Grant said it was exactly what they wanted and that they would take it. Merrill who was a little savvier asked the realtor what reports they had on the land, what the current asking price was and said that they wanted to see the title. He found out that the land had been perk tested and that they could put a septic on the north end of the property and that they had tested for water and that there was good water at a depth of 90 feet. The asking price seemed a bit high at \$20,000 an acre since there were no utilities available. They were four miles from the electric and there was no anticipation of putting in the lines.

Grant said that they could get around the utilities problem and that he would be willing to make a cash offer so Merrill suggested that he offer half of the asking price. To Grant's surprise when the realtor called the owner it turned out that the man had been trying to sell the property for five years and he was more than

happy to sell it for that.

Grant wondered how soon they could do the transaction so the realtor called the title company she normally used in Crescent City and pulled some strings. She had told them that they could actually have the title report that afternoon and since it wasn't a residential deal, they could actually close it tomorrow if they could get the owner down to sign. So, that's exactly what they did. Grant had the realtor call and set up escrow. Once he had the escrow account number he called his bank in San Jose and set up a wire transfer for that evening and by Friday at two o'clock he owned the property.

"I have never seen anything like that," Merrill said. "I can't believe that just like that you were able to get your hands on \$430 grand." He and Grant were standing outside the title company waiting for the final documents to be printed out. They wouldn't get the final title until sometime the following week but all of the preliminary work was done and everyone was being paid.

"I'm going to tell you something that stays between the four of us. Nobody in the world aside from Sarah and the internal revenue service knows this. But since you are going to be managing it, I figure you might as well know. The reason that there will be no problem with our business going together is that I inherited a lot of money when my father died. He had been an inventor and because of some obscure little parts used in computers, he made a small fortune. He died when I was pretty young and my uncle was left to manage the estate for me."

Grant looked at Merrill who seemed to be taking it all in but still a little disbelieving.

"I decided very early on that I wouldn't touch it until I really knew what I wanted out of life and my uncle was very good working stocks. He almost tripled the value in the past ten years. He was good enough that when he saw the economy start to fluctuate he took it all out and put it in safe low yield bonds with a couple of million in various banks to make it accessible. Unfortunately he died a year ago. That left me with no one to manage things and I really don't know anything about how to do it. So, I figure that I will just put the money into the business and leave it up to you to make those decisions."

"Just how much money are we talking about?" asked Merrill?

"It's about a billion and a half."

"What? I've never handled..." Grant cut him off. "Don't worry about it now. You can hire people to do the actual investing. All I want you to do is keep track of the company needs and keep the rest split up among different investments and brokers so that it is never all at risk. I suppose I could do it myself but really I am not interested in it. I enjoy life too much to worry about money."

"Ok, then I am guessing you are going to want Jan and I up here fairly soon

to get started on the project.”

“Yes, I noticed a house for sale when we were at the realtors. I wanted to ask you before I brought it up but I was thinking of buying it as a temporary residence and office for you and Jan until we got the retreat built. It was a four bedroom so you could keep a bedroom and office set up for Sarah and me when we are up. What do you think?”

“Sounds great to me, and I’m sure that Jan wouldn’t see a problem with it. And we can sell it when we everything is in place. Seem pretty reasonable actually.”

“Ok,” Grant seemed relieved that all of this was settled and he no longer had to worry about it. He had never even questioned the fact that he could trust both Merrill and Jan. He could just feel it. He wasn’t sure why and actually he didn’t care. “I’ll take care of the house when we get back.”

When they went back inside the office, the documents were all ready. Grant took the envelope and handed it to Merrill and then thanked everyone for their efficiency. Then the two left again. “I figured you are going to have to keep track of this stuff from now on. So, there you go. Let’s go get your van.”

The van was ready and as a bonus by Grant’s instruction they had repainted the entire van so that everything would match properly. It was like a new van. Merrill couldn’t believe it. Seeing Merrill’s expression Grant decided to drop the rest of the news he had on him. “I never want there to be any contention about there being any boss verses employee between us,” he said, “so while we drive home I want to tell you about another decision I have made.”

They settled with the body shop and started back to the resort. After a few blocks, Merrill said, “Ok, I have been shocked pretty well already so I guess I am ready to hear the rest. Go ahead.” He looked nervous.

“Since there is all of this money, and I really didn’t do anything to earn it. In fact until now, I really didn’t want it. I figure it would just mess up my style of living. So...” he paused. “Like I said, I am putting all of the money into the business.” He paused again. “Maybe you better pull over for this one.”

That really unsettled Merrill. But he did what he was told and found a parking lot and stopped the van. He looked up at Grant with huge questions in his eyes.

“I talked it over with Sarah and we have decided to make the company a limited liability corporation with four equal owners. That way we all have the same authority and we all have the same incentive to make things happen. We will all be officers and any expenditure over a hundred thousand will require all of our signatures. So, if any of us decide it just isn’t working, well that person still has enough to not feel locked into something that they don’t want.”

Merrill looked dumbfounded. He couldn’t even speak.

“It’s the only way I can see for there never to be a reason for any of us to

need to leave and the only way I can see to not feel the burden of being someone's master. That is something that neither Sarah nor I believe in. And from what I know about you and Jan, it would be the same for you. So, now the first decision we need to make will be how much salary we should each be drawing."

"How..." Merrill couldn't even get it out. He was so overwhelmed that he couldn't even move let alone drive.

Grant laughed. "Well, I knew it might be a shock, but once you are living with it for awhile, you'll understand why I am doing it this way and you will understand that it really won't change things as much as you think." He paused and put his hand on Merrill's shoulder. "Think of it as an inheritance." He paused again seeing that Merrill was still trying to stabilize himself. "Here, let's switch and I'll drive while you absorb all of this."

While Grant and Merrill were taking care of business, Sarah and Jan were cleaning clothes, getting a nice dinner together and getting things ready for their long Sunday drive home. Grant had asked Sarah to fill Jan in on the rest of the business plan and even though she had done it in a much more gradual manner Jan's reaction was just as strong as Merrill's.

Jan was sitting on the patio, looking out at the trees and grounding herself when Merrill and Grant drove in. Merrill went out to see her and she was in tears. "Are you alright?" His question sounded like it was intended for himself as much as for her. She looked up and threw her arms around him. "What do you think?" she replied. Her voice was shaking. "I mean what do you say to something like this?"

Grant and Sarah went out to see if they were ok and Jan looked up at them with her teary eyes. "Are you sure you want to do this. I mean I don't want to go on with the idea only for you to change your mind later. It's a huge decision."

"No, Jan. For me it is not a huge decision. In my mind it is the only decision. I don't want to control anyone. I don't want to make the huge decisions by myself and I don't want that burden on Sarah either. I just want all of us to have a life, to do the things we love and maybe, just maybe make things a little better for our country and for the world if we can. What we just did was huge. I don't know if you realize it or not but we stopped something that could have ruined the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. I know we couldn't have done it separately. I know, I tried for several years to break into this and with your help, I finally did. So, it only makes sense that we keep doing it."

Grant put his hand on Jan's cheek reassuringly. "Do you understand?"

Both Merrill and Jan looked up at Grant and then at Sarah. Then they looked at each other. Jan was the one to respond. "Yes, we both understand now. So, I guess you could say we are a family."

“Oh, that’s another thing I forgot to tell you. When we have kids, I don’t want them to know about the fortune. Only that we live in a wonderful environment provided by the corporation which is owned by the stockholders. They don’t need to know who the principles are. I don’t want the money to screw up their lives. It would have messed me up if I hadn’t had a great mentor. So, you have to promise me that.”

All four of them looked at each other and they all agreed.



On the trip home they all enjoyed the views of the mountains, the ocean and the wineries. It was a beautiful sunny day and they were all comfortable in the cool air-conditioned van. They had put the rocket in the storage unit where the van had been hidden and secured the cabin for another two weeks to use until the house would be available. They talked excitedly about what they would all like to see in the retreat and some ideas that Grant had worked on for several years. At one point Jan brought up the last visions that she had about Johanna and how she had been in a dream and Grant realized that they still didn’t know that she was still alive. He told her that the death had been announced to protect her and that she had been in a coma the entire time.

“Oh my,” said Jan. “We have to go there first thing when we get down there. I think I know how to help her. Where is she at?”

“She’s in San Jose Hospital checked in as Melissa Brown,” Grant said.

“No problem, we should be there in about two hours,” Merrill said.

“Ok,” Grant inserted, “Just remember that I have to be at the airport in about five hours.”

“What?” All three of them sounded out at once.

Grant looked a little embarrassed. “Didn’t I tell you? Rusty wants me to come in for a debriefing. I should be back tomorrow. I thought I would give him my resignation then and see what kind of concessions I can get for us to work on contract when needed.”

“No,” Sarah said, “you didn’t say a word. But that’s ok, I thought I would go put my notice in and then take my vacation time to finish it out. I was thinking maybe Jan would like to go shopping with me tomorrow.”

“That works for me,” said Merrill, I need to take care of some things like let the book store know that I won’t be back and give notice on my apartment. You realize I haven’t stayed there since...” He stopped. “No, I am not even going there. Let’s just say I want to let go of the last of the past I didn’t belong in.”

Jan leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “There will be no reason for

you to stay there at all if you don't want to."

Merrill smiled. "Even though we hadn't talked about it, I really hadn't planned on staying there."

Jan kissed him again. "Good!"

When they reached the Medical Center, the four of them went to the desk and found out which room Melissa Brown was in and made their way to the elevator. She was in a monitored care unit on the third floor. She looked normal aside from the wires that were attached to her for the respiratory, cardiac and respiratory monitors. She just looked like she was asleep. A nurse came by and told them that everything seemed normal and they couldn't figure out why she hadn't come out of her coma by then. They had tried all of the normal stimulants and there were no results. Her brain activity was perfect. No damage. She just wouldn't wake up.

Merrill watched as Jan went up and put her hands on Johanna, one on her forehead and one over her heart. Jan closed her eyes and Merrill could see her skin become pale and her aura change from her normal blues, yellows and greens to a brilliant white. Then Jan moved her hands so that they surrounded her face. Then in a very quiet voice Jan said, "You're safe now. The Worm is dead."

Jan stepped back and her normal color returned. She looked at Johanna, raised her hands and turned her palms to face the patient. Merrill could see the energy flowing toward Johanna. A few moments later, Johanna opened her eyes. She saw Jan and at first didn't recognize her. Then she saw Merrill standing next to her. She smiled and in a hoarse croak said, "Thank you. I could see you in my dream but I couldn't make sense out of all of it." She looked at Jan again and suddenly recognized her. "You were the one in my dream."

It took them awhile to get Johanna to realize how long she had been asleep. In the one day she felt like she had been sleeping, ten had passed. Then the memories of her ordeal hit her and she began to cry. That was when Jan knew for sure that everything would be all right for her. Unfortunately, Jan also knew that Johanna was up for another shock. She would have to deal with the absence of her husband. But, that is the way of Karma, she thought. And that was for someone else to deal with and on a different day.

They left Johanna with the nurse who was certainly surprised to see Johanna talking when she came in. Then they took Grant to his apartment to refill his suitcase for his trip to Washington.



Grant returned late Monday night. The only new information he brought back with him was that the investigation had uncovered more e-mails from the Traveler. They were all instructions to the various players including the senators. But no matter what had been tried they couldn't get any more information. Either no one really knew who he was or who he worked for or all of the prisoners questioned were so scared that nothing could make them talk. Grant wondered what else the guy might be planning. He wished they had something from him directly so maybe Jan could pick something up. But there was nothing to be found.

By Wednesday, they were all on a plane to Las Vegas. Kalen had joined them and having never flown, was outraged when the airline made them pay for two seats to accommodate him.

On Jan's suggestion they had booked themselves into the Luxor and arranged to be married there. Jan's friend the priestess had come to do the ceremony at Sarah's request with Merrill and Jan as witnesses but they had to pay an official from Las Vegas to come observe and sign the legal papers. For fun while the six of them were in costume, they had pictures taken as Egyptian nobility and an Egyptian priestess. Grant was apprehensive at first, but when it was done he said he wouldn't have had it any other way. It was a wedding they all would always treasure in their memories.

After the ceremony they went to dinner and Grant announced to the others something he had been saving for a very special time. He stood at the table, took up his wine glass and looked at Merrill and Jan. "First, I want to thank both of you. With out your presence none of this would have felt complete. I know that Sarah and I would have come together and gotten married. But it would not have been the same. You are very special people and we..." He took his arm and circled it around the table. "We are all on a very special journey. And I want to announce that I came back from Washington with some very special news. We have our first assignments and we have the support we need to put this together. So, *here* is to the future."

They all raised their glasses in a simultaneous salute and drank. They were all excited with Grants announcement. When Grant sat, Merrill stood. "I have already told Jan this and we wanted to share it now because we see it as a part of the journey we are on. When I got back to my old apartment, I found this in the mail, which I need signed by myself and a witness. I would like Grant to be the witness and I would like it postmarked from here."

He handed Grant the paper with a highlight sticker where he should sign. It was Merrill's divorce papers. Grant looked at him oddly but signed it.

"The reason that it should be taken as a joyous occasion rather than an ominous one is that Jan and I would like to make a date six months from now to the day

for us to come here again to legally join Jan and myself.”

They were all smiling once again and Grant stood and raised his glass. “That is something to drink to. So here is my toast. To my beautiful bride, to our marriage, to our wonderful friends and their upcoming wedding, and to our new life, we are all truly blessed.”

A waiter came up to the table and handed Grant two small gift wrapped packages. “These came here for you this afternoon,” the waiter said. One of the gifts was from Greg and the other had no tag.

“Here,” Grant said handing the second box to Sarah. “I’ll open this one and you can open the mystery gift.”

Greg had sent them a small antique gilded picture frame. His note said that it should be used to preserve the memories of this memorable occasion.

When Sarah opened the second, inside she found a small coffin with a naked Barbie Doll inside. The doll was posed as the women they had found. Also inside was a note. Congratulations on your wedding. This is just a thoughtful token of my appreciation. With Love, The Traveler.





Part II

The Traveler



Chapter 28

Cheryl Tyler woke too abruptly. Her nose was cold and she lay there shivering under her covers. She could see out of her window that the trees that bordered her property were white with snow. This was the first snow of the year which was not uncommon for the area in mid-February. In many areas there would be no snow at all, but Orting was just far enough away from the warmth of the bay that there could be several inches even if Seattle or Tacoma saw only rain.

She felt like she had an undeserved hangover as she tried to sit up. Or maybe she did deserve it. She really couldn't remember. As she thought back to the night before her memories were a fog. She could kind of remember being at the tavern in town and this nice man buying her a beer. She had joined him at his table then the memory ends. She puzzled over what had happened later and how she got home but had no answers.

Obviously she hadn't turned up the thermostat. She sat on the side of the bed trying to focus but her vision was obscured by flashes of color that seemed to swirl. She screamed. The shape of a man moved in the corner of the bedroom but was then gone. She suddenly felt nauseous.

She stumbled her way into the bathroom and put her head in the sink. She couldn't vomit. She felt herself gagging but no relief would avail itself.

"I need to straighten out!" She yelled at herself. "I have to..." She realized that she really didn't know what she was supposed to do. Best to try to start her morning routine and see if she could snap out of her woolliness, she thought.

She turned and forced herself to prepare her bath. The huge garden style tub filled with warm soapy water would feel good and maybe the coziness would stabilize her. She turned on the knob and when she straightened up the world began to spin. She fell and bruised her knees.

She got up slowly, trying to shake her sense of instability. Maybe some coffee would help. She carefully maneuvered herself back into the bedroom, out of her door, passed the breakfast nook and into the kitchen. She took what seemed a

very long ten steps to the island in the center of the kitchen where she threw her arms and head down as she started to whorl once more. Then in the center of her vision she saw a pair of heavy wire cutters and a Zip Lock bag containing five small packets full of grey powder that looked like dishwasher soap.

She stood there in nothing but her open robe and a necklace staring at the items she knew were important. She dropped her robe and picked them up. She felt better immediately. The world became clear again. She carried them around the partition wall into the living room and outside the front door of the large manufactured home.

The slight wind was ice cold in the still dim light of early morning but she didn't notice. Nor did she notice her feet beginning to freeze in the snow or that her car wasn't in the driveway. She was on a mission.

The field across the road was empty aside from cows. It was after milking time and they were scavenging the exposed grass under the shade of the trees on the far side.

Cheryl turned left when she reached the road and followed the asphalt beyond her property line and across the clearing that ran in front of the single wide mobile used for housing temporary migrant workers. The road came to an end with a wide turn cul-de-sac.

She could feel her small breasts, buttocks and feet screaming from the frigid exposure but she continued on. In front of her was a small shed buried within the trees and undergrowth. It was surrounded by a chain link fence. She followed the perimeter to the left. Her feet, legs and thighs were being torn viciously by the sharp thorns of the encroaching blackberries. She continued her path to the back corner of the fence where could not be seen. She felt triumph at completing the first part of her mission but then realized she didn't know what the mission was. She froze in place like a machine that was turned off.

After several minutes she wavered, almost fell and caught herself by touching the fence. Touching the fence seemed to reactivate her and she knew once again what she had to do. She began cutting the chain link carefully away from the stretcher bar all the while protecting the baggie in her left hand. The metal was hard and her hands felt almost broken from the strain she exerted on the handles of the cutters and by the tenth cut her hand would not respond.

That would have to be enough, she thought. Enough for what? She froze again and started to lose her balance. The nausea started to return so she supported her body using the fence. Once again her mission became clear.

She pushed hard on the mesh and wedged herself through as the sharp metal pulled her long brown hair and cut her face, breasts, stomach, buttocks and legs. Blood began streaming down from her wounds covering her once perfect skin

and dripping to the ground. Once inside the fence she went to the small building and inside the door.

She could see the square wooden top that covered the brick and cement fixture in the center even though there was only the light from the doorway. There was a hatch in the top. She opened it and looked down inside to see water about three feet below the surface.

The small pouches came easily out of the baggie. They felt like plastic in her hand until they fell in the water and disappeared. She carefully closed the hatch and returned to the fence.

Cheryl tore her skin further as she suffered back through the torture of wire and repositioned the cut ends so that her intrusion wasn't obvious. Stumbling, she fell into the sharp blackberries. Her half frozen body ignored the sharp barbs that stabbed her, some remaining in her skin. Her steps left blood that stained the melting snow and mud with every step as she fought her way back to the road.

Once more on solid ground, she felt exuberant and began dancing back to her home. Her arms were flailing in the air as she twirled her tall skinny body around and around. Steam appeared from her mouth each time she sang out, "I'm Free! I'm Free!"

She no longer noticed the cold tearing at her flesh nor did she notice the water beginning to flow out of the front door and down the wooden stairs as she climbed them to re-enter the living room and go back to the kitchen.

She took the French knife from the block on the counter and realized that the long broad blade belonged in her heart.



At 7:00 PM Claire Tyler arrived at her sister's home. She had left her work in Seattle at 5:30 and had battled through rush hour traffic taking the faster route through Bonnie Lake and down the back way through South Prairie.

She usually didn't like to try to go out to Cheryl's house during the week. Orting was a long drive for her but she was concerned. Cheryl hadn't answered her phone for three days. She approached the front of the house and realized the car wasn't there. Something else caught her attention and caused her to stomp on the breaks. The front door was open and there was a lake where the lawn should have been with water was running down the front steps of the house.

She jumped out of her car and ran across the flooded yard. She as much flew as ran up the stairs into the living room. "Cheryl! Cheryl! Are you in here?"

She ran through the living room and bedroom into the bathroom to find the tub, empty aside from the overflowing water. She hurriedly turned off the water

and looked around her. She had to grab on to the door to keep from slipping as she passed back through the bedroom. As she went through the second door she saw her sister. She was laying face down in a pool of pink water. Claire screamed as she rolled Cheryl over and saw her torn naked body with the large handle of a knife standing out from her chest.

Chapter 29

Merrill stared at the set of plans he had sprawled out across the side table of his office. The pit they had dug over the past months seemed much larger than he had anticipated. He knew the hole would be big but he hadn't really had a clue how much rock and gravel three acres twenty feet deep really held. Fortunately the contour of the land accounted for part of it. The temporary mountain they had created still seemed unfathomable. But the more he triple checked his measurements they came out the same, almost 100,000 cubic yards. They needed half of the rock and gravel for fill and building the driveways and would need to reuse the top soil but that still left about 3,700 dump truck loads to move out and another 200 truck loads of additional top soil to be brought in.

It was fortunate indeed that they had been able to find someone only a few miles away who would pay for the gravel and they had contracted four trucks. But even with that the estimated completion for the movement had been four months, six when you added in the digging of the well, the septic and the construction of the almost half mile of road.

He could hardly believe they were almost done with the preparation phase of the project. The twenty foot deep chasm had been actually completed yesterday. The hole was impressive indeed. By next week they would be starting to set forms and the crew already had to direct trucks delivering wood and steel. The place was getting chaotic.

Merrill also had to deal with the people in town who were full of questions. Of course they were pleased the government had decided to put research facilities close to their town. Most of the people in the area were very interested in any causes that involved protecting the environment. But the townsfolk seemed to think that the amount of excavation was needed for the venture was strangely excessive. MPI Ltd. had issued a press release explaining that much of their geo-tech work had to be subterranean and that had relieved much of the attention. The rest should go away now that most of the earthwork was done.

Merrill was thankful Jan had taken on her responsibilities with as much enthusiasm as he had. She had worked miracles with her association with the town council keeping the facility from becoming the subject of local urban legend. She was involved with the town's schools and was writing articles for the local paper as well. Her involvement had freed Merrill to do the project management for the site.

He got up from the drafting board and walked to the opposite end of the single wide mobile home they were using as a construction shed. Grant's idea of making the center of the unit a large lunchroom and keeping the kitchen intact was brilliant. The building had been a lifesaver when the days had been so hot during the months before. The solar powered air-conditioning had provided the workers a place to cool off and now its gas heater gave the men a warm retreat from the cold mornings. It also provided Merrill a place to work and keep an eye on the operation.

Richard, the architect, drove up just as Merrill reached the kitchen to re-fill his coffee. Merrill couldn't believe Grant had found this guy. He had been sent out to run the show at the suggestion of Rusty, Grant's ex-boss in the Bureau. They had needed someone to help them design the facility and that person had to be used to working on classified projects. Grant had heard a rumor that Richard had helped with the building of some facilities in Area 51 but of course that was information he wasn't willing to confirm or deny.

"Hi guy, how's it going?" Richard asked as he came in the front door.

"Going well," said Merrill. "Want some coffee? It's only about an hour old."

"Sounds great! I have the final revisions for the cement work for you to see and the new plans for the air and power systems. I also made up a rendering of the grounds."

The two of them sat down at one of the six lunch tables and Richard spread out new plans. Richard showed him the color rendering that gave the overall view of the Retreat from above the facility when done. There were three houses and a barn all facing the center from the four directions with a fountain in the center. The walkways between the buildings were curved in roughly a circle and then additional walkways from the front of each building forming spokes ending at a pond in the center. The overall effect was the astronomical symbol for the earth.



In the center of the pond would be a replica of The Birth of Venus by Sandro Botticelli. The naked goddess standing on her shell would symbolically act as guardian over the facility. A driveway made up a second circle surrounding the

entire complex was be topped with a mixture of cobblestones and a kind of acrylic that Richard assured would be both aesthetic and extremely durable, even in the snow. Merrill nodded in approval.

"I also have the materials for the battery cores on their way. The new design incorporates better access to the piles so installing replacement cells will be easier than replacing the batteries in your car."

"How often will we have to change them?" Merrill looked concerned. He knew that he would have to learn some new skills for maintaining the facility but he didn't want to have to mess with that level very often.

"The core should be replaced completely over a period of about five years. I'll give you a rotation plan. The batteries should provide a very low maintenance system. The solar panels for the entire facility will be on the roofs of the houses and barn with a second set on the side of the canyon just as we talked about. I was able to find a new version of the ones we use in Nevada that are dark brown and non-reflective. They shouldn't even show from the sky when we are done. I have the set for the canyon on their way so we can get rid of the generators in another six weeks.

"Wow! That puts us almost two weeks ahead of schedule."

"We're more than that actually. I sent the plans for the three houses to a company up in Oregon and they are going to pre-make them out of styrofoam core panels. They will be far superior for energy efficiency and since they are prefabricated, the houses will be up in three weeks using their crew for that part of the construction. That knocks about a month off the time and the panels are ready whenever we are. Of course by the time they get here the hole will already just look like a cleared field. The house entrances to the facility will already be poured as the foundation and they know the houses have cellars. In fact, I had them make a double thick floor for the barn. That should eliminate any noise from the shooting range."

Merrill looked shocked. "Are you telling me that we will be ready for landscaping in four months?"

"Actually, I've got the central plaza already planned now too. Since that will be the beginning of spring, I was able to find a hydro-seeding company to put in the lawns on right after the houses are sided, the sprinkler system installed and the walkways are bricked. So, you just let the grass grow in for three months and you can start putting in what ever other features you want after that. Of course I'm not finishing your personal gardens but the replacement trees will be planted near the buildings and outside the driveway ring."

"I can't believe it," Merrill laughed. "I might as well pack up my project management program and go home."

“No, you’ve done a hell of a job so far, this just means I have a shit load of changes for you. It isn’t going to happen if I don’t have the schedule to work from. But figure in about four months the houses will be finished. I’ll still be working on the labs and underground fixtures for about six months after that. That’s the part that gets interesting as far as I’m concerned. By the way, do you know when Sarah is supposed to get up here? I want to go over some of the specs with her.”

“You know? I haven’t heard yet. They were still in Europe when I talked to Grant last week. He said they might be back as soon as next week but they were having too much fun wandering around in Florence so they may be a bit longer.”



After going over the plans, Richard went out to talk to his crew and Merrill began updating the new project changes to his ongoing plan. He always dreaded making changes to the list of contingencies. Microsoft Project seemed to have its own ideas whenever he tried to re-link and re-calculate. After two hours of tweaking, he finally had a plan that seemed to work. Richard was right, he thought, they would be able to move in July.

He had just saved his file and was printing it out for Richard when his cell phone rang. He looked at the display. It was Jan. “Hi! I haven’t talked to you all day. How did it go in the council meeting?”

“Really well, actually, they are going to put in a request to the state for assistance to add another wing onto the grade school and they have decided to add a fair next summer to try to increase trade. From the plan they showed us, it looks really fun. If the idea takes off, we might be able to set up a booth to do some readings. When I told the council that we did Tarot readings for fun, they got really excited about the idea. But, that isn’t why I called.”

“What’s up?”

“I got a call from Grant a few minutes ago. He and Sarah are headed home. They got a call from Rusty and something is up. He suggested that we try to do some readings tonight and see what we may be up against.”

“That’s strange. I thought he said that he wasn’t going to take any business until we got the Retreat finished. Things must be pretty urgent for him to come home from Italy in a hurry.”

Merrill looked at his watch. “Tell you what, its 3:30 now, I’ll head out of here and see you back at the house in about fifteen minutes and I can update you on what’s going on here too.”

“Sounds good” Sarah replied. Does Subway sound ok for dinner? I really don’t feel like cooking tonight and it sounds like you’re tired too.”

Merrill's stomach began growling with the suggestion of food and he realized that he hadn't eaten since early that morning. "Great, you want me to pick 'em up or are you going to?"

"I can. I'm close to there anyway."

"Ok," I'll see you in a few minutes."

Merrill hung up and went out to find Richard talking with his lead man.

"Richard, I'm taking off now, apparently you should be able to talk to Sarah sometime this week. They're on their way in."

Chapter 30

"I'm sorry we have to leave so suddenly," Grant said softly to Sarah who lay cuddled up to him on the soft bed of their hotel. He seemed to be apologizing to himself as much as to her.

"It's ok," Sarah replied in an equally soft voice. "It's not like we haven't had a wonderful honeymoon. I mean, how many people can spend a month in South America, a month in Scotland, a month in Ireland, another two months wandering around the rest of Western Europe and then a month in Tuscany. I think it's time to go home."

"I suppose, but the Retreat won't be ready for another six months."

"And don't you think you should give Merrill a hand with that?"

"No, he needs to feel that he has worth. Besides, from what Richard has told me, Merrill is doing ten times the job I could ever hope to do. I hope you realize how lucky we were to find those two."

"You don't need to tell me," said Sarah. "Both Jan and Merrill have been a real delight."

"And as you know," Grant injected, "they postponed their wedding so that they could move into the new home he is building for her right after the wedding. I really don't want to take any of the wind from his sails."

She looked into Grant's dark eyes. They were eyes that showed both compassion and wisdom that made her want to melt right into him. She had never felt so complete until they had found each other. The fact that they had also found the two psychics at the same time was life changing.

"We better get some sleep," said Grant as he leaned over and turned off the lamp that sat on the bed-side table. "Tomorrow's going to be a long day with our flight leaving at 7:00 AM."

He turned his head to kiss her and the shifting of his body brought them into a full embrace and as always, a kiss was not enough to say good-night.



4:00 AM came too early for either of them. Since they had been vacationing for six months neither of them was used to any hours earlier than 10:00 unless it was to go to bed after a very late evening.

Grant had gone out onto the terrace to have his morning smoke and coffee while Sarah took a shower and half way through he joined her to scrub her back and enjoy their morning play. He loved the way she looked. The soft light skin that formed curves that never failed to entice him. She was almost a foot shorter than him and he loved the way she would pull him close and kiss his chest. They had just begun what had become their morning ritual when Sarah pulled away.

"No time for that this morning," she said. "Let me wash your back and I have to get ready to go. We have a plane to catch, remember."

Grant sighed and turned around to feel her soft but slightly abrasive strokes with the wash cloth. Life is good, he thought.

By 6:00 AM they were at the airport and checked in and were having breakfast. Grant missed the fact that he could no longer get them on flight as security, but Rusty had arraigned for them to have first class seats even on such short notice. After all it was Bureau business that was bringing them home so soon.

One advantage of being in first class was that they had room to play Cribbage. The game was one of those mutual interests that neither of them had known about the other before they got married. Neither of them had played in years but they had found a beautifully carved board when they were in the Netherlands and both of them were drawn to the design and later the game. So they had spent much of the flight to Los Angeles playing or sleeping.

"Two," said Sarah as she put down her first card. "Now that we are in flight, do you want to tell me a little about what's going on?"

"Twelve." Grant laid down the Jack of Spades. "Rusty really didn't tell me too much. Probably because the lines weren't secure. He said he would send information by courier to the house.

"Fifteen for two," Sarah said as she laid down a three and pegged two points.

"Eighteen for two," Grant laid down another three and pegged two more. "He did say that there was a situation that concerned the Center of Disease Control in Seattle of all places considering what we just went through up there."

"Twenty-one for six," Sarah set down her three, took the points and looked

up at him. "I wonder what they found that would cause alarm with the CDC." She looked concerned. "I hate to think we are working with an epidemic of some kind."

"Thirty-one for two, you want some coffee?" Grant was getting up to go to the serve yourself beverage center.

"Actually, see what they have for juice. Grapefruit would be nice if there is any."

While he was gone, Sarah stared out the window overlooking the clouds and thinking about the infectious disease preparedness classes she had taken the year before. She knew how ugly a breakout of almost any kind could be. And she imagined the situation would have to be pretty severe for the Bureau to get them involved.

Grant came back with his coffee and her juice. "I hate these flights," he said. "It's gonna be another six hours before I can have a cigarette."

"Well, I think you should think about quitting anyway," Sarah said. "Now that I have found you I would hate to lose you to those things. It's not like I haven't had to cut open smokers. I know what damage smoking does."

"I'll consider it," Grant said with a solemn look on his face. "I've tried before you know. It's not an easy thing to do. Merrill didn't make it either."

"I know and I'm sorry," she said. "I just worry about you. That's all."

"I'm not much in the mood for Cribbage just now," Grant said. "You mind if we pick up on the game later?"

"That's fine. I want to read some of this book that Jan sent me anyway." She pulled out the hard bound she had stuffed in her carry on. On the cover was a water color drawing of a hiker looking over the hills of Northern California with that special lime green color that only comes in spring back dropped with a bright orange sunset. The title of the book was 'The Fifth Sacred Thing' by Starhawk. "She told me that the story is a fictional adventure that demonstrates some of the philosophy she and Merrill believe in and some incidences of practical magick."

"Sounds good, let me read it when you're done."

Grant pulled out his own book, 'A Thief of Time' by Tony Hillerman.

Neither of them completed a chapter before sleep took them and they didn't wake until the steward woke them for coffee prior to landing. Grant looked at his watch. He was amazed that it was 2:30 PM on Friday afternoon.

"I hope you don't mind helicopters," Grant said as Sarah took her first sip.

She looked at him questioningly, as if to say 'What are you talking about?'

"Rusty knew we would be getting in here in the late afternoon on a Sunday and that there were no reasonable flights to get us near Klamath, so he arranged for a copter to fly us up there. The flight's only about three hours, so we should

be up as far as Eureka by there around 7:00 or 7:30, Merrill's going to pick us up there. So, we should be home about 8:30."

"Wow, I figured we'd be going up to San Jose and driving up. That wouldn't get us there until tomorrow afternoon at best."

Grant looked at Sarah realizing that she was wearing a silk blouse that clung enticingly to her appealing curves, well fitting Capri pants and healed sandals. She looked just edible.

"There is one slight hitch though," he said grinning.

"What's that?"

"The helicopter is a cargo ship. You know, one of those big Chinooks." Sarah looked at him questioningly.



Merrill and Jan watched as the large dual-roped helicopter set down at Eureka Airport and the line of troops came out of the side door facing them. Finally they saw Grant and Sarah carefully step down and out. They were halfway ducking needlessly from the slowing blades while followed by two corporals with their bags. Sarah and Jan hugged then spread apart to look at each other while Grant and Merrill shook hands. "Damn, it's good to see you," said Merrill. "How was your trip home?"

After they had secured the luggage and all climbed into the black Kia van with Grant sharing the front with Merrill. Sarah started to recap her experience with the helicopter.

"He could have warned me that we were going to catch a ride with a troop movement carrier."

She looked at Grant who was smirking which made her laugh. "Those guys must have undressed me with their eyes a thousand times during that three hour trip."

"I can't help it if you look so hot," said Grant. "You should be flattered."

Sarah winked at Jan. "Well actually I was," she paused. "But it was still embarrassing!"

They all contained their tears from laughter then Grant asked how the Retreat was coming along.

"I really think you're going to like it. Richard and I had to make some design decisions that I wished we could have asked you about, but really I think you're going to love how the place is turning out. Plus, we are running about two months ahead of schedule."

"I hope you are at a point where Richard can go forward without you for

awhile,” said Grant. “We may be busy on other fronts for a bit.”

“We figured as much,” said Merrill. “A courier came by yesterday with a package for you. The box is marked confidential.”

“I was expecting it. Rusty said there was plenty for us to go over.”

Grant looked at Merrill to see his expressions. “Did you do a reading for us?”

Merrill cringed slightly. “Yeah, and it looks like things are going to get plenty complicated. I couldn’t get too much from the reading except that it looks like we will be doing some traveling and there is going to be a lot of confusion. Not very helpful I know, but right now that is all I have.”

“I tried it too,” said Jan. “I felt blocked somehow and really couldn’t get anything.”

“Blocked?” Sarah asked. She looked at Jan like she didn’t understand.

“Think of a block like someone cut the phone line and no matter how you try, your call is not going through.”

“What could do that?”

“That’s a really good question,” said Jan. She looked perplexed. “I haven’t experienced anything quite like it since I was a teenager trying to learn how to control my ability. So either I’m being blocked by something or the future has too many open possibilities and none are significantly stronger than the others. It’s fairly rare but I have heard of it happening.”



Grant and Sarah had never seen the house other than the pictures the realtor had shown them prior to them buying the property. The house was larger than either of them had imagined with an impressive kitchen and large living room. While Jan assembled the light dinner she had prepared earlier, Merrill showed them their room. They were happily surprised to find that the bedroom was a large 16 X 18 feet. Merrill and Jan had picked out a beautiful antiques black steel frame bed and oak furniture with bright rust colored curtains and bedding. Grant and Sarah agreed that they could not have done better themselves.

Merrill explained that the house had been custom built and that there were essentially two master bedrooms and that even the smaller rooms, now set up as offices, were large.

Sarah had done the office design, each with two adequately lit work stations complete with computers that Merrill had built by ordering separate components. Merrill explained that he had built four of them all the same with built in wireless cards so that when they move into the Retreat he could set up a central network server. The four were already networked and they could establish shared files.

"You never cease to amaze me Merrill." Grant laughed, "Is there anything you don't do?"

"I don't do windows." Merrill said and grinned.

The four of them sat down at the round dining table to eat the quiche and salad Jan had prepared. After eating, Grant opened the large padded envelope that had been delivered the day before and took out the contents.

There was a compact disc and a gold engagement ring with a small diamond.

Grant examined the disc and saw that on the label was written a series of numbers. 3-105-33-6.

"What are the numbers?" asked Merrill. "Is that some kind of code?"

"Exactly," Grant said as he picked up the disc and ring and stood up. "Let's go into our office and try out the computer you made for me."

The four of them went into the office on Grant and Sarah's end of the house and Grant took his place on the well padded computer chair and turned on the computer. The others took seats across from him. Grant rotated the large gas plasma screen so they all could see and the surface lit up immediately. Within a few seconds the desk-top appeared. "Nice machine," he smiled in approval. He inserted the disk and a prompt appeared asking for a password. "Hold on a sec," he said as he got up, went to him and Sarah's bedroom and returned with a book.

"The first number says what book to use. In this case it's 'The Spy Who Came in from the Cold' by John Le Carré'. The second is the page number, let's see." He turned to page 105. "The next is the line and then finally the word." He counted down to line 33, counted across 6 and then turned to the keyboard and typed 'philosophies'.

The computer whirled for less than a second when an Acrobat file opened and displayed a letter from Rusty. The letter explained there had been a biological attack on the water-supply on an area outside the small towns of Orting and South Prairie in Washington State. The CDC had been able to keep the story from the media until the victims were isolated. There was a flu warning posted as a cover and thanks to the quick response of the locals the danger had been contained. They had already located the source which was a local well that served about thirty homes which had been poisoned by a member of the community.

They were being asked to work the case because the strain of blue-green algae was a genetically engineered strain that was almost 90% lethal. There had already been 45 deaths and the incident had now reached the media providing more fuel for the already increasing terrorism hysterics. The woman who had put the algae into the well and then killed herself had apparently been drugged. The barbiturates used on her were designer drugs that were not in the records. Included on the disc were the police records, toxicology reports for Sarah to evaluate,

maps showing the impact areas and pictures provided from the crime scenes. A ring from the perpetrator / victim was enclosed for the psychics to use. Rusty hoped this would give them a good starting point.

"Print me a copy of the tox reports," said Sarah. "I need to learn more about this."

"Merrill. You and Jan take this," Grant handed him the ring. "See what you can learn about the woman. I'm going to read through the police reports. I hate to say this but we are going to have to take a drive up there tomorrow. If we leave around 4:00 AM we can be there by about 1:00 in the afternoon. We can call ahead and see if we can get into the crime scene then."

"Ok, I guess Jan and I better get some things together."

Chapter 31

The drive had been long and wet by the time they passed Fort Lewis and turned onto the 512 freeway. The ever-present gray was a far different scene than they had experienced the previous spring. "The map shows we should be able to see Mt. Rainier from here," Sarah said. She was looking off to the east. "It's amazing that something that big can just disappear."

"What I can't get over is how everything close to the freeway looks," said Jan. "The trees are all gone and it looks desolate with old buildings, cement and dirt. Then there are all those green trees in the distance. It looks like someone had taken what was obviously once a beautiful landscape and ripped it away. It's bad enough that people treat the land with such disrespect but then to leave the area in such disrepair showed no sign of caring at all. It makes me want to cry."

After about ten minutes the area looked more maintained and new buildings appeared on all sides. There was a large mall, houses and apartments that had been nestled between the trees and only the main arteries were clear cut. Then they passed over the city of Puyallup on the freeway and could see that the city's showplace was the State Fair Ground. There were signs directing people to the facility everywhere and she could see the enclosed barns and even the huge roller-coaster and Ferris-wheel from the height of the overpass. Merrill followed the freeway to the right and there were signs showing the turn-off to Orting. He took the next exit and turned onto a two lane highway.

"This reminds me of when we were up here before," Jan said, I think it was on that island."

“Bainbridge Island?” Merrill asked.

“That’s it. What reminds me of it is all the trees. But it seems like this is a lot more broken up by farms and fields of berry vines.”

They crossed a river and entered a small valley. Here the land changed again. “This is really sad,” She said. “You can see where this used to be beautiful but people have cleared off all of the trees and now the area is solid with housing developments. See, those are still under-construction.”

“What you’re identifying here,” said Merrill, “Is a process of destruction that has been a disease of the entire Seattle-Tacoma Basin for as long as I can remember, though it has become much worse over the past fifteen years or so. They slowed it down for a long time by restricting the land use to no smaller than ten acres. But obviously that changed.”

He looked at Jan. She had tears running down her cheeks. “Why couldn’t they be satisfied with the land near the cities? Then everyone could have enjoyed it out here.” Merrill put his arm around her.

They passed through the center of Orting. “This little town looks like it has been here forever. And look how clean it is. Couldn’t they have just allocated some of the land for some apartments and left the outer areas alone?”

Once through town the countryside became wooded again. There were the occasional dairy farms and roadside pull offs for fishing and there was a bike trail that followed the highway going in and out of view into the forest. After another five miles they turned off on a private dirt road and were stopped a few yards down by a local sheriff who, after looking at Grants credentials, waved them through.

They continued down the dirt road that led them behind some dairy farms and came to a dead end. The home stood there by itself surrounded on two sides by trees with the front facing a dairy farm. On the far side was a torn up circle in the road large enough to turn a large truck around.

“I would have known we were in the right place even if there weren’t crime scene tapes or the white government car parked in the driveway,” Merrill said. “I can sense of a lot of confusion emanating from that house.”

They went into the pre-manufactured home and were greeted by a man who introduced himself to Grant. The carpet squished under their feet as they were led from the living room into the kitchen.

“I don’t understand what I’m feeling,” said Jan. “First there was a sudden sense of euphoria and then a wave of fear and then anguish. The feelings are really intense.”

“She was found right there,” the officer said.

Sarah knelt down and could still make out the pink stains on the now dry

linoleum.

"The report said that the knife wound was self-inflicted," Grant said looking up at the deputy.

"Damnedest thing I've ever seen, she apparently had buried the knife all the way to the hilt into her chest." The sheriff seemed uncomfortable and looked at the two ladies that were also looking at him. He coughed slightly then added, "She had been running around outside nude. Some of the neighbors in the trailer across the way saw her. She'd been out there dancing with blood all over her. They said the scene was really bizarre."

"Show me where the well is," said Grant.

"I can't," the deputy said apologetically. "We'd need bio-suits to go in there. The CDC has the area all sealed off."

Jan saw the robe lying on the floor on the far side of the island. "Is this where this was found?" she asked.

"Yes, we were told except for what the forensic team needed was to be left as it was found."

Jan picked up the still soaked robe and then suddenly reached out for Merrill with her other hand. She was pale and shook slightly. Merrill realized what was happening and instantly grounded himself as energy began to pass from her to him and then out. Then after only a few moments, Jan dropped the robe.

"We need to talk," she said looking at the others.

"Will you excuse us a few minutes?" Grant directed his question to the deputy who nodded with a look of wonder and went into the other room.

"I don't know if this adds much to what we already have, but I can confirm that Cheryl was not herself when she did all of this, in fact she hadn't been for several days. I saw her put what-ever it was into the well." Jan looked up thoughtfully, "They looked like little plastic pillows with powder inside. I don't think she knew what they were. That may not be much but it's a lot more than I picked up from that ring. I still don't think she wore the ring."

"Ok," said Grant. "Everyone take a quick look around for anything else that might have been overlooked. I'm going to see if I can find anything else out from the neighbors. After that I think we should head over to Puyallup. They've got the rest of the victims over at the hospital there. Maybe they've learned more about the disease she spread."

Jan went into the bedroom and looked around for anything personal that Cheryl may have been wearing or kept near her. There didn't seem to be anything that stood out. But the energy in the back rooms seemed overwhelming, especially in the bedroom. 'Strange,' she thought, 'there aren't even any clothes left out. Not even in the hamper.'

When Grant returned, Jan asked him if there had been any jewelry on the body when the woman was taken in.

“Nothing was listed, but we can check when we talk to the coroner.”

Grant pulled everyone together; neither Merrill nor Sarah had any better luck than Jan. “I talked to a couple of guys living in the trailer across the street,” he said. “They were from Mexico and only one of them spoke English, but he was able to translate well enough. Two of them were there when she got home the night before. They noticed a van drive up, park in the driveway and then leave about ten minutes later. Supposedly this wasn’t the first time she had come home late with someone else. But they thought that it was odd because they had seen the same van drive through and turn around a couple of times during the week before. That morning they saw her in the street dancing in the nude.”

“How come *they* weren’t poisoned by the water?” asked Merrill.

“That farm has its own well.”



They arrived at Good Samaritan Hospital at about 4:00 PM and were directed to an isolation ward. There were twenty-four residents in the ward by this time. Fortunately some of the houses had been occupied by snow birds that had safely migrated to locations like Palm Desert for the winter before the attack. Several households had been literally wiped out. The residents of the ward were those who lived in the homes affected that either didn’t show symptoms and presumably hadn’t drank the water or those who were resistant to the toxin and whose symptoms were controllable. There were only two non-resident victims, both were boys who had stopped by a friend’s house after school. Both had died.

Sarah talked to the nurse in charge and then left with her to see to the resident doctor. When she returned she shook her head. “I’ve never seen anything like this before,” she said. “The victims took on symptoms of high fever and violent tremors within a few hours of ingestion and then died from heart failure very shortly after that. This is could be very nasty because the neurotoxin it is producing can kill through skin contact as well as ingestion.”

“What about further contamination?”

“That’s another weird part. The blue-green algae aren’t really algae, they’re kind of a cross between algae and bacteria but neither, having the advantage of photosynthesis and motility. The most commonly known incidence is the dinoflagellates that cause Red Tide. Who ever did this limited its impact by using the well. There wasn’t enough light exposure in the well to allow it to grow freely and all of these houses are on local septic so we were able to contain the problem.”

“Do the doctors know anything about the narcotics that were found in the blood stream of Cheryl Tyler?”

“No, we’re going to have to talk to the coroner to find out more on that.”

“While you were in the other office I tried to call both the coroner and the detective in charge. We have appointments with both of them tomorrow at 9:00 AM and I have an appointment to talk to Cheryl’s sister at 1:00. Till then I suggest we try to get some rest.”



The four of them had checked into a Holiday Inn, only about a mile from the hospital. Neither Merrill nor Jan had thought that they might want to swim but the indoor pool looked very inviting. Besides, there was no one else using the facility. They walked the three blocks to the South Hill Mall and went shopping for swim wear. Unlike California however, they found that no one seemed to carry swim suits in February. They had fun wandering through the shops but returned to the motel empty handed. Merrill picked up the phone and dialed the number for Grant and Sarah’s room. “Hey, Grant. What do you want to do about dinner?”

“I dunno,” said Grant groggily. “I don’t know the area down here at all.”

“We noticed that there was an Olive Garden Restaurant a couple of blocks down. How does that sound?”

Grant woke Sarah up from her nap and forty-five minutes later they were at dinner.

Chapter 32

“Well, that was a total waste of time,” said Sarah. “Aside from getting this necklace for Jan to look at I got nothing at all that I didn’t already know. They don’t even have their own lab. They shipped everything off to Seattle and don’t expect to have any further results until late next week.”

“The sheriff wasn’t much better,” Grant replied. He sounded totally disgusted. “Once the Agency got involved, they just dropped the case. The only thing I did find out was that her car had been impounded as abandoned from a tavern parking lot two days before she was found.”

The sheriff’s department and coroner’s offices had been next to each other in the heart of downtown Puyallup near the commuter train station. Grant drove the

van the two blocks onto Meridian Avenue to go up to South Hill. There was very little traffic going through town and in front of the Fair Grounds. He guessed that this was a typical week day for Puyallup. Being Tuesday everyone left the area to go to work elsewhere.

"I did get a chance to take a look at Cheryl's body," said Sarah. "That lady took a lot of damage getting in and out of that well site. Nothing that would have killed her, but the scrapes and tears on her skin would have been very painful. The other thing that I noticed was bruising on one of her wrists and some tape residue. She apparently had been connected to an I.V. shortly before her death. That's probably how they were administering the drugs."

"I hope we have better luck with the sister," Grant said shaking his head. "As it is, we shouldn't have bothered to drive up here. I called the CDC and they still can't figure out why the strain of algae is producing such a powerful toxin. But they did say that the barbiturates used on Cheryl Tyler had been modified to maximize hallucinatory and paranoia side effects."

A few minutes later they reached the motel. "It's about noon," Sarah said as they got out of the van. "I have to meet Jan at her room. We have to be up in Seattle by two to meet Cheryl's sister Claire."

"Before you two leave, let's have Jan take a look at that necklace you have. Who knows, maybe it will give us something more to work with."

When they reached Merrill and Jan's room and knocked, Merrill answered the door. "Shhh." Merrill put his finger to his lips and then pointed at Jan who was sitting on the floor in trance. "She's working with the ring again," he whispered.

They quietly entered and all three sat on the bed and waited. Jan seemed unaware of their presence. She was sitting in a full lotus position with her peasant skirt spread around her creating a circle. She held her back and head straight with her hands crossed in her lap. Her breathing was slow and deep, her eyes were closed. Her slight body seemed in complete bliss and her natural beauty that caused all of them to be drawn toward her was enhanced even further by an aura that even Grant thought he could detect. For both Merrill and Sarah her energy looked full, white and extended several feet from her body.

"I wish I knew how she did that," Sarah whispered to Merrill.

"Its nothing you couldn't do with about ten years of practice," he replied quietly.

Jan took a full cleansing breath and then reached her arms high above her head causing all of them to sigh with her majesty. Then her aura shrunk to just surround her, she was back. She looked around.

"Hi!" she said with a smile and spun around to face them. I know about the ring now. It was an engagement ring. She had broken off with the guy a few years

ago and hadn't worn it since. That's why I couldn't pick anything up off of the ring before. She just didn't have any connection to it."

"That makes sense," said Grant. "My guess is that Rusty had one of his people grab a piece of jewelry from her case not knowing the importance of the item being something she used all of the time. See what you get from this."

He took the necklace from Sarah and handed it to Jan who held the chain in her gently closed hand and closed her eyes. Her aura leapt out again but this time showing signs of reds, yellows and blues. Her body tightened and then she seemed to sway like a snake as if to some unheard music. Her hand tightened around its treasure until her knuckles started to turn white. The motions became more deliberate and intensified until she was almost vibrating then her eyes opened wide, she dropped the necklace and her aura again collapsed.

She dropped her head and closed her eyes as if trying to recapture all that she had experienced and began to speak in a slow voice that was hardly her own.

"She met him at a tavern. He was attractive, blond... no dark-haired but with white tips. He wore a large ruby ring on his right hand. He had offered to buy her a beer. After she joined him at his table, she became dizzy. The next thing she remembered was being afraid, there were giant snakes and spiders surrounding her, she was trapped for hours. Her only way to avoid being attacked was to complete her mission. Then she would be free. She didn't know what her mission was."

"Could you see his face?" asked Grant.

"No, the only thing I could see clearly was the hair and the ring," Jan said as she opened her eyes once more and looked up. "I'm afraid that is all I got. Though I did get the feeling she was under the influence of something and was kept that way for several days."

"That seems to go along with what we have heard so far," Grant observed. "I don't think there will be any reason to talk to the sister. I think you just got anything we might have learned from her." He looked around and saw everyone nodding in approval. "I'll call and cancel the meeting with Claire. I'm not quite sure what our next step is. We could go to the tavern in Orting this evening and maybe pick up some information that will help make sense of this. Someone there may remember seeing her or her abductor."

Grant looked over at Merrill. "Wanna beer?"

"That's a great idea," said Sarah. "While you two are doing that, Jan and I can go shopping."

She looked at Jan and grinned to find her grinning back. The dim-lit tavern was typical of most. A bar, a few tables and a partially separated section with two pool tables a glossy-topped shuffleboard table, a few arcade games and the ever

present acrid odor of spilt beer and stale cigarette smoke. The only major difference was that the room was almost empty. The lack of customers seemed strange, even for a Tuesday. There were a couple of guys sitting at the bar talking and sipping on beer and the bar tender. Grant and Merrill were the only others and they sat at a corner table where they could observe.

"What can I get you two?" the slender bartender asked as he approached the table.

"We'd like a couple of schooners and a little information," answered Grant while lighting up a cigarette. After putting away his lighter, he reached into the inside pocket of his corduroy jacket and pulled out a picture of Cheryl that they had printed out from the information diskette. "You recognize this lady?"

The bartender took the picture and held it up to one of the accent lights to get a better look. "Sure, that's Cheryl, she's a regular here. She hasn't been in for almost two weeks though."

"Do you remember when you saw her in here last?" Grant asked.

"Sure," he said. "The night it snowed. That would have been a week ago Thursday. I remember because by the time I got out of here, the roads were a real mess and I have to drive up the hill toward Graham. The hill up by the cemetery was really nasty that night."

"You know if she met with anyone?"

"There were a couple of strangers, the one younger guy sat right there where you are sitting and the other guy was back there playing on a machine. When Cheryl came in the guy here showed real interest and asked her to join him. Less than half an hour later the three of them left. She was being real friendly with the guy, leaning into him, seemed kinda outta character for her." The man said the last part through his teeth.

"Did you get a good look at the guys?"

"In this light I never get a great look, but I can tell you that the younger guy had dark brown hair, a little bit longer than an average flat top with the tips bleached out. Looked kinda weird to me, but it's been a style lately. He was about 6' and was wearing a jacket kinda like what you have on." He was looking at Grant. "It was cut about the same but the cord was charcoal instead of tan and he was wearing it with blue jeans and some kind of light colored polo shirt. He looked like he worked out all the time. The older guy had balding gray hair and was a good four inches shorter and about average build. Looked like a banker in his three piece suit. Don't usually have people in here wearing a tie."

"Anything else," Grant prompted.

"Yeah, when they were leaving I noticed they had been parked right out front. They were driving a big Dodge Van. You know the kind some of the

contractors use with the rack on top. The van was either dirty gray or green. Hard to tell with those old florescent lights out there. The rig seemed really out of place with those two. Oh, and it had outta state plates. Not sure which though, they just didn't look like the normal ones?"

"Thanks."

"You know anything about Cheryl? Not like her not to drop by at least once a week, hope she's ok."

Grant looked up at the bartender and sighed. "Sorry to be the one with bad news, but Cheryl killed herself the Monday after you saw her. We're trying to figure out why."

The bartender looked like he was sorry that he had asked. Then he nodded and wandered back after the beers.

"Well, that goes along with what Jan had told us," said Merrill lighting a cigarette, his second. He seemed to enjoy the fact that he could sit and smoke inside. That was something you couldn't do in California aside from a personal residence. That was why when he and Grant designed the homes and living facilities in the core, they had included highly vented smoking rooms. Neither of them liked the smell of smoke in the house.

The bartender returned with two glasses and a pitcher. "Sorry, I forgot what I was doing and filled this. I'll just charge you for the schooners." He looked like he was on the edge of tears. "Too bad about Cheryl, she was a nice lady."

He went back behind the bar and Grant and Merrill looked at each other. "Seems there was more to this than we knew about," Merrill said sadly and took a gulp of his beer. "I hate things like this."

"I know," Grant replied, "But I better pass on the descriptions to the Sheriff and to Rusty but it's too late to do that now."

Grant looked at his watch. "It's nearly 6:30 back there and I know he had a meeting tonight."

Grant's cell phone began to vibrate in his pocket. "I have a call. You stay here and enjoy your beer." He got up and pulled out his cell phone while he walked to the door.

"Forrester."

"This is Rusty, how is your investigation going?"

"We've been running down leads, not much to report though other than we have a description of the culprits. I was going to send you an e-mail with that."

"Well, you better pack up and head south. There has been another attack in southern California this time and a much larger target."

Grant's voice became concerned. "Where was it and how many people are we talking about?"

“Down at Lake Elsinore in Riverside County. The police got to the perpetrator only minutes after she killed herself and we had our bulletin out so they knew what we were looking for. We had to cut water service and close down the lake as a precaution.”

“Wouldn’t it take an awful lot of algae to do anything in a lake that big?”

“That’s part of the problem. We just found out that this strain has been modified for even higher potency and for extremely high reproduction. This thing reproduces itself thousands of times faster than normal.”

“How many people are affected?”

“Fortunately, there are other sources that join in on that water supply but the situation is enough to force the CDC to release a statement about conserving water and close that lake off.”

“How’d you find out about the contamination? It seems to me like you’d have to be pretty lucky to just happen into it.”

“That’s just it,” Rusty said, “It must have been set up that way. The woman was dancing naked on the deck of her boat in broad daylight. It created quite a spectacle for the fishermen that were out there. Then she dumped the contents of an ammo box over the side, yelled out ‘I’m Free’ and stabbed herself through the heart with a fishing knife. Needless to say it’s a media circus there right now.”

“Geez.”

“The story is all over the news in California, by morning it will be national news. You probably better give me those descriptions right away and figure out how you’re going to get down there. If you want I can arrange military transport for you tomorrow morning down to March AFB.” Rusty paused. “Grant, we’ve got some preliminary water samples and they tested negative for the altered blue-green algae which is strange enough but there is also something else. One of the packets she was dumping was on the deck. The packet was full of the algae and there was a second element added to it. We’re not sure what its significance is as yet but it seems to be a kind of dye. That’s all the lab has on it so far. Al Quida is trying to take responsibility saying they wanted to show the US that they could hit us anywhere and any time and of course the media is taking it up as another terrorist attack.”

“Ok, go ahead and send us out of McCord, we’ll be there by 6:00 AM. Can you make room on one of the airships for a van?”

“No, but I’ll have someone else drive it back down to your house for you and arrange for ground transport in Riverside.”

A few minutes later Grant went back inside, sat down at the table and downed half of his beer. He looked frustrated.

“I started to think you got lost,” Merrill said. “What happened?”

“Better drink up, we have to get up early again tomorrow.”

Merrill looked at him strangely but realized he would be told later. He picked up his glass and finished it. “Where to now?”

“Back to the motel, I guess. Hope the ladies aren’t out late.”

Chapter 33

Their flight to March Air Force Base had been much more pleasant than Grant and Sarah’s previous military lift. They flew on a more conventional MD-80 the Air Force was using for relocating personnel from training in Washington.

When they reached California they found Rusty had already arranged for a rental car and they were able to start the hour-long drive to Lake Elsinore almost immediately. Jan was grateful the sedan had air-conditioning. The temperature change from their home to Puyallup had been a little bit of a shock, going from 65 degrees to the low forties, but going from there to the mid-eighties of the California Desert, was more than she could have handled.

“You look tired Jan.” Sarah was sitting behind Merrill and could see Jan’s head drooping. “Are you alright?”

“I suppose.” She yawned. “I guess I’m just not used to traveling.”

Sarah reached up and took her hand in a gesture of giving support.

“You know,” Jan continued, “Before we met a year ago I had never ventured out of the Silicon Valley aside from her occasional trip to San Francisco on the train so this ping-ponging between states seems a little unsettling.”

What she didn’t say was that she wasn’t used to getting up at 3:00 AM for her and Merrill to do their morning ritual. A 6:00 AM flight didn’t mean that they didn’t need to greet the day.

“Thanks Sarah, I’ll be ok.” She squeezed her hand and then let it go. “Hopefully we’ll get a little more sleep tonight.” She looked out of the window. “Hey Sarah, don’t these traffic patterns seemed odd?”

It was just after 11:00 AM on a Wednesday and they were moving easily down Highway 15 just south of Riverside while the northbound lanes were backed up with cars. They weren’t just cars however. There were trucks with personal possessions tied down, vehicles with car-tops or with assorted goods tied down on the roof and they were all full of people.

“That looks like an evacuation,” said Sarah.

“I was a little afraid that would happen,” said Grant. “People are panicking.

There isn't anything to run away from aside from a possible shortage of water, but the mere mention of terrorist attack and they start fleeing the area. You can thank the helpful media for that."

Twenty minutes later they were in the city of Lake Elsinore near the marina. There were few people on the streets but there were cars parked everywhere. Some of the stores had boarded up their windows and the few grocers they passed had large signs in their windows saying they were out of bottled water.

As they approached the marina they saw a large gathering of what seemed to be local residents. Merrill pulled the van to the side of the road so they could take a look. Many of the people were carrying signs denouncing the United States involvement in the Middle East. Voices could be heard yelling over the amplified voice of a man standing at a temporary podium pleading with the crowd to be calm and that everything would be normal in a few days and there was nothing for them to worry about.

Surrounding the man at the podium were a line of police wearing riot control equipment and carrying various forms of non-lethal deterrents. Grant pointed to the outside perimeter where news trucks were positioned with camera crews standing on the roofs with their cameras. "Might as well wave, we're on national television."

"This reminds me of some of the protest rallies back in the sixties and seventies." Merrill replied. "You've got some of the people heading for the hills, some yelling and screaming in contempt and the rest sitting on their hands afraid to get involved."

"Yup, all in the name of religion," Jan said in disgust.

"I don't think any of this is in the name of religion," said Sarah. "I think they do a damn good job of making it seem so, however."

Merrill looked at Sarah wryly. "Follow the money?"

"That would seem like the most reasonable approach to me," said Sarah. "Though I do think we have to put in some effort on the local clues as well in order to figure out what money to follow."

"Ok," said Grant. "Let's go see what we can find out from the coroner and tonight we'll figure out a strategy for other approaches. But I'm pleased that none of you are taking this at face value. Things are almost never so simple."

They drove around the lake to the Sheriff's office and parked. While Grant and Sarah went inside Merrill and Jan went to see what accommodations they could find. They walked two blocks and found a small store and bought a copy of the local paper. They noticed that they were in an older part of town and though some of the buildings had been recently renovated, most looked like run down versions of what probably had been there thirty or forty years before. The

feeling of the area gave them a sense of anxiety, like the area had been through so many crises that they had left their emotional mark on everything.

"Let's walk down the hill so that we can at least see the water. This heat is oppressive."

"I don't think we can get much closer, Jan. The police have all of the access roads blocked off. I don't think they're letting anyone down except for those who have homes there."

"How about that little cafe, it looks like they have a terrace."

"It looks more like a bar, but I suppose it should be ok."

As they walked in, they both felt uneasy. Their bodies became flushed and they could feel goose-bumps rising all over them. They looked at each other and then immediately left.

"What was that about?" asked Jan.

"That's a place where we would never be comfortable. The last time I felt that particular sensation is when I went into a particularly red-neck bar in Everett, Washington wearing my hair below my shoulders." Merrill grinned.

"You had long hair?"

"You're surprised? I was sure I had told you that."

"No," chided Jan and then teasingly said, "I would have remembered. I'll bet you looked cute."

Merrill began to blush slightly and then looked over his shoulder at the tavern entrance. "How about we just go sit on a bench up at that park we saw. It overlooked the water and I think I remember there was a baseball diamond there."

They walked to the park and sat on the bleachers. The air felt cooler with a slight breeze that carried moisture from the lake to help fight the stifling heat.

"Hmm," said Jan. "The ads in this paper would lead me to believe that we are going to have to look outside of town. There really isn't much here unless we intend to go hiking or gambling."

"Well, if you look around that's really what they have here. There are wooded mountains to the west," Merrill pointed across the lake, "and there are barren hills to the east."

"Hey, how about the Capistrano Beach Resort, that's only a little over half an hour from here," Jan said excitedly. "I really would like to get back to the coast. I guess I'm really spoiled from our new home."

Merrill leaned over and kissed her. "That sounds great. You have the number?" he said while pulling out his cell phone. "It's off season so there shouldn't be any problems getting a reservation."

After securing two rooms, they walked back to the Sheriff's department.

They arrived just in time for Grant and Sarah to be coming out. “Any luck?” asked Merrill as they walked up.

“I guess that depends on how you define luck,” said Grant shaking his head. “Seems like if we didn’t have bad luck we wouldn’t have any at all.”

“What happened?” asked Jan as they started toward the car.

“Well, nothing really,” replied Sarah. “That’s the problem. We really don’t have anything new to work with. The M.O. is the same, we have the address of Jennifer Calloway, the woman they found on the boat and the coroner found the same drugs in her system as the last one. The blue-algae are the same, the delivery system is the same with a difference of the dye and really there is nothing else.”

Grant looked frustrated. “The only good thing that came out of today was that Rusty called and faxed us the pictures from the sketch artist they sent to the bar in Orting.” Grant handed them the two pictures.

“What about the boat?” asked Jan?

“It was a 17 foot runabout. Apparently a wave must have hit the hull just as she was dumping the ammo box and one of the packets went inside instead of out,” explained Sarah. “We did get lucky on that. The boat belonged to her, which is how she got on naked, she had her own dock.”

They reached the car and Grant pushed the button to the remote lock. “That’s where we need to go next.”



The house looked like it had been built in the forties and displayed patches of curling paint. The wood on the front door was dried out and the antique brass hardware had tarnished to a dull brown. The yard was sun burnt weeds. “It’s too bad some people don’t know what they have. This place could be really nice if kept up,” observed Merrill.

When they went inside the house was a complete contradiction. Everything was neat, clean, oiled and painted. The floors looked like the carpets had been removed and the wood planking had been sanded, stained and then accented with throw rugs and runners. The furnishings looked modern along with the fixtures and appliances. The building was a fairly small with the inefficient use of space that went with that era, but the owner seemed to have been aware of the limitations and had kept the furniture small. Instead of appearing crowded, the rooms seemed cozy like a beach home.

A set of stairs split the house almost in half with the kitchen and small dining room on the left and a slightly larger living room on the right. The two bedrooms and only bath were on the second floor. Grant and Jan went upstairs to look

while Merrill and Sarah searched the downstairs. "This has already been gone over by the local detectives and crime scene guys of course," said Grant. "So what we are looking for is something unusual that maybe they missed."

Jan opened a closet door that led under the stairs. "Well, my guess is that she has only had the house for about a year and was doing a complete remodel," she said.

"Damn, Jan. Are you getting that good at reading the vibrations of places?"

Jan laughed. "No, I just found a case and a half of exterior paint here in the closet. She hadn't gotten as far as the outside yet."

"Ah, you had me scared for a minute," laughed Grant as he looked through the kitchen. "The detectives got several sets of prints other than the victims but they haven't been able to match them with anyone."

Grant noticed a small ring in a dish near the sink. "Hey Jan, see what you think of this?"

Jan climbed down from standing on the paint box where she'd climbed up to look on the shelf in the closet and went to the kitchen.

"Take a look at this," Grant said as he handed her the ring.

Jan looked at the band and noticed that initials that had been engraved on the oval face were almost worn off. The ring's shape was slightly distorted where the band narrowed. She could tell immediately that very high gold content made the ring soft and that the ring was very old.

"She wouldn't have gone anywhere without this," Jan said as she closed her hand around it and closed her eyes. "This ring belonged to her grandfather. She had taken it off to wash her hands when someone reached around and put something over her face. The next thing she knew she was being hunted by beasts of all kinds and surrounded by gore. She was horrified. She had to get out and there was only one way to be free."

Jan opened her eyes and looked at Grant. She had tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry, that's all I can get."

Grant hugged her in reassurance. Her small body was like a child in his arms. "That's a lot more than we would have had without your talent," he said. As he released her, he took the ring and replaced it in the dish. He looked outside the kitchen window and could see the spot where the boats trailer had sat. "I wonder if they could have missed anything out there."

He walked to the bottom of the stairs and called up. "We're headed outside to take a look."

"Hold on a second," Merrill called back. "Jan. Could you come up here for a second? I think we may have found something."

Jan leapt up the stairs taking two of them at a time.

“What do you have?”

“Sarah noticed that some her personal stuff seemed out of place and I noticed that this side table they were sitting on seems like it’s been moved a little.” Merrill pointed down to the legs of the table. “See, the impressions of the feet don’t match up. To me it looks like someone had set something here and needed to get to the power outlet back there. And, I’m not nearly as good as you are at feeling the energy sources but I feel like there is a lot of anxiety in the room.”

Jan closed her eyes. “Not anxiety, fear. I think they must have done what ever they did to her here.”

“Pretty gutsy doing it right here I would think,” said Sarah.

“Not if they knew that she was here alone all the time,” said Grant. “She was a writer and would seclude herself for sometimes a week at a time. No one would have ever known. Just like the lady in Orting.”

“Yeah,” said Merrill, “I noticed the other bedroom is set up as an office. I wonder if the neighbors saw anything.”

Grant stopped, thought for a moment and then said, “You go check out the back and I’ll go talk to the neighbor, there is only one that is close enough to have noticed anything.”

Chapter 34

The sky was slightly overcast and even though the air was still warm, it was considerably cooler as they arrived in San Juan Capistrano than it had been in Lake Elsinore. For Jan and Merrill it was certainly less oppressive. They had decided to go to their rooms and relax for a few hours before going out to dinner.

Jan was dozing on a chaise lounge that faced the ocean from their third floor motel room balcony. She wore sunglasses and had changed from her normal 14th Century peasant wear to a fully revealing two piece swimming suit. She hadn’t quite gotten used to the feel of having just strings around her back and over her hips. Before going shopping with Sarah, she had never owned a bikini. She and Merrill had tried to find bathing suits in the same mall only the day before but she hadn’t been looking for anything like this. But Sarah had insisted that she looked wonderful.

Sarah had bought one for herself as well. When she tried the suit on and Jan saw how great *she* looked, she decided to give it a try. She loved to be nude in her own privacy or with Merrill, but aside from a few rituals she had attended on

the beach near Golden Gate Park, where they threw down their clothes and ran into the ocean, she had never been so publicly exposed. She was a little self-conscious about the whiteness of her skin but she loved the sense of freedom the lack of clothing gave her.

Merrill came out onto the deck carrying two glasses of iced tea. He stood there momentarily and admired this beautiful woman that had chosen him as her companion. Even though he had seen her many times naked including every morning during ritual, he could hardly take his eyes off of her.

When Jan looked up she almost choked. He was standing over her and although Merrill was not in bad shape for a man in his mid-thirties he was no athlete and didn't quite hold up to the scrutiny of the bathing suit that she and Sarah had to settle on for him.

Since swimming had been completely out of season in Washington, they were forced to go to a sporting goods supply to get suits for Grant and Merrill. The spandex trunks were skin tight and did nothing to hide the outlines that created an obvious bulge that was growing in the front. Fortunately, Merrill seemed happily unaware and in that sense carried himself well.

She reached up for the glass and Merrill sat in one of the chairs and placed his glass on the table. "Did you by chance remember to put my incense in your little ritual bag?"

"Sure," Jan replied and took a sip of tea. "Why do you ask?"

"I've been thinking about something Grant said back at Lake Elsinore."

"What's that?"

"When they came out of the Sheriff's office, he said that we were having nothing but bad luck and it was taking us nowhere."

"I remember that," Jan said sitting up with interest. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that we should maybe do a ritual to change that luck. One of those powders is custom incense called Fast Luck. My spell powders were made by an alchemist in Hollywood. Did I ever tell you about him?"

"No, you said you had some strong blends, but you never told me where you got them."

"His shop is just about a block off of the Avenue of the Stars and most of the Wiccan communities in Southern California get their potions from him. The funny part is that the same group that uses his magick is afraid of him since he's a ceremonial magician and does evocations."

"What?" Jan laughed. "What kind of game does this guy have going on?"

"I dunno," chuckled Merrill, "I buy from him because they seem to work and other than being a little eccentric, I thought he was ok, even though I personally stick to invocation. But he had a very strange relationship with the rest of the

community. He kind of carries a sense of Aleister Crowley with him that I think scares a lot of people.”

“That’s really strange.” Jan said as she leaned back into her lounge. “When do you want to do the ritual?”

“How about now?” Merrill asked, “I noticed that the beach is really empty and the tide is low. That would be a great place to do one.”

Jan sat up again. “Ok, I’ll get my little bag; you get a couple of towels and make sure you have your lighter.”

After a few minutes they were ready. Jan had put on the light wrap that came as a set with the bikini. When Merrill saw her he couldn’t help saying something. “You look wonderful, like someone you might see in Hawaii.” Now that she was standing, he could see how the top accented her small but adequate breasts and the wrap sensually revealed only part of her legs. Unfortunately, the effect on him only exaggerated the problem she already had with his suit.

They walked out onto the covered walkway and down the two flights of stairs that led directly to the beach. For a somewhat overcast day in February, the sand was surprisingly warm on their feet. The air was calm so Merrill decided that they really didn’t need to look for a sheltered area, they could just go down near the water to set up.

They were about half way down the beach when it occurred to Jan that she hadn’t heard what Grant had learned from the neighbors. Grant and Merrill had been talking in the front while she and Sarah had been in the back.

Merrill explained that the neighbors really hadn’t noticed much except that there had been a dark green van that sounded like the one in Washington parked near the house for about three days. They figured she had friends or relatives over for a visit. The only thing he had found out was that the out of state plate the bartender had seen was from Oregon.

Like a trained team, the two of them split up the work of arranging four candles, one for each of the cardinal directions creating a cross about six feet across, green for the north to represent the earth, yellow for the east to represent air, red for the south to represent fire, blue to the west to represent water. A fifth white candle was placed in the center to represent the goddess and spirit. Jan made a small indentation in the sand and took a cake of charcoal and lit it. When the edge of the black brick became white she blew gently causing the edge to glow. A cascade of sparks spread across its surface telling her that it was igniting. When the sparkes came close to her fingers, she laid cake down in the small divot she had made.

Merrill took out his packets of incense and selected the white crystals of Frankincense and added a large piece to the heated charcoal. The rosin immediately

began to sprit and bubble and a white plume of fragrance drifted slowly upward showing that the air was totally calm and giving both Merrill and Jan a sense of being grounded.

He took the lighter and watched as Jan made a circle and chanted to the goddess. She started in the north and with her hand drew a pentagram in each of the four sides. Then she started once more, this time summoning the guardians of each direction while Merrill lit the corresponding candle.

When she moved to the western side this time the sun broke clear of the clouds. He could see her delicate outline through the fine translucent wrap she wore causing Merrill to fill with desire. Too soon she moved on to the North once again and completed the circle. She moved to the center and from the eastern position Merrill sat, he once again was tantalized by the view while she invoked the goddess into the circle. Merrill lit the white candle.

When she was done, she joined Merrill. They sat facing each other holding both hands and meditated for a few moments. Then Merrill looked up with a questioning expression. "Who do you think we should cast the luck spell on?"

Jan thought for a moment then answered, "Let's place it on Sarah. I feel very close to her right now so it should be the strongest bond."

Merrill spoke some words to summon the attention of Hermes the messenger and then sat quietly while Jan stood and called out to the goddess Fortuna. She stood facing the ocean with her arms raised in a graceful arc upward. They both focused on Sarah. Merrill then added some green powder to the charcoal. The sweet smoke of Fast Luck filled the air. Jan called once more to Fortuna and there was a sudden movement of offshore air. The candles wavered but remained lit. Jan lowered her arms and knelt. Their summons had been answered.

They meditated on the spell for a few minutes before standing and together creating a cone of energy that extended into the ether. Then they closed the circle thanking all those who participated, both feeling relaxed and contented. They knew they had been successful.

After snuffing the candles, they sat for a few minutes to let the wax harden and enjoyed the gentle breeze they had brought. Then they covered the charcoal with sand and packed everything else up. As they approached the motel, they noticed Grant and Sarah sitting on the side of the waterfall fed swimming pool with their feet dangling down. They were obviously enjoying each others company and were sipping on drinks from the bar.

"Come on in," Grant said, "The water feels great."

Merrill noticed that Sarah was wearing a bikini similar to Jan's and in a different way she was just as lovely. He was taken back by his own body's reaction and began to blush. "I think I'm ready for a shower and then dinner," he said. He held

the small bag of magick items casually low blocking the view of what he felt was an obvious indiscretion.

“Ok,” said Sarah smiling. “We’ll be going up shortly. See you in about half an hour.”

“Sounds good,” said Jan, giving Merrill an odd look.

When they reached their room, Jan turned and looked up into Merrill’s eyes. “You know what?”

“Huh?”

“You worry too much.”

She threw her arms around his neck, kissed him and then reached down, gently put her hand on his bulge and then chuckled. “Don’t worry, this is mine and she knows it *and* you know it. Besides she’s attractive enough to get *me* excited and I certainly don’t go both ways.” She laughed. “I would be a little worried if you weren’t affected that way. And if people see that you are aroused and are offended, that’s their problem.” Then she pulled him onto the queen sized bed and reaffirmed their bonding. They were a half hour late meeting Grant and Sarah.

Chapter 35

“What do you think about going out for a special dinner since we are down here?” asked Grant after Merrill and Jan arrived at Sarah and his room. “It’s a bit of a drive from here but I guarantee its well worth doing.”

Merrill looked at Jan who smiled. “Sure, what kind of restaurant is it?” he asked.

“A place that has by far the best seafood I have ever had,” Grant said happily. “Anthony’s in Newport. It’s on a back road below Fashion Island on the waterway. They’ve opened up some additional restaurants, one I know is in Tacoma, Washington but this is the original and by far the best.”

“Sounds great,” said Merrill.

Sarah handed Grant his corduroy jacket. The coat completed his usual casual look of slacks and no collar shirt. She was amused that Merrill had taken on a similar look with one vital exception. He wore a round pendant that centered on a cross that represented the earth and where Grant’s jacket was a dark gray, Merrill’s was tan. She wondered about how long it would be before Grant took on the affectation of wearing a pendant as well. But she had to admit that she had changed her wardrobe since she met Jan as well.

She was wearing an ankle length peasant skirt similar to what Jan typically wore, though a different pattern, a black silk camisole and shoulder wrap. Jan had shifted her wardrobe to include the camisole look from the peasant blouses she had worn. So now, when the two were together they looked like sisters even though Jan had light brown hair instead of light blond and stood two inches shorter than Sarah. If they all looked like they had the same stylist, so be it, she thought. The clothes were the best of the combination they all had brought together and they all looked fantastic.

As they walked out to the car, Grant opened on his cell phone to make the dinner reservation. Merrill couldn't help notice that Jan and Sarah were talking to each other in low tones, then Sarah let out a loud giggle. Merrill blushed.

"Wait a minute," said Sarah. "Grant, look at that van."

A gray van with a rack on top and Oregon plates was parked just across from where they were walking. Everyone stopped and Grant closed his cell.

"What are the odds of that being the same one," Grant said.

Jan looked at Merrill with startled eyes and walked up to him. "You said that alchemist was good, but come on," she said quietly.

Merrill grinned, "Well, it was your idea to cast the spell on Sarah," he answered in an equally low tone."

"So much for going out tonight," said Grant. "It looks to me like we're working."

He looked back at the hotel and saw that their restaurant faced the parking lot. "Merrill, see if we can get that window seat. I want to make a quick call."

As Merrill, Jan and Sarah went into the restaurant; Grant stepped into the shadows being careful to keep the van in view. He made a call and then joined the others who were seated in the booth. "We need to keep track of that van for the next couple of hours," he said quietly.

"Could I start you out with some drinks?" A waitress wearing a dark evening dress stood at the end of the booth slightly bending over toward Grant allowing just enough cleavage to draw attention.

Grant smiled. "I would like a double scotch on the rocks. Sarah?"

"Long Island Iced Tea for me thanks," Sarah said and then looked across to Jan.

"I've never had one of those, so I guess I will try one," she said smiling.

"I'd like a double Rusty Nail," said Merrill.

"Hmm, I've never heard of that one," said the waitress biting down on her lower lip.

"Let me ask the bartender, he might know." She stood up straight and walked away showing a discerned sway to her hips.

Grant smirked as though thoroughly amused by the blatant gesture. Then his expression changed as she moved exposing two men sitting at the bar. One had brown hair with white tips and looked like he was in his early thirties and the other was older and partially balding. "Damn," he said. "I guess we can stop watching the parking lot for now." He nodded toward the bar causing Merrill to look over his shoulder.

"No way," Merrill said in just over a whisper.



Dinner was adequate but nothing to their original expectations for the evening. But they enjoyed each others company as usual and Jan found out that Sarah and Grant played cribbage, which was a game that she and Merrill loved. Grant kept his eye on the two men at the bar throughout the evening. After dinner and several rounds of coffee he saw the two get up from their bar stools. He noted that they weren't really drunk but enough so that they wouldn't notice if they were discreetly followed.

Grant placed his credit card on the bill that the waitress had left almost an hour before and the three others went outside and waited. Merrill lit a cigarette and it looked like they were just waiting for their fourth to complete his business when the two men walked out.

Instead of walking to the van, the the two men turned the corner and walked to a hallway part way down the front of the building. "Wait here," said Merrill and then he took a deep breath and grounded himself before following them. He knew the shield he put up did not make him invisible, but rather made him insignificant to those who saw him, if they noticed him at all. It is a trick that many people do naturally as a defense. Unfortunately, those people can never seem to understand why people don't seem to notice them or why they talk around them. Merrill had a good handle on this particular ability having once been one of those unknowing people.

He nonchalantly rounded the same corner and saw that the two had gone up one flight and they were standing in front of a door to a front-side room unlocking it. He stepped into the shadows until the two had disappeared into the room and then went back at a faster pace than he had come.

"There staying here in the hotel," he said. "They're in room 243."

Grant had just come out from settling the bill and as if on the cue by some obscure director a man approached them. "Greg!"

Grant sounded genuinely surprised. "What are you doing down here?"

"I heard you were down here and couldn't pass on another chance to make

you look good,” the man grinned.

The man was roughly Grant’s age of 35, a head shorter than Grant and wore the officious dark blue suit normally worn by FBI agents and a grin that was contagious.

“I think you’ve met everyone here except for maybe Jan,” Grant said. “You remember Greg Stoddard?”

Merrill reached out and shook hands with Greg. “The last time I saw you we were at Grant and Sarah’s wedding. I never got the chance to thank you for palming me the \$500 during your reading. It saved us you know.”

“Well, I thought the cash might come in handy. It was Fed money anyway,” Greg laughed.

“I’m Jan.” She extended her hand which he took in his tender hands.

“I couldn’t be more charmed,” he said in a manner that would challenge any courtier and kissed her hand.

Grant looked over at Merrill and grinned. “You have to watch out for this one. He is quite the charmer.”

Jan smirked as she took back her hand. She was obviously taken with his gesture in a very playful way. She smiled at Greg and then returned to Merrill’s side and took his hand reassuringly. “I rather agree,” she said.

He used a similar gesture with Sarah and then reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black box with an antenna and magnetic backing and handed it to Grant. “I understand you need this,” he said. “The receiver is in my trunk.”

“Thanks,” Grant said. “We need a little more of your assistance at this point. See what you can find out about the people in room 243. By the description they may well be our suspects.

I don’t want to close in on them though. I suspect they are just gophers. I want to see if they lead us to the real bad guys.”



Sarah led Merrill and Jan back to her and Grant’s room where they waited while Grant planted the GPS transmitter on the van, retrieved the small tracking receiver and stopped for a drink with his friend. She moved the small table near the window closer to the bed so that Jan and Merrill could sit and sat on the edge of the bed. The three of them talked until Grant was done. When he came in he plugged in the GPS receiver using an adapter, located the small blip on the small LCD map and set the controls to alarm with any change in status. Then he sat on the bed next to Sarah. “Now we wait,” he said, pointing over at the receiver.

Then he looked at Merrill. “You’re gonna want to be packing, so I suggest

you go get your harness.”

Merrill nodded and went out of the door to the other hotel room. Grant took off his jacket, went to his suitcase and then put on the dual harness he was accustomed to wearing. Under his shoulder he carried a .357 magnum revolver and a small .25 caliber semiautomatic at the small of his back. Once he put his jacket on, it was impossible to tell anything about him had changed.

“I wish I could get more information on that dye they found in that packet,” Sarah said looking up at Grant. “I still can’t make any sense out of it. Even if the powder were a kind of tracing compound the concentration wouldn’t be strong enough to detect further than maybe a few hundred yards in that volume of water, there just wouldn’t be enough. And actually that’s true of the algae as well. If it’s the same one we found in Washington, then it might be a problem for someone within that zone, just because the algae reproduce so quickly. But it would take an awful lot to affect a lake that big. There has to be more to this.”

“That’s why we need our lab up and running,” Grant said. “You talked to Richard last, when did he say he could have the equipment in place?”

“He said it would be three months after the building was complete, so that puts it sometime late next summer,” Sarah said with a slight sigh. “We really need that setup now. I guess I can check with the CDC in the morning and see if they have made any progress. Those people are incredibly slow on getting any information out.”

Merrill returned. He looked a little contorted with his left arm hanging strangely away from his body.

Grant laughed. “Don’t fight the damn thing Merrill, it won’t burn you. Just relax. You’ll get used to it.”

Merrill opened his coat and looked disgustedly at the small .25 Beretta semi-automatic that hung from the shoulder harness. Then closed his jacket and took his seat at the table. “I’ll wear the gun because I know how to use it, but I seriously doubt that I will ever get used to packing. Anyway, what’s the plan?”

“At this point we wait until either we have more information or until those guys move. But I think we should all stay here and trade off sleeping and monitoring the tracking device. When we need to move, it will probably be rather suddenly.” Grant took a deep breath. “I’ll take the first watch. I have some things I need to sort out in my head.”

Chapter 36

The night was quiet. Grant took the first two hours of sitting up waiting for the alarm signal while Sarah and Jan slept on the top of the bed and Merrill was stretched out on the floor below Jan.

He sat on the balcony smoking an occasional cigarette, sipping on cool water and thinking about a variety of topics, predominantly the case, but also the great satisfaction he felt with Sarah. He still kicked himself for not having the nerve to ask her out sooner than he had. All of this could have begun much sooner, he thought. But then he realized that the events would have been quite different if it hadn't been for Merrill and Jan. Maybe it is as Merrill had explained to him. Maybe they all *had* found their karmic path.

He looked out at the ocean. The almost full moon reflected on the rolling water leaving a shimmering path into the heavens enhanced by the darkness that surrounded it. He could see the otherwise dark sky above him studded with a million specs of light. The view was humbling.

Far in the distance thick off shore clouds pressed against the invisible dome of high pressure that was slowly losing its hold. It'll rain tomorrow, he thought.

He looked at his watch, 1:00 AM. It was time to get some sleep and let Merrill take his turn. He stood and took a last look at the wondrous sky. It would almost be worth it to get Sarah up instead and share the beauty with her. But in truth, he knew they would both need the rest.

He got up from his chair, went inside and removed his jacket and gun harness. Merrill woke with a light touch to his shoulder. "It's a beautiful night out on the balcony," Grant said. "I highly recommend it, strangely it isn't even cold."

Merrill nodded and got up while Grant found his spot on the floor below Sarah.

Jan got Sarah up at 5:00 and instead of returning to bed she got Merrill up. "We'll be down in our room for an hour or so," Merrill told Sarah. "We need to greet the day. It won't take us five minutes to be ready if you need us."

Sarah decided that it was the perfect opportunity for her and Grant to observe morning ritual in *their* way and woke him as soon as the other's left. They were up, dried off and dressed by the time Merrill and Jan returned at 6:30, but barely. It wasn't until 7:30, well after the end of Jan's watch that the alarm sounded.

"Time to go," Jan said.



Grant plugged the tracking receiver into the cigarette lighter of the rental car and watched the screen as Merrill pulled out of the driveway of the hotel. "Take a left," he said. "There'll be 'Y', you follow it to the right then another 'Y' to the left." Grant looked up for a second to get a physical view of where they were then back to his screen. "You need to get onto I-5 North and then almost immediately go east on the 74 highway. I think they're headed back to Lake Elsinore."

They took the winding highway up over the mountains and started down toward the town. "They're on the other side of the lake," Grant said. "And it looks like they've stopped."

They continued on the 74 until they passed the head of the lake and then went south on Shoreline Drive. They were nearly back to the sheriff's office when Grant said, "Pull off to your right." The van was in a parking lot that was mostly used by sports fishermen and other park visitors. Grant looked up at Merrill. "I think maybe you and Jan should take a romantic walk in the park."

Merrill and Jan got out of the car and strolled down to the cement path that almost lined the water's edge. The shoreline itself was corded off with stretch tape and warning signs, but the park was open and the two men were sitting on a bench. The younger one held a pair of what seemed to be very powerful binoculars and occasionally peered through them.

They could see what held the man's interest about a quarter mile out into the water. There were two boats apparently anchored close to each other. Both had the look of being military but he wasn't familiar with the designs. Neither boat looked to be much larger than 25 ft. Merrill wished he had a pair of glasses as well. He couldn't tell from where they were standing what was happening on the boats.

The two psychics continued their circular path which took them in front of the two men and then back around to the parking lot. They got in the car and reported what they had seen.

"This gizmo is good for several hours on battery," Grant said. "What do you say about going and getting breakfast?" He pointed out a small cafe across the road from the parking lot. "We'll know if they decide to move on."



After they finished their breakfast and had almost returned to the car, Grant's cell phone rang. "Forrester."

The three others went on to the car leaving Grant by the street talking.

"This is Greg. We checked out the daily receipts from that hotel you are in and found out that those two are registered as Stanley Greer and John Webber out of Portland. We don't have any warrants on either of them so far and the room was held on Mr. Greer's personal credit card. We're checking on deposits but so far there aren't any larger than a couple of thousand at a time and those have been cash deposits."

"That really doesn't give us much to go on." Grant said in a flat tone.

"Nope, nothing at all. We're still back tracking some of the deposits to figure out where he gets his income and I should have some more information on that later on today. Also, Rusty said to relay to you that what they thought was a dye turned out to be something more serious, concentrated phosphates. It provides food for the already accelerated growth rate. Fortunately there wasn't any trace of them in the preliminary test samples from the lake."

"Damn, from what Sarah said, the only thing that saved them in Orting is the fact that the blue-green algae needed light to grow." Grant's voice revealed his shock. "It's a good thing that the quantity was so small in the lake, otherwise I am guessing that it would be devastating to this water system."

"We've got divers out there right now checking the water contamination at deeper depths; the CDC seems to think without the phosphates it should be pretty well dispersed by now. In fact, so far they haven't been able to detect any of the algae in the water. They hope they can open that part of the water system back up by the end of the week."

"Ok, Greg. I'll pass the information on to Sarah. By the way, those two guys seem to have been put on surveillance duty and are watching the diving operation."

"That seems pretty strange," Greg said. "I really wish I knew what they were up to."

"So do we, but I'm going to keep an eye on them for a little longer before we have them picked up. I'm still hoping they will lead us to something or someone. Thanks for the update, Greg. Let me know anything else you find out."

Grant decided to check on his two observers before returning to the car. They were still there but now standing. When he looked out at the water to see what had peaked their interest, he noticed that on one of the boats there was now a small crane turned out over the water. He couldn't see well enough to see the activity but he assumed that they must have found something.

He was still unseen by the intense watchers and decided keep it that way. Once back to the car he instructed Merrill to head back up the highway a few miles and park on a side road. The tracking device still showed that the van had not moved. He put the alarm function on and sat back. "This may turn out to be

a long day,” he said.

While they waited, Grant updated them on the news he had heard from Greg.

“So the lake was never really in danger,” Sarah said. “Why would someone go to all of the trouble to drug and brainwash someone to commit suicide in front of a bunch of fishermen and not even administer the algae? And why would they go to the trouble of engineering a super-algae and a massive food supply and then not use it?”

“Probably just to create a scare,” said Merrill.

Jan, who had been silent through the entire exchange jumped in. “What if this was all to demonstrate what they *could* do?”

Chapter 37

The tracking alarm sounded. As they watched they saw the signal approach from the lake and passed by them on the main road. After waiting more than two hours they followed at a distance to find the van parked where it had been the night before.

“I saw one of them go into their room,” said Merrill as he went into Sarah and Grant’s hotel room. “I don’t think their planning on going anywhere soon since the one I saw went after ice.”

Grant furrowed his brow, got up and paced back and forth while the other three watched. “I guess we might as well kick back for a bit then. At least until we get some further information. At this point any direction we go would probably be wrong.”

“I went in through the office and the manager pulled me aside and told me that he has a package for you,” Merrill said. “He said he had instructions to give the package to you and you alone.”

“That’s strange,” Grant replied. “Must be from the Bureau, but I didn’t ask for anything else.”

He got up and went to the door. “Guess I better find out what this is about.”

He went to the door made a grimace to show he really didn’t want to go out again and then left.

“I wish we had been able to get something of theirs,” Jan said while looking out the window at the crashing surf below. “I might be able to figure out some of what’s going on if we had. I feel like we’re not getting much of the picture.”

“I’m not sure that much of the picture has to do with these guys,” Sarah

replied. "As Grant said, these two are probably just grunts. Why don't you two go get some reasonable rest? We can call you if we hear anything more."

While Merrill and Sarah got up and were starting to the door, Grant opened it. He was beaming. "We've got goodies!"

He seemed almost like a kid getting ready to show off his latest toys. He crossed over to the bed carrying an open box and a small sealed bag and set them down. Then he reached into the box and pulled out four smaller ones handing one to each of the others and keeping one for him. Merrill noticed that his name was on the box he was given. In fact each box had a designated addressee. When Merrill opened his, he found a pendant that was almost an exact duplication of the one he always wore, except this one was a little thicker. There was also a man's watch, an ear plug and a small rectangular box with an AC cord that had a disk shaped pad with two concentric copper circles and what looked like a vending machine coin slot only slightly bigger. Next to both the circle and the slot were red and green lights. Merrill looked up at Grant confused and realized that he wasn't the only one. Both of the ladies were holding up the same thing except that the watches were women's.

Grant laughed when he saw them all looking at him confused. "As you may have already guessed," he said. "The boxes are chargers for the other items. You'll notice that the circular rings match up with the watches and the slots hold the pendants. On the back you'll see corresponding copper circles on them. Just lay the watch on the circle and put the pendant in the slot and they will be charging. That watch is a GPS phone. The buttons on the right side of the face are the normal clock functions. The three buttons on the left correspond to the other watch's addresses. We'll try them out so you know which one goes to whom. To use it in silence, the earphone plugs in the micro-jack just below the bottom button and they're fully duplex so you don't have to hit any send keys. The pendants are micro-circuited GPS locators. You'll notice that there are two concentric copper strips along the outside of the earth-sign. Those are the charging contacts. The charge on that is good for 48 hours, but make sure you charge both the pendant and watch each night while you sleep and don't leave home without them," he smiled. "To activate the pendant, just touch the center of the symbol with a damp finger. Sweat should be enough."

"Where'd these come from?" asked Sarah. "You've never mentioned them before."

"Actually, I had them custom made for us through some of Rusty's contacts. I ordered them right after we got back from Las Vegas over six months ago. I got the idea from Merrill's pendant since we are also using it as our logo. Guess they came in and Rusty decided we should have them right away," Grant answered

as he pulled another small box out of the larger box. This one is a tracking GPS receiver similar to the one we've been using but slightly larger and easier to read.

Grant plugged its adapter into the wall socket and told Jan to touch her pendant. When she did a few alarm tones sounded from the receiver and a map lit up on the screen. A small red dot showed their location with a notation at the bottom of the screen that showed Jan's name highlighted in red. Merrill touched his and his name showed in Green. Sarah activated her pendant and was indicated in yellow and Grant's showed up as blue.

"Now," Grant said. "Touch them again and watch the screen." As each member touched the pendant again, their corresponding notation went out. Grant waited to deactivate his. The screen now showed a blue dot on the map as well as his name. "To verify your pendant is activated, look on the back." He turned his over. "It's not easy to see but there is a small LED in the center. I didn't want the light to stand out." They each looked at his pendant and saw the almost undetectable light.

Merrill attached the small wire of his earphone into his watch and pressed the top button and three beeps sounded from Sarah's watch and both watches dials lit up in red. Sarah looked up at Grant questioningly. "Oh, I forgot. Press down on the crystal." As soon as Sarah pressed down, both crystals glowed in a soft green. Merrill spoke into his watch. His voice could be heard coming from the Sarah's small watch loudly enough for her to hear easily.

"Now if either of you press the crystal again the watches will hang up." Merrill pressed his crystal and both phones went dark. "One last thing," If you press the crystal and hold it for five seconds, it will take you off line and the crystal will glow red for ten second and then go dark. That should only be done if you can't afford to be detected. Hold it again and you will be reactivated. Also, if you press any two of the call buttons it will call everyone."

Once they had all tried their phones to learn who was represented by which button on their watch, Grant opened the small bag that he had carried in and handed Sarah a small vial and Jan a somewhat odorous t-shirt. "Greg went through the suspect's room while we were gone. They found a small case with hypodermic needles and some of these vials. He thought you might want to have a look."

Sarah looked at the milky liquid and shook her head. "Not much I can do with this until we can get to a lab, but I wouldn't doubt that it's the hallucinogen that they used on the women. Was this the only one they took?"

"No, Greg said there were several so he sent one up to the lab as well. He doubted that they would take an inventory." He looked at Jan who was holding the sweaty shirt as far from her body as she could. "Yuk," she said. "It's still damp."

"It was stuffed in a duffel bag," Grant explained. "Greg thought maybe you could use it."

"I can try," Jan replied. "But Eeuwwww."

Jan laid the shirt on the small table, grounded and then lay her hands on the damp material. "These guys like their work," she said in a completely non-emotional voice. "As far as I can tell, they like to scare their victims. They love their fear. They inject them with something, gag them and then play something awful on a VCR, over and over until they no longer know anything except their own fear. I pick up something about there being only one way to be free and until they are free they are hunted." Jan paused then in a quiet voice said, "This guy doesn't expect to live after their mission. He looks forward to when it's over, when he can be free."

"I'll phone this in," said Grant as he went toward the door. Merrill followed. Each was pulling out a cigarette as they went. "Think we should pick them up?"

"I suspect that will be the next move," said Grant. "But I want to have Rusty make that call since we aren't actually part of his staff."

Grant and Merrill went outside and lit cigarettes and then Grant took out his cell phone and dialed. He took a drag and then spoke briefly to Rusty then hung up and looked up at Merrill. "He wants us to hold. There are some things going on we don't know about yet. He said to hang back and wait for his call so I don't see any reason to feel glued here, we have the van."

After finishing their cigarettes they went back in and told the ladies. Since they had to wait, they decided to all go out for the dinner they missed the previous night. Before leaving they all put on their pendants. Jan looked up to see both Merrill and Grant in their cord jackets with collarless shirts and pendants and started laughing.



"This is wonderful," said Jan. "I've never had such a great Cioppino. The taste is like everything is fresh off the beach."

"That's because it is," replied Grant. "I'm not sure how they do it but all of their fish and shellfish are that fresh. Even the salmon is flown down everyday and I think some of the fish is kept alive in tanks in the back as well as their clams, oysters and mussels. There is nowhere quite like it that I know of..." Grants voice trailed off when he felt his cell phone vibrating in his pocket. "Excuse me a second."

He stood while pulling out his cell phone and looked at the number displayed before answering. "This is Grant. Hang on a second."

After walking outside into the parking lot Grant resumed. "Sorry about that Rusty, I was in a restaurant. What's up?"

He stood there and pulled out a cigarette while listening. His expression went from a casual interest to one of deep concern. After taking a deep drag on his smoke, he answered. "So you want us to pick them up? No, the alarm hasn't signaled on the GPS so they should still be at the hotel. Ok, send Greg back down and we'll do this the right way. I'll call you when we're done."

Thirty minutes later they were met in the hotel parking lot by Greg. The truck was still parked and they could see that the hotel room was dark. "Hi, Guys," Greg said as he approached the rental car. "I checked the bar and they weren't there so I suspect they are still in the room."

"Did you let the manager know what was going on?" Grant asked.

"He gave me the key so we won't have to crash the door. You ready to go?"

"Yeah, let's do it," Grant said as he climbed out of the car.

"Ladies, why don't you go have a drink in the bar. Merrill, you're with us."

The group walked toward the restaurant and when they reached the front door the three men split off and went silently down the front of the building and up the exposed stairway. They all drew weapons and positioned themselves with Grant at the door, Greg backing him up and Merrill on the lock side of the door. Grant looked at the others and then swiped the pass key, opened the door and they rushed in checking each side with their guns.

The two men were lying on the bed and the television was on. They weren't moving. Grant approached them with his gun trained seeing that both had emptied their bladder into their pants. He checked each of their necks for a pulse. The skin was cold. The expressions on their faces seemed like they should be on a Gargoyle, frozen in a silent scream.

On the nightstand was an empty bottle of Jack Daniel's, two mostly empty glasses and a hypodermic. On the floor below there were two of the vials Grant knew had come from their case. Grant touched the top button on his watch, a moment later the dial glowed green and Sarah's voice whispered. "Hi, what's up?"

It only took the ladies five minutes and they were there. Sarah did a quick examination of the bodies and said that they were probably dead before they even left for dinner. Jan went to the opposite side of the bed, grounded herself and then touched one of the men on the forehead. "They died from fear," she said. "They believed they were going to meet their savior. Someone called The Traveler."

"You don't suppose it's the same Traveler that sent us that coffin as wedding present?"

Chapter 38

The light dimly lit the corner table where the four gathered in the now almost empty bar. Grant had called Rusty and told him about the bodies and Greg secured the room and waited for the authorities to set their crime scene. Grant decided that he wanted a drink so they had gone from the room of death to a room of forgetting. In this case, it was also a room of planning. He held the glass delicately in his right hand and swirled the ice cubes thinking and the others sat staring. Then he began. He told them the news Rusty had given him while they were in the restaurant in Newport.

"This is a lot graver than we knew," he said in a low tone. "The thing they were lifting from the bottom of lake was a cigar shaped canister big enough to hold over a hundred gallons of liquid. The tank was divided and the two ends were hatched so that they could be released remotely." His eyes went around the table looking at the expressions of each member of the team. "One end of the canister was full of the blue-green algae and the second half was the phosphates."

"That would be enough to contaminate the whole lake," Sarah gasped. "It might even gradually affect the whole water system. What are there about six lakes and underwater aquifers in this system?"

"More than that I'm afraid," Grant sighed. "All of the water that supports Riverside County might have been affected."

"What do you think it means?" asked Merrill.

"Rusty's not sure yet. There haven't been any demands made, but who ever put this together, undoubtedly has made more of them. The big questions are how many and where are they? There's something else that's troubling me though. Jan, you said that those men thought their savior was the Traveler. I haven't gone over this with you before because it was deemed a security issue, but now you better all know. When we worked on the case six months ago, all of those activities were centrally coordinated by someone. That someone was never located. In fact there is a team assigned with their only goal being to find out who The Traveler is. He seems to know systems enough to leave himself virtually invisible and untraceable."

"Is this the same guy that sent the coffin" asked Sarah? "If it is, you *did* mention him to me in New York. Didn't he communicate to his people by bouncing e-mails off of unprotected servers?"

"Yes, and he had the where-with-all to almost take over the US elections by rigging the computer systems. He also knew enough to find us at our wedding. The only things we know about him other than that is that he profits by creating turmoil in the stock market and therefore knowing when to buy big and then sell off. He does his transactions just small enough and widespread enough to make a lot of money but stay under the radar of the regulators and he manipulates the political arena through blackmail, extortion and infiltration. This guy is gonna be hard to nail down. And personally I don't like the idea of him being in this."

Grant looked at Merrill and Jan. "I think we're going to have to use your talents on this. You think you can track this guy down?"

Merrill looked at Jan. He thought for a moment and then said, "It's certainly worth a try."

"I'm gonna need to see that canister," said Jan. "Can they decontaminate it?" She looked over to Sarah.

"I don't think that the canister will be safe for quite some time." Sarah said thoughtfully. "They'll be studying them right on the canister. Since the neurotoxins are so highly poisonous, I doubt that you could get access."

"Do you need to actually physically touch the canisters or could you work through lab gloves?" asked Grant.

"Probably through the gloves would work."

"Ok, I'll see what I can do. Do you have any other ideas?"

"Well, a couple actually," said Merrill. "I think we should start with a ritual and with some readings. Give us a couple hours to prepare ourselves and we can create a circle down at the beach where were before. I noticed some fire pits down there so we can do a night ritual."

"Ok, you two do what you need to and Sarah and I will go to the store and get some firewood. Is there anything else we need?"

Merrill nodded. "I'm gonna need some coffee and Jan will need hot water for tea."



"This tub is not going to work," Jan said disgustedly. "I know that this place is far beyond any I had ever stayed before we met, but look at that. One person can't be submersed let alone two."

"How about using the hot tub outside?" Merrill laughed. "I really doubt anyone

other than us would venture out into them this time of year.”

“Works for me,” Jan replied while taking off her clothes.

When they were both naked, Merrill handed Jan one of the hotel courtesy robes. They were made of terry cloth and had the hotel logo embroidered on the front. Merrill couldn’t help notice how sexy Jan looked enveloped in the soft white material. He felt drawn unwrap her. Then as if catching himself, he shook his head as if to say, “Bad Merrill, Bad Merrill, Bad, Bad.”

Sarah seeing his reaction began to giggle and when he turned she pinched his butt.

“Don’t worry. I want to grab you too.”

Merrill put their amulets, watches and the small scripts Jan had written out for Sarah and Grant into the small bag of magick components. He took the bag and two towels. Jan carried their coffee and tea as they walked quietly down the outer stairs to the ocean side of the hotel and the hot tub. He put down the towels and bag and surveyed the surrounding windows. Being 11:30 PM in the dead of winter, he shouldn’t have been surprised that only a few were lighted and all of them had their curtains drawn.

They both dropped their robes and stepped into the steamy water. They held hands and submersed themselves and then arose as if reborn reaching for the sky. Merrill turned and faced his bride to be and they stood in three feet of water with their legs apart and arms outstretched both approximating the arms of a pentagram. They looked to the sky and then to each other both admiring the beauty of their bodies.

Lowering their arms they felt each others chest and then followed the skin around to their backs. Merrill slowly pulled Jan to him and straightened his legs. His hands moved slowly down to cup her tight buttocks. He easily lifted her slight 95 pounds that was made lighter by the buoyancy of the water that surrounded them.

She wrapped around him with her legs about his waist and her arms about his neck and explored his open mouth with her tongue. She could feel the pressure of his growing member reaching up to join with her and his hands gently separating her to provide access. She gasped slightly as he entered her. They were one. They were the Goddess and her consort, the bringers of spring and new life. As they stood there joined, Sarah saw a fleck in the sky. A shooting star to announce a new beginning and she knew. They had done more than become one with the world and the gods, they had started a family.

Jan decided not to mention her revelation just then, there were more pressing matters worry about rather than have Merrill distracted. So, she just held him close still joined for several minutes before pushing back and lowering herself

into the warmth of the water. Then she looked up into his steel blue eyes and kissed him. "I love you," she said. "But we better get on with it before it gets much later."

Once they dried themselves and put on the robes once more, Merrill took out the watches and amulets and after giving Jan hers, he put his on. He pressed the center button on his watch and seconds later Grant answered. "We're ready," he said. "Meet us down by the pool."



The aroma of campfire surrounded them. The light from the flames emanating from the fire-pit and the occasional sparks that waif up in the smoke were the only sources of light aside from the feeble attempt to brighten the sky by the late waning moon. It was a time of banishment. They all stood there in their courtesy bath robes. And even though Grant and Sarah were wearing their swim wear beneath they had been warned that Jan and Merrill would be doing the ritual sky-clad. Candles were spread out surrounding them in the four cardinal directions, each with their representative color. Sarah raised the sharp blade of her dagger to the sky and called out to the goddess while Merrill threw crystallized frankincense on to the glowing coals. While the sweetness of the scent surrounded them, the four dropped their robes.

Even with the warning, Grant found it difficult to take his eyes off of the lithe figure of Jan standing seductively naked in the flickering yellow light of the flames. He was mesmerized by her beauty. Sarah nudged him and gave him a look that he knew meant discussion later breaking the spell.

Jan walked out to the Northern candle and while facing outward cut the ancient symbol of the pentacle into the air in front of her all the while greeting the guardian of the sacred earth. In a clockwise fashion she cut the edge of the circle and repeated the process at each corner calling onto air, fire and water only to return to the north and declare the circle complete. When she returned to the center, she and Merrill faced each other once again with legs and arms spread and grounded each other in the safety of the circle.

Merrill had never allowed non-pagans into his circle before and was surprised when the energy wasn't disrupted. He had been to a few public rituals which were in his mind always non-productive. It told him that his dearest friends held no contempt to their practices. It made him feel loved.

Jan was the most experienced and had been involved in many public wiccan rituals. Some of them were done fully clothed, especially in the confines of an auditorium in the city. But others, like this were done fully naked or sky-clad on

the beach, especially on the beach near Golden Gate Park. At most of those rituals she remembered, there had been as many as two hundred people and though the energy was not well directed it was exhilarating. She was pleased that her new friends were open enough to enjoy the night air in the sanctity they had built. She was also pleased when Sarah asked if she could participate in some way and with her encouragement, Grant also said he would like to play a part.

Merrill had been gratefully pleased to hear this. With what they were going to attempt, he wanted all of the energy possible added to the circle and to the spell. "Goddess!" Merrill exclaimed. "We are here to banish our ignorance. Let us know who this Traveler is, what he or she wants and how we can stop the negative that is being generated against the unwary. So mote it be!" The others replied in unison, "So mote it be," while Merrill threw the yellow incense of banishment into the fire. Each of the members recited in turn, Sarah and Grant reading from the scripts they had been given and each time the one reciting adding to the perfumed air.

Merrill took both Jan and Sarah by the hand and Grant completed the circle of friends. They stood there facing each other and then the sky and Merrill took up a murmuring chant. They each joined him and the energy began to flow. The strength circled clockwise through their bodies with a constant increase until they could all see each other glowing with the power. Then with a nod from Merrill, they flung their arms into the air causing the wind of it to rise above them. "Our reality is our own and we contribute to it. The future can be changed and we decide how it shall be. With the goddess who is a part of us as we are a part of her, we shall decide. So mote it be!"

As Merrill spoke the final words, what little light that had been given off by the moon then went dark as the only small cloud in the sky covered it. "It is done."

They reversed the process of making the circle and declared it gone, thanked the guardians and bid them stay or go as they pleased. Then they all sat together in silence until Jan finally felt the coolness of the air and replaced her robe followed reluctantly by the others. The work had been a success and they had all done their part. Merrill stood and took the hands of Grant and Sarah, "You are welcome in our circle anytime. You have done very well." He hugged Grant and then Sarah. Jan hugged them also but when she hugged Sarah she emerged with tears in her eyes.

"What's wrong Jan?" Sarah said trying to comfort her.

"Nothing, these are tears of joy. You and I have something in common this day," she took on a stilted Old English accent. "The goddess has brought us both our family. We are both with child."

"You're kidding!" Sarah shrieked. "How could you possibly know that?"

"I don't know how. I just do and you and I both conceived today. Don't take my word on it, we will both know for sure soon enough."

Both Sarah and Jan were beaming with full out smiles on their faces while both men looked dumfounded. They started to speak but neither knew what to say. They were more than adequately shocked.

"Well, I hope you both wanted families," Sarah said. "Because for some reason, I think she's right."

"I very rarely drink," said Jan, "But I think this deserves some champagne."

"I agree," said Sarah, "Go get dressed and we'll meet you at the bar."

Merrill and Grant just stood there, still in shock until the women guided them through putting away the candles. Neither said a word all the way to their rooms.



"To us," Sarah said as she raised her fluted glass above the center of the table. "To us, the four parents to be, and our children." They all raised their glasses. Even Grant and Merrill were smiling then. It had taken a few moments for everything to sink in but once it had they felt joyous.

Merrill took Jan's hand and kissed the soft skin. "Talk about banishing ignorance," he said referring to the ritual. Then he paused and looked into Jan's eyes. "Do you think maybe we should stop by Vegas one of these days soon?"

"Might not be a bad idea I guess. It probably doesn't really matter since we are spiritually joined anyway, but it doesn't hurt to be observant to society in certain things."

Grant was smiling brightly and leaning toward Sarah as if to be as close as possible but then pulled back and looked serious as if reality had pushed its way into his mind. "I hate to be the one to bring things down, but weren't we supposed to do some readings?"

"That's ok, Grant," Merrill jumped in. "We can get down to business but under the circumstances I want to do some other readings first anyway. So, when we are done here, let's give it a try."

They finished their drinks and then went to Merrill and Sarah's room. They moved the small table up against the bed so that Grant and Sarah could use the chairs and Jan and Merrill could share the bed.

Merrill took a small wooden box covered with carvings out of the nightstand and removed a blue satin bag. From the bag he took out two banded decks of cards. One deck was thick and contained all of the seventy-eight cards of the Rider-Waite Tarot while the other was made up of only the twenty-one major

arcana.

He took out a single white votive and lit the wick. Then he began to meditate. While the others watched his face became expressionless, his skin tones became pale and his dark blue eyes became like steel. He began spreading the cards first reading for Sarah and in turn Grant and Jan. Unexpectedly all of the readings had two cards in common, ten of cups and the death card. Each time, Merrill had to explain that death means change and the ten of cups means family security and happiness. Merrill declined to read for himself but said that his would undoubtedly follow suit. There would be new members to the tribe and they were all happy.

"Now it's time to go to work," he said as he shuffled the cards once more. "Everyone focus on the Traveler." He began laying the cards.

"This can't be right." Merrill stared at the reading. His brow was furrowed and he fell out of his trance. "There aren't any majors. The cards talk about a lot of activity but without any majors there is no real direction to the reading, like a road-map with no cities, only the roads. What do you pickup from this Jan?"

Jan spread opened her hands and held them over the cards. "They're blocked Merrill, I can't explain how but there is energy surrounding them but it isn't yours. Hold on, let me try something." She closed her eyes and like Merrill, her expression went lifeless. Only the glow of her extended aura told Merrill that she was working. She sat that way for several minutes and then her eyes opened suddenly. "I swear we are working against Magick. I tried to focus on Traveler and all I got was a cloud. I tried to go to the mist and I was warded away by something I can only describe as an energy field. I thought I heard laughing."

They all sat there staring at each other. "Any idea what that could mean, Merrill?" asked Grant.

"Nothing aside from the fact that this guy's shield is at least as strong as anything I could put up. And that expends a lot of energy. Since Traveler wouldn't have anyway of knowing we were trying to read him, it seems reasonable that he is maintaining it somehow or having something other than himself maintain it which right now seems more likely. And if that's the case." Merrill paused and looked up at Jan very concerned. "I think we are working against a Ceremonial Magus." He reached his hands over to Jan and she took them. "Ground me, I'm going to do a little exploring."

Grant saw Merrill's expression change again like when he was reading. Only this time Grant thought he could see waves of energy with a slight tinge of blue emanating away from Merrill's body and extending beyond the room. He thought he sensed flecks of orange and red moving outward and then back in unequal cycles. This state lasted for a few minutes that to Grant felt like hours until Merrill finally opened his eyes.

Merrill looked up. He was visibly tired. "I was right. The energy that protects him is not his own. He has evoked a protector, a guardian. I don't suggest trying that again. I was lucky, I wasn't detected. I think the next step is to try to contact Kalen. It's possible that he can channel a guide to give us a better picture."



Grant sat looking over the crashing surf his eyes staring out unblinking. He took a drag from his cigarette and exhaled a smoke whose grayness matched the overcast sky and the feeling he held in his gut. We've got nothing, he thought. The magnitude of the threat and the lack of clues made him feel helpless and insignificant.

He picked up his coffee from the small table and mindlessly took a sip. Maybe they should just head home and wait. No, waiting wasn't his style. There had to be leads somewhere lurking, only they weren't finding them.

It was 9:00 AM and since they had been up until almost 3:00 doing readings, he let Sarah sleep. Along with the other problems he was also still trying to reconcile with himself about the news Jan had given them about the two ladies' pregnancies. It didn't seem likely to him that they both could conceive on the same day. In fact it would have had to have been within moments of each other. The only time he and Sarah had alone together was while Jan and Merrill were getting ready for the ritual. A father? Him? They had talked about it but he wasn't sure he was ready.

Grant was putting out his cigarette to go inside when his cell phone rang. It was Rusty. A huge pit formed in his stomach as he heard that there had been a ransom note. The note came in the form of a fax that had been broadcast from a prepaid cell phone account purchased in Fresno two months earlier.

Grant would remember the wording that Rusty read to him for years. The note said, "There are 35 of the bio-canisters like the one your government has found in Lake Elsinore. They are distributed throughout major water supplies In the United States. Each canister will be offered for the sale price of \$1 Billion. The offering will occur once a week starting on Monday. Refusal to complete the transaction instructions as described on the offer will result in the activation of that canister. Please have the money ready. The time to respond will be very limited. Have a nice day. The note was signed, The Traveler." Rusty thought it might be prudent for Grant to be in attendance when the first of the offers came in and would arrange for transport to Washington DC on Saturday evening. He also told him that he might have to travel light and fast so to bring only one backup.

Grant sat back down and lit another cigarette. So, the Traveler is

communicating to us directly this time, he thought. A first. The last time his existence was only known from correspondences to third parties transmitted through untraceable e-mails bounced off of unprotected servers. The clouds seemed suddenly darker and the coolness of moisture filled the air. Grant realized he'd better go back inside of the hotel room before he was drenched by the coming downpour.

"Grant?" The soft sound of Sarah's voice greeted his ears as he went inside.

"Hi, I'm surprised you're up already." He said as he reached around her and pulled her in. The scent of her caused all of his senses to become suddenly alive as he kissed her. "Good morning."

"Have you been up long?"

"About an hour. I just got a call from Rusty and I have to take off for DC tomorrow night. I think Merrill better go with me this time. You and Jan can see what you can find out from the CDC and then head back up home."

Sarah pouted. "It's gonna be hard not being with you after not being separated for six months." Then she grinned. "But, I suppose Jan and I can see what trouble we can get ourselves in."

Grant laughed. "Are you up for some breakfast?"

Chapter 39

"Gentleman, you all know why we are here. But I'm not sure all of you know each other. There have been some substantial changes since we last met so I will introduce everyone."

Rustorf (Rusty) Gammel, the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Internal Affairs Division stood at the head of his antique conference room table. As always he is wearing a dark suit with office slippers that are never seen in even the most expensive department stores. His steel gray hair, piercing brown eyes and deep lines in his face proclaim a man of experience and little patience. His entire presence radiated a sense of control and power.

The conference room supported his presence with its ensemble of furniture and statuary that appear to have been meticulously collected over the past three centuries and verging on garishness.

"Most of you know Grant Forrester." His arm motioned to the chair on his right and then noticed a look of confusion on the some of the faces around the table. "Many of you know him as Lawrence. Since he left the agency he started

going by his middle name. As a contractor, Grant has agreed to act as point man for field operations. He has been on the case from the beginning and you will be taking your orders directly from him. Next to Grant is his partner, Merrill Erickson. He will be working with you as well and should be treated as second in command of this operation.”

Merrill did his best to hide his shock. No one had told him her would be taking on a command role and he wasn't sure he wanted such a responsibility. Sure, he had been a manager most of his life and he had been in the military but this was different.

Rusty continued around the table. “Next is Joseph Thorndyke who will be handling electronic surveillance. Sharan Swailam is a CDC expert and will be working in the area of identification and containment. Ralph Scott is here in his usual negotiator function. Special Agents Joyce Walker, Doug Smith, Gary Green, Greg Stoddard and Thomas Gladstone will be working as field ops. Does everyone understand their assignment?”

He looked in the eyes of each member of the group and saw that they understood clearly.

“Now, let's review what we know so far.” He opened his copy of the folder that was lying in front of each of the team. He didn't need it. He knew the information thoroughly. It was his way to assure everyone else looked at it.

“On Monday, February 13th, exactly two weeks ago a woman in Washington State dropped several packets that look much like these into a well that serviced a small community.” Rusty handed a dish-washing machine packet to Grant to pass around. These packets contained what we have determined to be a genetically engineered form of blue-green algae that reproduces and kills at a highly accelerated rate by producing an extremely dangerous neurotoxin. It however has a very limited capacity to reproduce. Because of that and a limitation of sunlight, after only a few days the water supply in Orting was almost devoid of the dinoflagellates.

A second similar incident occurred at Lake Elsinore, California. In this case, a packet was left on the deck of the boat that contained a sample of a different strain of the algae with a second component, phosphates, which would act as a primary supply of nutrient to give it a kick start. We were also left a sample of a delivery system.

This new strain of algae is highly resistant to most environmental conditions. Certainly anything we could add to the water of a lake in quantities high enough to eliminate it would kill everything in the lake. Its limiting factor seems to be salinity which means it was designed not to survive once it hits the ocean. This strain produces multiple toxins at alarmingly high levels. One of the toxins is an extremely powerful neuro-inhibitor that even in very small concentrations is capable of killing

anything with a complex nervous system. The second toxin is even more destructive. It attacks aquatic plants at the cellular level by destroying the chloroplast membrane leaving all floras incapable of photosynthesis. In the short term, this essentially removes all of the algae's competition and in the long term it could literally kill everything in an entire region if it weren't contained.

Rusty paused momentarily and took a sip of water. "When the sample canister was released from the bottom of the lake, the divers discovered that the device was buoyant and it began to slowly float to the surface by itself. We examined the canister further and discovered that the center section is a remote activated buoyancy chamber capable of expelling water. There is a second circuit that enables hatches on either end that release the algae and the phosphate."

He took another sip of water to let the group absorb what he had said and then looked up at Sharan. "Would you explain to the rest the importance of this finding?"

Sharan pushed her dark hair away from her eyes revealing an attractively long face with dark almond shaped eyes, high cheeks and beautiful lips. She had medium dark skin that made Merrill think she might have been Egyptian. As she looked up to speak Merrill noticed Greg had taken notice. His stare was so obvious that Merrill felt a little embarrassed for him.

"The design of the canister is significant in two ways." Her soft voice spoke in a clarity that made up for her lack of volume. "First, it can be released or activated only by a sonar unit, not radio waves as was originally thought. Secondly, if it is activated at some depth say 150 feet and then the blue-green algae would be released and mixed with the phosphates as the container rises creating effective disbursement of its contents. From this we believe it was designed for use in large deep bodies such as mountain lakes. This limits our areas of concern if we believe the canisters will be used. However narrowing down the potential targets enough to find them would be close to impossible. There is actually a third point to this. Since the toxin is so virulent we will be requiring anyone who might be in contact to wear bio-suits which I will assign to you directly after this meeting. You must keep them in your vehicles at all times and put them on if you believe you might be near a container or contaminated area."

"Thank you Miss Swailam," Rusty looked around the table once again catching each of their eyes until he reached Greg who was still gazing at Sharan. He grinned slightly and then made a purposeful cough that caught Greg's attention. "Now that we are again all listening, I would like to point out that in a few hours we will be getting a fax. Our ploy is to limit the fax buffers to slow the rate and try to locate the origination of the signal using the cell sites and satellite feeds. Now obviously we are the point group and each of you have your own internal contacts.

Use them. Let's find the Traveler before he has a chance to do something that really hurts us."

Rusty opened the table for discussion and after a few refinements of responsibilities the meeting was adjourned so that the various members could get their teams in place. As Merrill followed Grant out of the conference room he noticed that Greg and Sharan were talking. He laughed to himself as he realized everything that Grant had told him about his friend's weakness for the ladies was true.



The acrid odor of antiseptic hung in the air of the CDC causing Jan's stomach to turn slowly while she fought off a wave of nausea. They had been given shots of antibiotic and assigned disposable paper lab clothes to wear while in the decontamination unit. The soreness of her arm and the scratchiness of the clothing only added further to her discomfort.

Technicians wandered in and out of the many labs too focused on their projects to notice her small frame leaning against the white wall of the hallway trying to stabilize. She felt as though she had cast invisibility on herself for the lack of attention she drew. She could have used some attention. To her the place reeked of death and she doubted she could ever get used to the assault placed against her both physically and psychically.

"Are you all right?" Sarah had just returned from a nearby lab. She sounded deeply concerned.

"I'll be fine. It's just this place. I'll be ok."

"We won't be long. I just talked to the administrator in charge of the decontamination chamber. We can go in now. Just remember they are going to have us shower before we can leave the secured area."

Sarah guided Jan into the doorway she had just emerged from. There were cabinets and countertops on every wall except for the two doorways. The standard door they had entered was directly across from a metal door that looked like it belonged on a walk-in freezer. There was a keypad on the wall just to the right of the metal door.

A tall man in one of the ubiquitous lab coats was the only other person in the room aside from Sarah and Jan. When they came in, he rose and without a word punched in seven digits onto the keypad. There was a loud click and he opened the door and once through they heard the loud clank of the doors bolt. They entered a small room that had two showers on the right and cabinets on the left. There was another heavy door on the far side.

The next room was wide enough for more cabinets like they had seen in the adjoining labs on the left and a door in the center. On the right were large glass windows that overlooked another lab that looked to be fully automated with equipment and tables that were all on motorized wheels. Below the windows there were a series of holes that went through the wall and into thick rubber gloves that allowed the technicians and doctors to work with whatever was being isolated. In this case, a canister about six feet long and 3 feet in diameter with open hatches on either end.

“That’s what they found?” Jan asked as she looked at the strange metal container.

“That’s it. Of course the contents have been removed but that’s what you have to work with. You can put your hands in the glove box in front of you. But that is as close to the thing we can get.”

Jan reached her hands into the two holes in front of her and through the loose sleeves. Her fingers felt tiny inside the huge gloves of the box. “How do you manage to manipulate anything with these things?” She asked.

“The gloves are designed for all size hands,” Sarah said. “Some of the larger men actually find them a little snug. But, you will notice that there are several different tools laying there so the technicians can pick things up including tools like screwdrivers, wrenches, and magnetic pickups, and pipettes, crucibles with holders, torches and scalpels. Trust me, with a little practice you could do just about anything through there.”

Jan focused on her task. She was still fighting nausea but it was receding as she focused on grounding herself for an initial contact with the vessel. She took a deep breath and laid her gloved hand on the surface of the canister. She could feel the energy of several people. None of them seemed to have anything specific about them except one. That one was a very hostile feeling. She focused on the negative energy and closed her eyes.

She could see over the bow of what seemed to be a small cruiser boat and in her mind she took a sweep around her. She began to float around the deck. She noticed what she assumed was an antenna tower. There were both the normal straight antennas like she had seen on other boats but also a small dish.

She traveled down a short ladder that lead down to the main deck. Inside the cabin there were none of the beds she would have expected but instead what seemed to be a combination kitchenette and office. Where the beds should have been was a desk with a chair that was attached to the deck by a track that seemed to allow the user to slide in and out, a computer and a scanning printer which were both secured to the desk with bolts. She turned and looked to the stern. Just to the left of the engine cover was what appeared to be a fiberglass

skid which was beveled giving the appearance of the kind of shoot she had seen on a cement truck. It looked like the shoot could be attached to the gunwale and then extended beyond the end of the stern. In the center of the deck was a square metal plate with bolt width notches at the corners. A spar with small winch was lying against the gunwale. The base looked like it might attach to the plate on the deck. Under the skid and on the opposite gunwale were two canisters like the one she was touching, secured in what appeared to be an angled rack. From the winch a metal cable extended over the boom and held a strap apparently designed to cradle the canisters.

She knew very little about boats and realized she would have to try to describe everything in detail to Sarah when she came out of her meditation. She went to the bow and floated out over the water and began to circle the boat. The vessel had an opalescent dark blue upper and a white hull. On the side she could see a series of numbers. She knew she would never be able to retain them once she left the dream so she looked further. She floated down the side of the boat until she came to the broad stern. Above the outboard unit that extended down to the prop, she saw the boat's name, "Traveler".

The shock of seeing the name snapped Jan back into reality making her already unstable body contort and shake. Before she could gain even enough cognition to her surroundings to pull her arms out of the glove box she began to heave. Sarah seeing her friend lose control grabbed her and pulled her back away from the glass and out of the gloves. By the time Jan regained control she had left a trail of vomit across the floor. Then she looked up trying to see something to wipe her face and mouth and tried reaching for a towel that was on the table behind them. Sarah realizing what she wanted reached up and handed the towel to her.

Jan sat there grounding and stabilizing taking several seconds before she could talk. "I know how the devices are delivered," she said. "But I have to get out of here. The place is really messing me up."

Sarah went to the door and pressed the intercom. The technician who had been monitoring the room from his desk had already notified security about Jan vomiting and had assumed a breach. Lock down had commenced. "Stay calm ladies, you have been locked down. If you go through the door behind you, you will find a room with beds, refreshments, restroom facilities and a shower. Please make yourselves as comfortable as possible while the air tests are completed."

"Great," said Sarah as she went and helped her still wobbly friend into the next room and sat her on the edge of one of the six beds. She found a dispenser, filled a paper cup with cool water and gave it to Jan. She gently stoked her hair back to comfort her. She knew too well how it felt to sick-up that way. "We're going to have to make do for now."

The tone of her voice was calming. “Let’s get you cleaned up and then you can tell me what happened.”

“Grant, the fax just kicked in.” Joseph’s voice was like finger nails on a chalkboard being high and nasal. Grant got up from where he had been sitting and watching Greg talk with Sharan. He could tell that their topics were primarily work related but their posture revealed there was much more underlying. By the time he reached the desk, the other two were already there with Rusty studying the computer monitor displaying the progress of the trace. The data showed that the transmission was coming from somewhere in Pennsylvania. The monitor updated to show Huntingdon County just as the machine hung up and began to print.

Grant picked up the paper as soon as it stopped printing, read it and then handed it to Rusty. The note said, ‘Position a boat capable of hoisting aboard a canister in Raystown Lake in the center of the channel due south of where Coffee Run from Entriiken, PA joins the lake. Contact will be made as soon as the boat is in position. You have four hours. Have Fun, The Traveler’.

“I’ve been there before,” Merrill said. “Grant, there’s a big marina on Raystown Lake called Seven Spits or something like that. There’s a smaller one right at Entriiken, smaller but you might want to check it out too.” Grant looked around at the others, thinking. “Greg, check out those marinas and find us a retrieval boat and a speed boat. Gary, the team except Sharan and Joseph are going to need winter gear. Joyce, get us an amphibious plane. That’s probably going to be the fastest way in, only about an hour by plane. Sharan, coordinate with the CDC and get a unit out there as fast as possible. Joseph, get us a dedicated satellite focused on that lake and start tracking as soon as possible. We’ll meet back here in twenty minutes.”



After Jan took a shower and had sufficiently calmed down she told Sarah what she had seen. “We have to get the information to Grant and Merrill right away,” Sarah said looking around for a phone. There was none. She wished they had been able to keep their jewelry on when they came in but wearing any outside clothing or jewelry had been against the quarantine protocol. Her only hope was to see if they could get patched through on the intercom.

It took almost twenty minutes for them to arrange for the call to DC only to find out that they had just left. She did talk to someone named Sharan who was the assigned CDC on the case who assured her that she would forward the information. There was something that bothered Sarah about her but she couldn’t

put her finger on it. ‘Probably nothing’, she thought.

During the ordeal of trying to get word out she did find out that the air tests wouldn’t be complete for at least four hours and she was asked to provide blood samples from both Jan and her that were placed in a quarantine compartment located on the wall. Those tests would be completed in six hours and then if everything was clear, they would be able to leave. They were told that they may as well relax and have something to eat from the refrigerator.

The last thing that had been on Jan’s mind was eating. She passed in and out of nausea and basically felt miserable. It wasn’t until she grounded and isolated what was causing her problems that she was able to overcome the discomfort. She discovered that there had been a young woman who had been brought into the CDC only two weeks before and had died from a lab accident involving the Ebola Virus.

When Sarah came back to the bed from trying to get her call out she was surprised to find Jan sitting up and looking as if nothing had happened. Her color had returned to normal, she apparently wasn’t running a fever and she was hungry.

“What happened?”

Jan explained that she had to put up a specific shield against the intruding impressions of the woman that had died. Sarah was astonished. “Is this the price you pay for having the gift?”

“One of them,” Jan said. “But it happens so rarely that it took me by complete surprise. How soon do we get out of here?”

“That’s the bad news.”

Chapter 40

“The lake sure doesn’t look like it did when I was here before,” Merrill said while looking down at the gray water completely surrounded by white. He had been watching out of the windows in the back of the six-seat plane since DC and seen the conditions worsen as they rose up into the mountains. The last fifteen minutes the ground had been completely hidden by thick cumulous clouds.

The pilot dove through the fog emerging directly over the lake. The long snake of water that extended as far north and south as he could see looked frozen on top. “You sure we can land on that?”

“Yes,” Grant said nodding his head. “Don’t worry, it’s not frozen, when the weather is calm like this the reflection from the clouds make the lake look a lot

colder than the water really is. See, look down there, the boat is already in position.”

Greg had arraigned for a boat equipped to rescue damaged boats to meet them at the coordinates. Fortunately the rescue business was slow that time of year.

Merrill remembered a nearby cave he had gone into during July years before that still had ice on the walls and even knowing this and the fact that they had equipped themselves with long johns, heavy jackets and gloves, Merrill wasn't ready for the blast of cold that greeted them when they opened the hatch of the plane. “I hope that guy has some hot coffee on board.”

The plane flew a few hundred feet above the waiting boat and then eased down onto the mirror like surface of the water breaking the calm and throwing out white furrows from its wake. The pilot expertly took a wide curve that brought them in direct line of the 30 foot craft and came to a halt only a hundred feet away. He went out into the cold air and dropped an anchor from the bow end of the pontoon where he stood while a small speed boat approached from the far side of already anchored boat. They had an hour to spare.



Grant held a warm mug of coffee in his hands and sipped from it. He was staring at the screen of the small sonar detector. Two sensor arrays had been lowered twenty feet, one from the airplane and one from just below him. Each array had two receptors providing direction and the distance between them provided stereo placement that would hopefully triangulate any signal source. He had contacted Rusty to let him know they were in position and now all they could do was wait. The boat was ominously still, the water had returned to glass and the clouds had dropped within fifty feet of the surface. In another hour they wouldn't be able to see a thing.

“Any word?”

Grant looked up to see Greg standing over him as if waiting for instructions. “Nope. Not a thing.” Grant suddenly smiled. “It looks to me like you're puttin' the moves on Sharan. I have to admit she's pretty sweet.”

“Hell, yes.” Greg said with a tone of satisfaction. “We're gonna pick up on that when we get done here. I can't believe how much we have in common. And let's face it, she is just plain amazing. How'd you know?”

Grant laughed. “Really wasn't had to tell. You're whole body broadcasted your interest. Just make sure you keep your head on straight while we're on this. I suspect things are going to get more than ugly.” His expression changed. “Could

you do me a favor and ask Merrill to come up here.” Greg could tell by Grant’s tone that this was more than a casual request.”

“No problem.”

Grant watched as Greg went up to Merrill who had been sitting at the stern and gestured toward him. Merrill came forward with the look of some urgency. “I didn’t want to bother you with this,” Merrill said before Grant could open his mouth. “I haven’t been able to get through to either Jan or Sarah.”

“That’s why I called for you. I checked the GPS and they haven’t activated but it really seems strange that they haven’t reported in.”

“Grant, I’ve got Rusty on the radio.” Doug was holding up the microphone. Grant got up and took the mike. “This is Grant, what do you have Rusty?”

“They must be watching because the fax just came in and they knew you were in position. They gave us an account and routing to deposit the money. The message also said that once they have the money you should see something off of your port bow and that when we were done that we might want to keep the boat for awhile. Keep your eyes open we are cuing the transaction now. I’ll stay on standby until you see the canister.”

“Suit up everybody. It’s show time.”

Grant put on his isolation mask, turned on its wireless intercom and looked out of the cabin window, scanning the water off to the port side and glancing down at the monitor. Thirty seconds later the display showed two transmissions. One was approx. two miles to the North and the other approx. two miles to the South. Only a few seconds passed and the tank emerged only two hundred feet off of the port bow just as had been advertised.

Grant activated the mike in his mask. “The canister is on the surface. Did Joseph get the signals?”

“Yes and he’s zooming in on the first target now. I’ll get back to you with the results.”



Jan and Sarah felt like they had been in isolation for days even though it had only been just over six hours when a voice came over the intercom saying they were clear and could enter the exit showers.

Jan had slept through a few hours of the long wait. She had needed to regenerate from the shock to her system. But Sarah had been pacing almost the whole time. She knew she needed to get the information to Grant and nothing else at that point mattered. They both rushed to shower with the harsh and toxic cleaners required by the CDC and then quickly dressed.

They had just finished putting on their jewelry and were stepping out into the prep lab when two men approached them. "Excuse me ladies, I'm Special Agent Tom Stone and this is Agent Mike Miller." The taller of the two men wearing a dark suit looked at Sarah. "Mrs. Forrester, We've been asked to escort you to Washington to join your husband."

"Why?" Sarah said with a sudden start. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, but if you will please come with us, we will explain on the way."

They left the lab and entered the long hall and Jan who had been dragging back slightly faked a cough and pressed her amulet. "Excuse me; I need to use the ladies room before we leave."

Sarah who realized something was up with Jan decided to join her.

"Something isn't right," said Jan. "I can feel it." She paused. "I activated my transmitter."

"Ok," Sarah didn't know exactly how Jan knew something was wrong but she understood well enough not to question it. "Let me try my watch." She pressed her amulet and then the top button on her watch and waited. Grant answered. "Hi, Sarah, I've been trying to get hold of you. Are you all right?"

"We're at the CDC and we got hung up in lock down but I'll explain that later. Right now we are in a bathroom. There are two guys outside claiming to be agents sent here to take us to you in DC." Sarah's voice sounded scared.

"I'm not even in DC. Can you barricade yourself in there?"

"I doubt it, but I might be able to stall. Both of us have our transmitters on just in case."

"OK, hang on a sec." Grant picked up the microphone and called Rusty and told him where they were and the condition."

"Sarah, you're going to have to stall them. Rusty has two agents less than ten minutes away."

Sarah looked at Jan who had been listening. "It sounds like we're on our own for a bit." She reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a small .25 caliber Biretta, loaded the chamber and put the gun back in her pocket.

Jan's eyes looked like saucers. "When did you start carrying that?"

"Grant's idea, after our last outing he said whenever we were on assignment that I should be carrying a weapon for protection. Now I'm glad he insisted. Can you act sick again?"

Jan nodded.

"Ok, let's go."

They stepped into the hall where the men were waiting and Jan slowed her pace. She internally lowered her heart rate so that her skin took on a sallow appearance. Jan looked up at Agent Stone. "Jan's not doing well. We're going to

have to stop by the infirmary before we leave.”

“I don’t think so,” Agent Miller said as he pulled his hand out of his pocket and exposed a gun. He then put the gun hand in his coat pocket and motioned for them to go ahead. As, they started down the hall, an orderly with a cart approached them going the other way. When he was almost up to them Jan doubled over and acted as though she were going to throw up and leaned into the cart. Grabbing the long wheeled table, she spun the rolling platform into the two men and ducked down. Sarah who had put her hand in her coat pocket at the same time turned with her gun exposed.

The shorter man fired through his pocket toward Jan and missed. Instead of Jan, he wounded the orderly in the leg. Sarah aimed center of mass, fired twice then turned her small gun on the second man who was reaching into his jacket. “Drop it!” She yelled as loud as she could.

The man froze. He stared at her with eyes that conveyed contempt. “Drop it.” She said in a warning tone. The man started to ease the gun out and then suddenly tried to swing the barrel up to fire. Her gun spoke once more. This time putting a hole in the man’s shoulder and spinning him backward. He turned again raising the weapon and she shot a fourth round which left an ugly hole in the man’s temple. He fell. He was dead before his gun hit the floor.

She stood there as still as stone. Her gun still extended in her hand away from her body. Her complexion lighter than her light blond hair and her eyes wide open. With a heavy sigh she lowered her weapon just as Jan reached her and assured her with a hug. The two stood there holding each other until others arrived.

Two guards with guns drawn and pointed at them approached from both directions. “Drop your weapon,” a voice called out. Sarah, only then remembering the warm gun in her hand, stooped and carefully laid it down. Both women raised their hands, stepped apart, turned to the wall, put their palms against it, spread their legs apart and waited in disgust for the guards to predictably cop a feel.

To their relief, the guards were slow on their approach and two agents came through the door at the end of the hall with their guns drawn. “Freeze, FBI.” The voice echoed down the hall. “Everyone step back.”



Grant’s mind was divided as they hoisted the cylinder from the water. The boat was being maneuvered to load the canister when Sarah had called. Everyone was dressed in white bio-suits with self-contained air. He had to deal with the unknowing captain who was uneasy about having to comply with the directive but calmed down considerably when Grant told him about the unexpected windfall

he would collect when they were done and he was debriefed. Grant handled all of his responsibilities competently and efficiently even though he couldn't get Sarah and Jan off of his mind. He hadn't told Merrill. He figured he already had enough to worry about and there was no reason to distract him as well.

They had no sooner secured their cargo when Grant's watch began to vibrate. "Sarah! Are you all right?"

"We're clear. I had to take the two out unfortunately," she said. "Remind me to thank you again for the gun."

"Any idea who those guys were?"

"I don't know, the only person I talked to was Sharan when I passed the information about the boat to give to you."

"What boat?"

"I think we found our leak," she said in disgust. "Who is Sharan anyway?"

"I'll get back to you; I'd better phone this in. Get yourself packed up to come out here and I'll arrange transportation for you. I love you and I'll call you in a little bit."

Grant pressed the crystal to disengage the call and then picked up the microphone, put on the headphones and switched the output of the radio. "This is Grant; I need to talk to Rusty."

Only a few moments passed and Grant heard Rusty's voice. "You have the container aboard?"

"Yes, but I need you to go secure." He waited again for a few seconds and then again heard Rusty's voice. "I'm on headphone, now switch to scramble."

Grant threw a switch on the radio and Rusty's voice sounded vaguely mechanical. "Ok, what's going on?"

Grant filled him in on what he suspected and as fast as Rusty could give the order a search for Sharan was in progress. "Ok, we'll find her. What else."

"I need Sarah and Jan transported out here. I suspect I'm going to need their talents on this one. Have any success on locating the transmissions?"

"Joseph's got them down to within about 50 feet. It should be close enough for divers. The satellite shows nothing on the surface. I'll get the coordinates out to you before the divers get there."

"No hurry. It'll be pitch black out here by the time we reach the marina. Are the CDC in place so we can go in?"

"They reported in a few minutes ago, give them another twenty minutes and you should be" Rusty hadn't finished his sentence when Grant heard something over the earphones that sounded like an explosion.

"Hold on."

Grant had been waiting impatiently for almost five minutes when he heard

Rusty's voice again. "They just found Sharan."

"Guess I'd better give Greg the bad news. Talk to you later."



Jan and Sarah's wait had been less than half an hour while the FBI Agents talked with the Director of the CDC. The local cops had shown up almost immediately after the agents. They agreed that it was a clean shoot and the agents said they would see to the reporting paperwork. The agents had taken a statement from the orderly while he was being sewn up for a superficial wound to his thigh and they got the full explanation from Sarah and Jan while they escorted them back to the hotel to get their belongings and on to March AFB.

Once at the base, the agents left the ladies to catch a flight on a Lear Jet to Willow Grove, Pennsylvania and then a chopper ride to Blair County Airport where Grant and Merrill were waiting with a rental car. The entire trip had only taken them eight hours which Sarah attributed to Rusty's ability to get things done. While they were en route, Jan told Grant about the boat she had seen in her vision and he had decided that taking a walk in the marina to look at boats might work to refine what she knew. By the time they reached the Bed and Breakfast the time was almost 2:00 AM and all any of them could think of was sleep. They were all tired from the long day.

Chapter 41

Jan cuddled against Merrill's warm body. She could hear the wind howling and every part of her knew the goddess had sent her torrents of winter to ascend on the sleepy towns of the Pennsylvania landscape. It is as it should be, she thought. The idea of waking to several feet of new snow thrilled her. Having lived her life in the Bay Area, she had never experienced a real winter. Even in their new home they had only seen an inch of snow and the people she had talked to in Klamath had said the winter had been an uncommonly mild. The conditions helped the progress of the Retreat, but warm weather hadn't been what she had wanted.

Even though she was exhausted from the previous day's ordeals, she kept waking almost hourly. When she did sleep, she had dreams and her dreams disturbed her. There was the boat she had seen when she touched the canister and the presence of the strange man. She never saw him but she knew he was

there. In these new dreams she saw the boat battling against the wind and being forced ashore. She could barely see the wooded landscape that surrounded the thrashing water that pounded against the hull. The clouds were thick like an unrevealing fog even with the constant wind trying futilely to push them aside. The water was black in the darkness with white caps shining out in severe contrast.

Jan also relived the shooting incident in her dreams, replaying each moment in slow motion. She was forced to realize just how close her and Sarah had been to disaster. Pushing the table at the men when they had a gun trained on them was a fool's gambit at best but somehow the maneuver had worked. Those men had wanted to kill them and she still didn't know why. She might never know. Her need for comfort covered her with a cloud as thick as the ones she knew came with the storm outside.

She rolled over and spooned her body against Merrill's back and legs and began kissing him on the back of his shoulders. He moved only slightly. She slid up so she could reach his neck, put her arm over him, rubbed his chest and kissed his neck with an occasional breath to his ears. She could feel the small bumps of arousal rising from his skin and when she allowed her hand to drift down his stomach she discovered that the bumps were not all that had risen.

He carefully turned to face her and took her mouth to his and felt the flick of her tongue searching out his. As he moved his hand down the smooth skin of her back and on to her buttocks he could feel her goose bumps emerging and her thighs begin to move with him.

They caressed, explored and played in their courtship dance for most of an hour experiencing the best part of a dream that only the joining of their minds could create. After the crescendo of their passion they lay there joined until they slept once more.

An hour later Jan woke again. This time she realized that trying to sleep any longer was futile. His arms were still around her and she felt safe but she also found that she was stiff from not being free to move. As she carefully slipped away and got up, he awoke. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I let things get to me a little too much yesterday." She sat on the edge of the bed and looked over at him. Her pale blue eyes showed a touch of mistiness to them. "There were some real lows between feeling the woman who had died so miserably and of course with the fake officers. But what you don't know is that in the middle of all of the misery, there was a definite high."

"Oh?" He sat up behind her and kissed her shoulder. "What was that?"

"When we got locked down they had to do blood tests to make sure we weren't contaminated. But they did full scan tests. The tests showed that both of us are very healthy and they also showed that Sarah and I are both pregnant just

as I had told you. The tests were only 75% conclusive because we are so early into the pregnancies. But I can say with real certainty now that you are going to be a father.”

Merrill didn’t know what to say. He had been so preoccupied with the case that he really hadn’t had an opportunity to consider being a father. His emotions were horribly mixed. On the one hand he was thrilled but on the other... then it struck him. “What other!” he exclaimed out loud.

Jan looked at him like there were three eyes on his face. “What’s that supposed to mean? I mean it wasn’t the reaction I was expecting. I...”

Merrill took both her shoulders in his hands and kissed her. “I love you Jan, and of course I’m thrilled. I was just taken back for a moment. We’ll have a beautiful baby. I mean how could we not? You are absolutely beautiful and I look like a short John Denver. What else could we have?”

Jan smiled then threw her arms around his neck. “Go get us some coffee,” she whispered then kissed his cheek. She let him go and smiled a blushing smile. “Go on,” she laughed.

Merrill put on a robe and went out into the common living room. It was eight in the morning but the house seemed still asleep except for the owner who was busily cooking breakfast. He stepped out on the covered front porch to have a smoke. His smoke break turned out to be a very quick one as the cold decking immediately began to chill his bare feet and the frigid air climbed up under his robe. He went back inside and found the small service room near the dining area with the coffee set up and filled two cups. The owner came out and staged a heated chafing dish on the table. “Breakfast won’t be until about nine. Because of the storm your friends asked that breakfast be delayed. I don’t think you will be going much of anywhere today so at my suggestion your friend asked me to have dinner for the house as well.” She went on to explain that during the winter they keep stores of food on hand in case of being snowed in. Being well stocked was a practice she had followed for years.

When Merrill returned to the room with the coffee, Jan was sitting at a small table in front of the room’s only window. The wind had calmed but the snow was still coming down lightly. Tree branches were lightly weighted making each branch an effective tier and the ground a smooth contour with little definition like a huge blanket of cotton. “Isn’t it beautiful,” she said. “I think today after breakfast we should go greet the day outside. But in this case I think I will forgo being nude.”

Merrill laughed.



It was a lazy morning for Grant and Sarah. They hadn't woken until 8:30 AM when the alarm sounded. While Sarah went in to shower, Grant lazily put on his clothes, went out through the living room, grabbed a cup of coffee, and outside the front to have his morning cigarette. He loved the chill on his face and the clean smell of the pines with just a hint of wood smoke. His thoughts drifted as he took his first sips of the aromatic brew. Good coffee. He couldn't believe how wonderful life had become. In less than a year he had gone from being alone to having Sarah as his wife, probably the most remarkable and beautiful woman he had ever known, an extended family in Merrill and Jan who were some of the most fascinating people he had ever known and now there were to be children.

Work had always been there for Grant. He had always felt lucky about that. There was always something interesting to do or learn and sometimes, like now, puzzles to work through. He felt that working was ironically like the military slogan, 'It's not just a job'. Grant smiled at the thought. He worried about Sarah sometimes. Who wouldn't? But she could handle herself probably as well as he could. They all could. Their adeptness just made everything more exciting and more complete. Yes, he thought, Life is good.

He finished his cigarette and looked once more at the falling snow. The weather is just one more complication to work through. He wondered if maybe the snowy conditions could be to their advantage somehow. He went inside, refilled his coffee and returned to their room. Sarah was just finishing drying off. "Do you realize how beautiful you are?"

She looked up and smiled. "I think you're a little biased on that mister but the words make me tingle when ever you say them." She opened her towel and pressed her naked body up to him and kissed him. "How soon is breakfast?"

Grant looked at his watch. "About fifteen minutes."

"I'd better hurry. Could you get me some coffee?"

"Here, take this one. I'll get a new one. I need to go out and wait for Merrill anyway. I have some ideas about today I want to discuss with him."

"Ok, I'll be out in a few minutes."

Grant went out and got another cup of coffee. He noticed that the gas fireplace in the living room had been lit so he settled into one of the two large couches that faced each other intended for house guests to sit and get acquainted.

He sat there watching to flames and looking around the antique filled room. He decided that he liked the little Bed and Breakfast. He felt a little guilty having booked the rest of the team in the motel a half mile down but since they were on government budgets and the four of them were freelance they could afford to have a few extra amenities. That was just one more blessing he could be thankful for.

He took out his cell phone and called Rusty who had been waiting for him to call in. Rusty was well aware of the storm and with the limitations he didn't feel any need to bother Grant or Merrill until they were ready to report. Grant found out that the account that the money had been transferred into was held by a fraudulent name in Italy where a second transfer occurred within minutes to a second account in Egypt. Limitations of treaty might delay getting access to those records for weeks. Rusty doubted that they would find anything there, but of course he had put priority on the effort despite that fact.

Grant told him of his plans. He had decided to send the divers out in sea gear to investigate the transmission sites. He explained that the cover of the storm might just give them some advantage against prying eyes during their search. Unfortunately, the satellite was of no help with the thick clouds, so in that sense the Traveler had the same advantage. He also told Rusty about Jan's vision of the boat, the name on the stern being Traveler and the idea of taking Jan out to the marinas to try to identify the type of boat she had seen. Rusty agreed that her vision was the best lead they had so far. With that they ended the call and Grant didn't even bother to close his phone. He called Doug and told him to get the divers out.

He had just hung up and decided to go out for another smoke when Merrill, Jan and Sarah all came out of their rooms. After only a moment to refill coffee cups, Grant and Merrill went outside. "You have any thoughts about how we are going to solve this problem?" Grant asked as they lit up.

"Right now I think our hopes of success are on Jan," Merrill said. "We have to find that boat and I was thinking that maybe she could try making contact with the new canister when it's secured and try to figure out where the thing was made. That might give us more of an idea of who is behind this." Merrill took a long drag off of his smoke and paused as if thinking. "Did you find out anything more about Sharan?"

"No, the last I heard from Rusty was that when they spotted her she was getting into her car and as soon as she closed her door the car exploded. We don't know if she set the bomb off herself or if it was a trap. So we really don't have much of anything. Rusty is trying to track down who she might have been working for but so far there isn't much to go on."

"Did you tell Greg?"

"No, I thought I would take him out for a drink later on today and let him know then. Poor guy, he's going to be heart broken. I know he didn't spend much time with her but for all the ladies I've seen him with I have never seen him so infatuated. Too bad there aren't more like the ones *we* found." Grant looked distant for a moment. "Did Jan tell you?"

Merrill's face broke into a full smile.

Chapter 42

The air was crisp at 3:00 PM when they finally arrived at Seven Points Marina located near the north end of the lake. A mild breeze had started up that seemed to promise more harsh weather was on the way but the beauty of the scene more than made up for small discomforts. Trees lined the shores that surrounded the lake with each branch carrying snow like one flocked for Christmas and broken clouds revealed the kind of blue sky that only cold air brings.

Jan was thankful that she and Sarah were dressed up like snow bunnies with insulated long underwear, stretch pants, sweaters, gloves, boots and stocking caps. Unfortunately, they lost a good part of the day trying to get the clothing. The ladies had only planned for much milder California weather and Altoona was the closest town they could find with winter-wear. Fortunately the sand crews had been out early and even with all of the wind, there had only been about four inches of snow or the drive would have been much worse.

Before they left, Merrill remembered that the marina held almost a thousand boats during the summer months. He guessed that there would be less than that during the late winter and they were surprised to see that there weren't that many less. Maybe one in five berths were open and he could see even as they approached that the variety of boats should be enough to help Jan.

The facility was beautiful. Even the four or so inches of new snow couldn't hide that marina was well maintained. They decided to start with the most northern dock and work their way south.

As they walked the docks they saw almost every style of boat imaginable. Many were sail boats with their barren masts pointing skyward like giant lances held high before a charge. There were power boats with either single or double prows and bass boats with their elevated seats. Jan almost immediately narrowed the search down to thirty to thirty five foot power boats with a flying bridge and her description of the opalescent dark blue finish said that the boat had to be fiberglass or at least fiberglass coated.

They had walked five of the long docks and had to fight slipperiness and cold the entire time. All of them were starting to feel the chill reaching into their bones when Jan saw a boat on the next dock that seemed close to what she had seen in her vision. They went around to that dock to get a closer view.

The boat she saw was a Bristol Bay boat built by Roberts back in the 1980s. When she looked closer she said that the boat in her vision looked a little newer but the lines were right and of course this boat didn't have the slide attached to the rear gunwale. But this was definitely a start.

They decided to get out of the cold. Sarah's teeth had begun to chatter before they ventured out on the final dock. There was a small restaurant across the parking lot so they decided to get some lunch.

Once they were seated Grant told Sarah what he wanted and then walked over to the marina office and looked in the window. A tall obviously Scandinavian man with short blond hair and weathered skin was sitting at a desk behind a long counter. Grant guessed that during the peak months as many as five people took their place behind the counter but being February the manager and maybe one other was all that was needed in the office. As Grant came in the man got up to the counter. "Good afternoon, I'm Stan Rolfston is there something I can help you with today?"

Grant was surprised to find that when the man rose he out-stood his 6'1" height by at least half a foot. He could also tell that the man had done his share of hard work by his callused hands and strong upper body.

"Quite a storm we had last night." Grant said trying to start some small talk.

"Not as bad as the one that's going to hit tonight."

The man pointed through the window at the tall clouds that were coming together over the lake. "It's going to be quite the blizzard, I suspect. It's been really dry this year and it looks like we're going to get our weather all at once this time. Hope you have plenty of warm clothes, even the buildings are going to be hard to keep warm."

The man paused and took a long look at Grant. "You didn't come in to talk about the weather and I suspect by the look of you, that you aren't here to ask about future rentals. I figure you're with those Feds that dropped in down at Aitch yesterday. So, how can I help you officer?"

Grant laughed. "Well, you got me. I'm a private consultant for the FBI and I was wondering if you had seen a certain boat lately. She's a Bristol Bay style, white hull, blue upper. The name on her should be Traveler."

"I saw a boat like that early this morning just after the storm broke, don't know about the name but there were two guys having a hell of a time trying to get it on their trailer. The wind kept pushing the boat sideways so they couldn't get the bow up."

"About what time was that?"

"Probably about 4:00 A.M. I'd come down to make sure everything was secure. I saw them when I pulled in. They were over there at the public ramp."

“Did you get a look at the guys or their truck?”

“They had a fairly new Jimmy Truck that’s about all I noticed. Sorry, I was more focused on them, trying to decide whether to go help or not when they got the bow started up their rollers. Since they seemed to have control of it, I came in here where it’s warm.”

“Don’t blame you a bit,” Grant said momentarily staring out at the public ramp.

“Thanks, we’ll be around for awhile so if you think of anything else, please give me a call.”

He handed the tall man his card, shook his hand and went back to the restaurant. When Grant returned to the table the others had all ready started eating. The smell of his Swiss steak made his stomach growl making him realize how much the cold weather had enhanced his appetite. He was surprised, the great food was much more than he had expected for such a small restaurant but then he realized that the restaurant was undoubtedly responsible for the meals they used on the tour-boats throughout the summer. Their performance would be highly scrutinized by the tour company.

“Well, you were absolutely right on with the boat,” he said to Jan. He filled the others in on his conversation with the manager. When he was done they decided that after their meal they should head back to the Bed and Breakfast before the storm hit again. They had found what they were looking for so there was no reason to risk being out any longer.



“She was a plant?” Greg looked shaken and hurt just as Grant had predicted. He really had thought that Sharan was that special one of a kind that he had been looking for and feelings like that were rare for him. “I’m sorry Grant. I was so enthralled with her that I’m afraid I may have told her too much about your team.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Grant replied. “One, she was on our team so you would naturally assume she had been properly screened. In fact they’re looking into that right now. And two, the information that put Sarah and Jan at risk came directly from them not you. We have to figure out a better code in our own ranks, though they had no reason to doubt Sharan either. I’m more worried about your feelings at the moment.”

“I’ll be all right. At least we found out now rather than later on. I just feel a bit embarrassed because I’m usually a lot more careful both with information and with my feelings.”

Greg paused a moment and then changed the subject. "Did you get the report from the divers yet?"

"Yes, I went ahead and got the report and relayed the information to Rusty. They found the transmitters, our triangulation of the two signals worked perfectly. They were underwater about 30 feet out from shore and had wires running into the underbrush to an FM receiver and antenna that couldn't be seen. My guess is that whoever controlled them could have been up to ten miles away."

"That makes sense as far as their boat goes. When the storm came, they had to get off of the lake, but if those secondary receivers are already planted, then they don't really need the boat to continue their mission. My guess is that the Traveler wasn't told about Jan's visions and that Sharan was working without his instructions. So, we know something that he probably doesn't know we know." This time it was Grant's time to pause and think. "I'll give Rusty a call and give him the information on the boat and you tell the rest of the crew to lock down. We're going to be here for at least another week."

Grant looked out of the window of Greg's hotel room. The wind had now kicked up to a gale with gusts up to 40 mph. Snow from the trees danced and blew through the path of the bright spotlights that lit the parking lot. It was only 5:30 PM and the sky was pitch black. "I think I'd better get back to the B&B before I have to stay here. When the storm really kicks in, that could be a really treacherous two miles."



The big Scandinavian's prediction came true with a vengeance. Cold air from the Northwest came in and swept the valley reaching nearly 100 mph and with the wind came the snow. By 8:00 PM Grant and Merrill could only go out to smoke through the back door. The front door was behind a drift of snow that was already only inches below the window sills. In the field in front of the building there was already more than foot of new powder that was growing by the minute. "Doesn't look like we're going to go anywhere very soon," Merrill said.

"That's all right from my perspective," said Grant. "There won't be another contact for five days and the delay will give Rusty a chance to get more information. In the meantime, we can just kick back. The B&B owner did say there was plenty of food and gas available for just this reason."

From where they stood the scene was surreal. The wind had been blowing the new snow so hard that the area behind the building had less than an inch of new forming drifts to each side and fifteen feet out from the deck they stood on.

They were cold from the low 10 degree temperature but weren't at all chilled

by the wind. Merrill realized that they were only a few feet away from severe hypothermia. He turned to go back inside. "Merrill?" Grant sounded concerned. "Are you ok with what happened with Jan in California?"

"Well," Merrill sighed. "Ok, isn't really the word I would use for what I'm feeling. But being in this type of work has its risks. I think she was as safe with Sarah as she would have been with me. Jan and I have talked about the dangers involved and have agreed that we like what we are doing enough to accept those risks." Merrill pulled out another cigarette and lit the end.

"I don't think I will ever get used to the idea of either of us being in danger, but in case you're worried about us pulling out, that won't happen. We both believe in the team and we both care too much for you and Sarah to ever let you down. Besides, you and Sarah handle it."

Grant looked back over the building snow drifts. "Yes, we handle it. But I have to admit, I sometimes wonder why. Both of us seem to thrive on the action and the problem solving. But, I know that you and Jan had never been exposed to these situations until you joined in with us."

Merrill took a deep drag of smoke and then flicked the butt out into the snow. "Don't worry Grant. We know what we have to do and even though our problem solving is done a little less conventionally than yours, I think we thrive on the challenges just as much as you do." He turned toward the door once more. "Come on, let's go in. It's getting cold out here."

Chapter 43

After four days the blanket of snow was still twelve feet deep in areas. The roads had been cleared by Friday but travel was slow. The landscape was a wonderland of icicles resistant to the weak sun that tried to burn through the gray skies. No one in Raystown could remember such a storm. More than a couple of feet of snow was rare but 12 feet in four days was completely unheard of. Normally the snow was completely clear before another storm could strike but this time the smaller first storm had prepared the ground to fully accept the second. Unlike a ski area, the people were unprepared for such an assault. The third storm hit two days later adding even more frustration and another three feet.

Merrill had finally learned to play backgammon the day after the first storm. There was little to do in the bed and breakfast other than dig the snow away from

the building or sit inside. Both Sarah and Jan were beginning to have their first symptoms of morning sickness which could have been lessened substantially if Jan had access to her herbs and unfortunately there was no fresh ginger in the B&B pantry. Instead they drank tea and ate soda crackers to at least partially relieve their unbalanced systems.

Grant had sent the diver team out to walk the edge of the lake to see if they could find more receivers. He wasn't sure what they would do if they found any but if nothing else the assignment helped keep them busy.

On Wednesday they had to dig themselves out of the building. The wind had drifted the entire front. It was impossible for them to open the front door. Grant and Merrill had never moved that much snow before. Where the open fields had their share of snow the building had acted as a backstop for drifts that extended up on to the roof. They were fortunate that the back had been sheltered enough for them to get out at all.

On Saturday Grant received a call from the pilot reporting damage to the plane. It wouldn't be flyable until Tuesday since he couldn't get replacement parts. Grant had to call Rusty to get parts flown in by a second plane.

The canister they had retrieved the previous Monday had been transported to Harrisburg where the CDC had a full facility. Since there was a second plane coming in Grant thought it might be useful to have Jan see what she could get from this new source. He also thought that it would be a good idea for them to all get out of the B&B for awhile. Cabin fever was beginning to take toll on everyone's nerves.

They arrived at the Blair County Airport at 7:00 AM and flew to Harrisburg in time to have a 9:00 breakfast. Jan had a hard time with the inevitable turbulence they experienced with the small aircraft. Her symptoms were raging. Merrill was very concerned with her paleness and worried that she might be sick on the plane. Once on the ground, their first priority was to find a specialty store to buy the needed ginger and Vitamin B for the ladies. The waitress in the Corner Café understood the situation all too well and was happy to brew some of the ginger into a tea.

Merrill had finally made contact with Kalen while they were in flight. Kalen didn't seem to be surprised to find that his friends in the middle of another case and on the other side of the country. In truth he had been expecting Merrill's call for two days. He had a message from Muriel. Merrill was only slightly surprised that the archangel had channeled through Kalen even though he and Kalen hadn't been in touch for several weeks. That seemed to be how it worked. Muriel would pop up out of nowhere when things started changing.

Kalen was told that Merrill was entering a situation where he would need to

rely on the strength of his guides to help him. Desperate Magick was at work and he needed to be extremely cautious on how to handle himself. Kalen also conveyed congratulations to all of them for their upcoming births. That part surprised Merrill more than any of the rest. Somehow vision of the mundane world by others always surprised him, even though he had the gift himself. As vague as Muriel's clues were, they seemed more precise than other messages he had received. The clarity of the message underlined its importance. Merrill would have to go into meditation that evening to see what his grandfather could tell him.



When they arrived at the CDC they were met by two agents from the local office. Apparently Rusty wasn't taking any chances this time after Jan and Sarah's recent experience. Neither Jan nor Merrill felt any psychic intrusions and both of the women seemed to be feeling more or less normal so they didn't expect a repeat of their previous problems. Just to be certain, Grant and Merrill joined them in the isolation room.

When Jan put her hands into the gloves to reach the canister she immediately felt the energy trace of Traveler. "He actually handled this one," she said. "I can get a vague image of him though it is like looking through water. I've seen this before. It's the kind of shield that Merrill uses when he goes invisible. He looks Middle Eastern. He has short dark hair, dark skin and he seems to be fairly short and thin. He's not much larger than me. He's wearing a goatee."

Jan pulled her hands out, "Damn, he detected someone remote viewing him and blocked me out. Merrill, this is more your thing, see if you can get through it."

Merrill reluctantly put his hands in the gloves and grounded himself. When he felt prepared he touched the canister. "Ow!" he exclaimed and jumped back almost dragging the gloves inside out with the action. "I got blasted. I saw nothing except for a flash of bright light. I don't think he is very happy." Merrill thought a moment. "Jan see if you can get a location of where this thing came from."

She put her hands back in the gloves, avoided the energy stream of the Magus and probed the cylinder for any other secrets it may have to share. "Yes, she said, I can feel the source as being west of here. I need a map."

"Do you need the map now or can you retain the location enough for when we get out of here?" asked Grant.

"I can do it after," she said. "I won't be able to get any closer than the city without carrying something with me but I have a thought about that too. Let's stop by the local book store and pick up a national road atlas."

"We done here?" asked Sarah.

Merrill nodded.



“Grant!” Greg’s voice sounded excited. He had been waiting and the Bed and Breakfast for them to return and came out on the porch as they arrived. “We found two of the receivers and if I’m right we can pinpoint the next location within a few hundred yards.”

“That’s terrific; tell the team they do nice work. Now what we have to do is get Joseph to focus the satellite centered on that location with wide enough spread to watch the roads surrounding the lake to about five miles out. Tell him he’s going to be looking for a truck dragging a 32’ cabin cruiser. That boat shouldn’t be too hard to spot this time of year. Then we just wait for instructions.”

After Greg left, Merrill and Jan went into the living room and laid out the road atlas they had found at the Target store before they left Harrisburg. They started with a city map of Harrisburg and figured out the orientation of the CDC building. Then Jan faced the direction of the canister in relation to the map. “The energy was coming from that way, I’m sure of it.” She said. They drew a line that was approximately west by northwest. Then they looked up the location of the CDC in Riverside California where they had made contact with the first canister and she focused on the memory. After only a few moments she determined that the energy flowed from an almost northerly direction. They drew the second line and two crossed somewhere in the Puget Sound area.

When they told Grant what direction they determined he looked perplexed. “I thought I knew how I was going to do this but now we have a problem. We have to be in two places almost at the same time.” He sat on the couch and stared at the map.

“Can I get you some coffee, honey?” Sarah said with sympathy in her voice. She knew that Grant was continually calculating their next moves and then when conflicting information came into the picture he had to focus on re-planning. “If you don’t mind, that would be great.”

He sat there staring at the map for the better part of an hour and then suddenly stood up. “I think I’ve got it. I’m gonna call Rusty, he’s going to have to pull some of his own magic for us.”

Chapter 44

Merrill was lying on his back looking at the cotton-like clouds that floated gently in the otherwise clear blue sky. Jan who was lying by his side pointed at one and suggested that the cloud looked like a large white eagle soaring high above them.

A wave of warmth flowed through Merrill's body as he rolled toward her and propped himself up on his elbow. Jan's perfectly shaped body was contoured by the tight blouse that outlined her now braless breasts and her peasant dress drooped between her raised knees. Her petit body and high cheek bones reminded him of the delicate beauty he associated with elves. He had never been told but he had often mused at her dimensions. Being only 4' 10" tall her exact measurements were not easily guessed but Merrill speculated that she was 32-24-32. He knew for certain that her breasts were just large enough to cup easily in his hands. He was aroused just being there next to her.

She rolled toward him and they embraced. While in a deep kiss she rolled on top of him. Instantly they were naked and her soft skin pressed against him. His back was cushioned by the blue-green grass that covered the entire valley where they made love. Tall Evergreen Trees that defined the border of the valley from the rolling hills swayed in the soft breeze that kept them cool but not cold. He knew he loved her more than he loved his own life and he loved what they had become together even more. His mind swirled in the ecstasy of the moment and he closed his eyes as she came down upon him. His hands stroked through her fine light brown hair. They remained engaged with out moving for a time in this dreamy excitement.

Jan reached to the sky with her arms and began to press harder down on him by pulling down with her bent knees until Merrill's throbbing made him want to cry out. A few gentle rolls of her hips caused Merrill to grab them and pull her in even tighter, the act was complete.

Merrill looked up once again only to see Jan's look of bliss turn to horror and she screamed out. Her eyes were as saucers. He lifted his chin and looked over his head to see what had alarmed her and realized that he was lying in warm sand. The landscape was flat and barren and a snake so large as to belong to a prehistoric age rose above them almost in striking distance. The snake's fangs were the size of pickets from a fence and dripped venom. The reptilian eyes seemed to glow green with their hypnotic gaze.

Merrill suddenly stood lifting Jan with him up to her feet. When he turned the snake was coiling as though preparing to capture a tasty morsel. There they stood trapped. In the sand they had no chance of outrunning the horrifying reptile so Merrill stepped between the snake and Jan and yelled to her. "Run!"

"SCREECH!"

The sound came from above and they realized that the cloud that had looked like an eagle had become solid and was speeding down in a full dive. The snake leaned back in response to the eagle's death scream and struck out just missing the deft bird that spun and drove long, sharp talons into the reptiles back. Blood was thrown off as snake made a futile attempt to shake off his giant attacker until with a loud crack the reptilian beast's back was broken and it lay limp.

"SCREECH!"

The giant bird rose into the sky and once again became the peaceful cloud it had once been and the soft grass returned.

Merrill and Jan sat up suddenly to the sound of a wolf howling in their minds and stared at each other. They were in their room both soaked with sweat.

"What happened? What was that? Who were they?" Jan stammered.

Merrill who was also still shaken could hardly answer. "I think we just shared a vision and the intruder is dead. The others are my guardians. The eagle is the chief and the wolf is my grandfather. What you may not realize is that everything was real."

"It seemed real enough at the time," Jan said, in an almost hysterical voice.

"I've never had a completely shared vision before," said Merrill. "But it seems that we were taken from our normal dreams and locked in the otherworld. I wouldn't like to think what would have happened if my guides hadn't been there to stop the snake. From everything I have learned, if you die while there, you die here."

"I've never experienced anything like that before at all," said Jan tearfully. "What was that thing that attacked us? I think it was more than a snake."

"I'm not sure, I suspect we won't know until we are told by Grandfather, but I can't help but think that it was one of the Traveler's manifestations. We need to talk to Grant. This guy is even stronger than I feared."



By 10:00 AM Grant had arraigned everything with Rusty. There would be a helicopter available only two minutes away from the lake and a jet ready to take them to Seattle on a minutes notice. Now all they could do was wait.

The four were sitting on the couch dressed in army winter clothes and looked

more like arctic explorers than federal agents. They were looking at the map of the area. There were only a handful of routes out of the area and each of them had turnouts that would seem appropriate for an interception so now they just needed to locate that boat. Fortunately, the day was clear so the satellite had a clear view of the whole valley. "I think we should all activate our amulets in case something goes wrong. I gave Randy the frequency and transponder numbers and he'll be able to keep a lock on us."

Just as they all reached up and touched the center of their amulets, Grant's phone rang. The other's all stared impatiently while Grant talked to Rusty. His furrowed eyebrows told them that the next part of the operation had begun even before Grant had hung up and started to fill them in. "Well, we were right on the location and as I suspected the Traveler had seen our progress in locating the transmitters. In his fax he even complimented us on our diligence and seemed humored by the fact that the information would do us no good. So... now we hit the sky. I have four specialists joining us while the rest are on the boat."

He picked up a canvas bag that he had sitting on the floor next to him and took out four small hand held grenade launchers. "The M-79 hasn't been used much since Viet Nam because the weapon was superseded. But in this case we have a special application." He pulled out ammunition belts containing six rounds each. "Each of these has five non-lethal rubber rounds for stopping someone and a sixth round developed for crowd control. The blue shell contains a net that when shot will spread out. That round is only good from about 50 to 70 feet so be very careful when you decide to use it."

He paused and looked at Jan who looked uncomfortable both in having to use a weapon but also being dressed in army field clothes. "Jan, I know you don't use weapons, but I want you to carry one this time. From what Merrill has told me about your vision, we may all have to be in close. We'll show you how to use the rifle and just remember that the ammunition is not designed to kill anyone, only stop them. Just be careful they tend to kick a little."

"Are you sure Jan and Sarah should be doing this?" Merrill asked almost pleading against the idea.

"Sarah has insisted that she be there and we need both you and Jan especially after what you told me this morning."

"I agree," Jan said. "I really don't like the idea of taking a weapon, but I know somehow that I am needed this time. Especially after last night I know we have to get this guy."

"Ok," Merrill said with his head hung low. "But I really don't like it."

Merrill, You and I will have our regular guns so just remember if you have to use your berretta , shoot to drop them, not kill them."

Grant paused and looked seriously at each of them. "We all know what we have to do so let's go do it."

As they got up, Merrill squeezed Jan's hand. When she looked up, he kissed her. "Don't worry we're just there to help find the guy. Odds are, we won't even need any of this."

"I'm ok. But my instincts are telling me that we will have to use them." She had tears in her eyes.



They sat in the helicopter waiting for word from Rusty. The middle of the floor was filled with road blocks and tire spike strips. Jan and Sarah both felt intimidated by the three Special Forces Commandos who took up the rear seats of the Blackhawk and fourth specialist who was at the controls. They could feel the men's eyes trying to penetrate their loose clothing. Their imaginations were either succeeding or drawing their own conclusions and neither method saw them as more than another desirable conquest. The thought alone made both of them shiver.

"Are you ok?" Merrill asked Jan. He could see that she was clenching her jaw and her aura was drawn in. "It's ok," she said quietly. "I'll tell you about it later."

Merrill was just about to push the question when a voice he recognized as Greg's came over their headsets. "The canister is afloat and we have gone into recovery."

"Roger, going into recovery mode." Grant's voice responded.

Five minutes later Joseph's voice broke the silent air. "We have the boat, it's headed north on Highway 26 just north of Penn."

"Copy that," Grant replied. "We're going airborne, figure out our intercept. Remember we don't want to be seen making our drop off."

"Roger," Joseph replied then after a few seconds, "Go north 15 km then northeast 5 km with a maximum ceiling of 500. Then hold for instructions."

"Roger"

The chopper's rotors roared and the cabin shook slightly as the armored bird took to the sky. Sarah felt the ship lurch forward and when she looked out the window she swallowed hard. She felt like they were trying to top the trees. She knew that there was more than adequate clearance but she was frightened just the same.

"Drop in approximately two miles south of Walker. There is a series of curves they will be going through to approach you."

"Copy that. Assault team, time to lock and load."

Everyone opened the shotgun shaped weapons and loaded them with an impact round except Jan. In her confusion she loaded the blue shell that contained the net.

The gun-ship descended and spun in one motion and they were on the ground. The first of the commandos threw back the sliding side door, lowered to the ground and was handed a barricade. While he placed it in position the second man jumped down and grabbed a second barricade. Two trips back and the two men had placed the blockade on the road. The third man threw out the tire spike strips and jumped out. The chopper was in the air once more.

“Suspects ETA two minutes,” Joseph’s voice called out.

“Roger that,” Grants voice responded.

The chopper turned to its left, dropped down behind a hill and then was positioned about 1 km south, parallel to the road.”

“They’re passing you now, close the door.”

“Roger, the trap is sprung.”

As the ship rounded a curve in the hillside they saw the truck and boat trailer ahead of them by about a quarter mile and the pilot matched their speed. As anticipated they saw the helicopter behind them and tried to crash the barricades causing them to run over the tire strips. As the metal bird set down Jan heard the sounds of gunfire, saw one of the specialists fall to the ground and then saw smoke from his M-79 launcher as it took down one of the men moving from the truck to the right. Two more jumped out from the truck and after firing a few rounds from behind the doors they bolted in opposite directions staying low to the ground. They both managed to get clear of the road and find defensible places in the ditches on opposite sides.

Then Jan heard the sounds of bullets striking the front of the Blackhawk. The doors on both sides of the chopper were slid wide open again and they all piled out. Grant and Sarah went out the right, Merrill and Jan went out the left. They all moved quickly and stayed low until they reached the shelter of the ditch. Merrill kept watch up their side of the ditch, waiting for anyone trying to escape in their direction while Jan watched the road. She looked across and saw Grant fire his weapon and the man on his side fell. The third man, which was on their side tried to run directly away from the road and was taken down by one of the commandos.

Then Jan saw something strange. A man got out of the truck and began casually walking toward the edge of the road on their side. He stepped down into the ditch and then continued to walk out across the snow toward the trees that were only fifty feet away. No one seemed to be paying attention to the Middle Eastern man sauntering away.

She grabbed Merrill by the shoulder and said, “What about him?”

“Who?” Merrill asked.

When she pointed in the man’s direction, he suddenly saw him. Both of them realized that no one else would be able to see him so they began pursuit. Jan stayed behind Merrill as they rushed across the open space as fast as the snow would allow..

Grant yelled out, “Hey, where are you going” But neither Merrill nor Jan took their eyes off the man walking toward the woods. Then the man looked back, saw them coming and turned. He was carrying a heavy pistol.

Both Merrill and Jan dove sinking into the soft cold and as they landed they heard the gun’s report, the wiz of the bullet going over their heads and the harsh bang as the bullet struck the side of the helicopter.

Merrill tried to hit the man with an impact round from his weapon and missed as the shell pulled to the right. He had never been told of the weapons tendency to do that. Jan saw that if she didn’t do something, the man was going to disappear into the woods so she staggered up and fired. The blast of the weapon almost lifted her 90 pounds off of the ground and sent her stumbling and sliding backwards. The net however found its target and threw the man down as if stuffed within a cocoon and slammed him to the ground unconscious. He was suddenly visible to everyone.

Merrill ran over to Jan who had fallen and picked her up. “Are you all right?” His tone was almost hysterical.

Jan started laughing. “I can’t believe I did that... I got him. I would never have believed it of myself but I *can* go warlock if I have to.”

Merrill looked at her with amazement. “You did it perfectly, I was just afraid that you got hurt with the kick back. You would never believe how proud I am of you right now. I knew you were able to handle yourself but this...”

“Let’s go get him.”

By this time Grant and Sarah who had been running full tilt slid up to them breathing hard. “Is she ok?” Sarah cried out.

“She’s perfect.” Merrill grinned.

They all approached the partially mummified figure and Merrill put both hands on its head. As Merrill took a deep breath and exhaled Jan could see the change to reds and yellows in his aura. “He’s not going anywhere now,” Merrill said.

He raised his hands away from the Magus and bared his palms toward him. Jan could see the energy field in the form of heat waves building around the Traveler. “Jan or I have to stay in the same room with him for now,” he said. “We’ll work on something more permanent later.”

Sarah could feel the energy being generated by Merrill with the raising of goose-flesh and knew he must be putting a lot into what ever he was doing. Grant

looked confused. He looked at Jan and said, "I can't believe you did that!" He gave her a hug and whispered to her, "I'm certainly glad you're on our side."

Chapter 45

The ride in the Blackhawk had been long and uncomfortable for all of them. Merrill had to be relieved by Jan periodically so that he could recharge himself. When the Magus awoke he tried to draw energy and found himself disconnected so he tried to tap into the energy Merrill was generating for the shield. Merrill had to change what he was doing several times before a stable field that the Traveler couldn't penetrate could be established and each change put an extra drain on his psychic energy. Finally they arrived at their destination in Washington DC and were taken by van to an FBI Intelligence Division Facility where the captives could be interrogated.

Fortunately the commando that had been hit was only superficially wounded in the arm and could be treated on site and was sent to the infirmary as soon as they arrived.

Rusty greeted them as they came in. "Sorry to be so abrupt", said Grant, "but we need to talk about the interrogation. I intend to do something that's a little unconventional. What we have here is a magick user of the first order. Normal questioning and even torture won't work with this guy. This is what I have in mind..."

About ten minutes into their meeting, Sarah poked her head in the door and said, "I'm going to need to go with the cylinder to get a closer look and I want Jan to come along. Maybe we can get another vector and I need to do some more analysis of the algae."

"I think you're going to have to go alone this time," Grant said. "We should be done here soon and we're going to need Jan for the interrogation. See if you can set up a viewing for Jan for when we are finished."

Sarah nodded and closed the door again. As soon as she left, Grant continued his explanation. Rusty had little confidence in the plan and could not truly believe in the psychic events but since Grant had been running operations, he agreed.

While Grant was concluding his meeting with Rusty, Sarah requested that the newly recovered canister be moved to a local CDC facility so that she could examine the algae first hand.

Merrill barely had time for coffee and cigarette before he and Jan were asked

to join the others in the interrogation room. He had left the prisoner in a cell on the lowest level of the facility. He and Jan hated the coldness of all of the floors below the lobby so it had been a relief for them to get outside. He was able to develop a shield that would hold without his presence for a few hours so he had been allowed this short reprieve. Neither of them looked forward to returning to that dungeon. A tall man that Merrill had never seen before opened the door and granted them entrance. He was a big man of over 6' whose frame well exceeded 300 lbs. but showed no sign of being overweight. He reeked of efficiency and his energy felt as cold and calculating as a shark. Merrill suspected that the man was capable of inflicting his subjects with more than a little discomfort to satisfy his mission with out even a flinch.

The 12' X 12' room they entered was stark with three brick walls and a fourth that was white plaster with a steel door and a large one-way glass window. A plain dark wood conference table filled the center of the room surrounded with six chairs. The Traveler sat one end of the table with his arms bound to the arms of his chair glaring at the emptiness in front of him. Grant sat two seats away with a large map of the United States and a pencil in front of him.

Hatred slammed against Merrill's shield as he and Jan entered and even though the prisoner never looked up Merrill could tell the extent of the man's outrage and anger. Merrill was starting to think that maybe sedation might not have been a bad idea but Jan had insisted that she would have better success getting what she could from his wake consciousness before resorting to medical alternatives.

The big man approached the Traveler and put a hand twice the size of normal under the Magus' chin, squeezed slightly and raised his head. "You're going to be a good boy and do what you're told now aren't you."

The prisoner seemed to recognize that resistance at this point was futile and stared up at him. When the big man let him go, he just stared down at the table once again.

"Ok Jan, it's your turn."

Jan's face was pale as she sat in the chair between the prisoner and Grant. She seemed to be straining to keep herself focused in the extreme environment with the worst adversary she could imagine. Merrill moved behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders and closed his eyes. Even Grant thought he saw a change in the air around them though he couldn't define what he saw.

The petit brunette reached over to the Traveler and grasped his arm and closed her eyes. After a few moments she reached over and slid the map in front of her and picked up the pencil. The Magus' eyes went wide as she began placing small circles with exacting accuracy on the map. Two of them were in Lake Raystown at the locations where they had recovered the two cylinders.

"That's all of them." she said.

"That's only fifteen," Grant said skeptically. "They said there were thirty-two of them."

"They lied."

Grant looked at Jan and then at the Traveler and with a huge sigh put his hands behind his back and began to pace away from them. When he turned he was completely calm. He stepped back up to the Magus and in a firm voice asked, "Who.. Are.. *They*."

The Traveler looked stunned. Even Merrill could feel a source of energy he couldn't identify as the captives mind snapped shut. Jan looked up abruptly. "I think I'm done," she said and started toward the door.

Merrill looked at her quizzically and then followed. Grant, seeing the procession to the door, picked up the map and looked over at the normal interrogator. "You can begin now. I guess we are done here." The hulk of a man nodded, went to the door and saw them out.

Once outside Jan motioned for all of them to step a distance from the door. "There *is* something bigger. It didn't show up until Grant asked and then the man's mind just blocked off everything. In that second or so I got the impression of a big organization. This guy is just another lieutenant. I got some images of the Middle East and I got the word 'Pendentive'."

"Pendentive" Merrill blurted out? "What in the name of the Goddess could a pendentive have to do with anything?"

Now Grant looked confused. "I don't even know what a pendentive is."

"That much I do know," said Merrill. "I learned about them during a class on the Renaissance. It's an architectural term for the spherical triangle that creates the transition between the rectangular or square building and the round dome. It's kind of like fitting a square peg in a round hole. But I can't think of what that could have to do with any of this."

"I'm not sure," Jan said, shaking her head. "I think it is a name of some kind. But I will tell you one thing. When I was connected I could feel this guy building some kind of energy even with Merrill's shielding. So, I suggest we do a ritual and try to build something stronger."

"No," said Grant. "That might be the prudent thing to do but right now we don't have time. We have to get down and find where those things are being produced. Besides, they have him now and believe me, this is not a place he is going to get out of or have a chance to talk to anyone."

"I personally don't think they can handle him!" Merrill sounded adamant. "Have him kept sedated or just kill him but don't let them try to keep him like any other prisoner. It just isn't going to work."

Jan was nodding in agreement with Merrill. "I don't believe in killing of any kind, Grant. You know that. But this guy isn't even human anymore. He's... I don't even have a classification for what he is but he can't be allowed to escape."

"I understand," Grant responded patiently. "But you and I both know that the agency doesn't work like that. You can't ask them to just kill the man and they aren't ever going to fully believe in magick, not even Rusty. I had a hard enough time convincing him to let us do our part of the interrogation."

Merrill and Jan looked at each other and realized that this was going to get them nowhere. Besides Grant was right, they had to stop production of the canisters and Traveler was the agency's problem now.

"Jan," Grant said. "Nice work, I'll get this map over to Rusty so he can have teams retrieve the other canisters and we'll meet up with Sarah at the CDC. They should have the room set up for you to look at it when we get there."

"Actually," Jan cut in. She looked a little distant. "I don't think we have to."

She closed her eyes and stood there still for a moment then put in the earphone to her watch and pressed the third button.

"Hello?" Sarah's voice was as clear as if she were standing there.

"Hi, this is Jan. There isn't time enough to explain right now but you're standing in the isolation room aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm taking some samples using the gloves."

"Do you know the orientation of the room as far as East-West?"

"Pretty sure," Sarah replied.

"In which direction are you seated?"

"Almost due south." Sarah's voice sounded strange like she was distracted.

"Is there anything removable from the canister like a nut or bolt, just anything that could be decontaminated and taken?"

"Actually there is a screw lying on the table that they took out when they removed one of the hatches. Will that work?"

"Perfect, how soon can you get that ready to go?"

"About twenty minutes," Sarah said. Her voice had returned to its normal vibrant self."

"That should work. I'll have Grant call you back. It looks like we're about set to move on."

"I've scheduled the tests I wanted done so I'll be ready as soon as I get that sample for you."

"Thanks Sarah, that's should do it. See you in a little bit."

Merrill looked at Jan. From his side it seemed like an odd conversation until Jan asked for the first map and marked a line that went from Washington DC and crossed through Tacoma, Washington. "How did you do that?"

"I'm really not sure," Jan replied. "When Grant mentioned joining Sarah, I had a wave of sensation as if she was standing right next to me and somehow I knew I could sense in my normal way through her."

Grant looked at her incredulously. "You could sense her presence?"

"Actually, I felt more as if we had joined in some way. I can't really explain it better than that. That's something I need to talk to her about."

"Well, you'll get your chance real soon," Grant said. "That just saved us at least an hour."

He pressed the first button on his watch and spoke. "Hi, how soon can you wrap things up there?" he paused as if listening. "Good, when you're done head over to the airport, we're going to be off to Seattle as soon as we can... Ok, I'll see you there... I love you too."

Grant had that faraway look he always got when he had just talked to Sarah. Jan thought it was cute. Grant and Sarah shared that closeness that created warmth even in the middle of a crisis. She looked up at Merrill reminded that they shared that same kind of closeness as well.

Chapter 46

"Déjà vu," Merrill said as he climbed in the back seat of the rental car at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. "Seems like we have done this before somehow doesn't it?"

He was referring to the first time he and Jan had been swept off on a mission with Grant and Sarah. In a way the circumstances were similar. They were getting into a rental car at the same airport going out into the area with nothing but an item belonging to someone and Jan's unique ability to have that item guide them somewhere. That time had resulted in their being ambushed.

Grant laughed. "Don't worry Merrill; we're headed south this time. I thought we'd head down to the Tacoma Dome District and start from there. I don't see any need to head up to Seattle right now."

Grant drove the luxury Ford out of the harsh cement parking garage and entered the parkway. Jan was relieved to find the rear seating in the Crown Victoria warm and comfortable and cuddled up to Merrill. They had departed from Washington DC fairly early. Even going through security they were in the air by 5:30 PM and with the time change they had arrived by 7:30 and now a half hour later the hours were starting to catch up with her. She looked out of the drizzle

coated window at the dark shadows of the hillside half hypnotized by the light posts they passed. The wetness created a starry collage of color that strained her eyes. She was beginning to fade out when Grant's voice sounded out from the front seat.

"Does it seem like we're headed in the right direction Jan?"

Jan slowly sat up rubbing her eyes and then reached into her purse and took out the half inch bolt that Sarah had given her earlier. Holding the metal in her left hand she closed her eyes and focused on the energy and the secrets it contained. "Yes, this is the right direction; the place seems almost directly in front of us."

When Jan looked at the signs that overhung the highway, she could see that they had turned south on Interstate 5. She glanced off to her left and could see that they were passing a large shopping mall called South Center. She yawned and leaned back against Merrill who put his arms around her as she began to drift off to sleep. "How about now Jan?"

Merrill felt her start as the sound of Grant's voice brought her once again into consciousness. When she looked up again the scene had changed. There windows were full of dancing colors that came from large electronic signs that announced casinos and RV Sales and glaring lights from surrounding cars. "I need to get some coffee," she said. "How long was I out?"

"About twenty minutes," Merrill said and then kissed her hair.

"I can't believe I'm this tired," she said.

"I can," Merrill said. "Not only has this been a long day but think about the energy we both have been directing. I know I could use some sleep."

Jan focused again on the bolt. "It's off to our left now."

Grant took the next exit and began to maneuver into the left lane when Sarah pointed out a cafe off to her right. The large neon sign that marked the building displayed the large figure of a dog and above the dog the name 'The Poodle Dog'. "I personally think we could all use some coffee and maybe a snack."

"Sounds like a plan," Grant grinned as he pulled the town car off to the right and crossed Highway 101 into the parking lot of the cafe.

They seemed to be entering a different era as they entered to restaurant. The decor seemed like remnants from the early 50s before the freeway removed the major traffic of trucks and travelers away from the once major thoroughfare. The owners had obviously taken great care to retain the ambiance of the boom era truck-stop / greasy spoon even though the clientele appeared to be mostly from the local neighborhoods. The smell of fresh burgers and French Fries filled the air along with the sounds of dishes clattering in the kitchen and the murmur of the many customers seated comfortably in booths.

"You know what?" Merrill asked while looking around. "I've been here before."

I didn't remember until we came in. It's been years since I was here last. We're in Fife. It's kind of the last stop before you go into Tacoma. Just down around the next curve in the freeway is the Tacoma Dome and not much further than that is the highway to the Narrows Bridge."

A waitress in her forties dressed in fifties attire vaguely reminiscent of trashy romance stories came and took them to a booth that overlooked the parking lot. "Coffee?"

"Yes please," said Jan turning her cup right side up.

The rest of them followed her example while the waitress handed them menus and then bent over to expose some cleavage to the men as she poured each cup where it sat. "I'll be back in a few minutes to take your orders."

"I think she takes her work a little too seriously," Sarah giggled while pretending to glare at Grant whose eyes had obviously been taken off guard.

"Merrill do you remember what is east of here?" Grant asked and took a sip of coffee.

"This road takes you takes you into Puyallup and Sumner. They're both small cities that started out as logging towns. Nice little area. You remember, Puyallup is where we stayed last time we were here when we went to Orting. We just went in the other way last time."

Merrill sat up straight and picked up his cup. "There is also another highway back there that goes back up north but on the opposite side of the Auburn-Kent Industrial area. That area is mostly industrial parks and storage lots full of shipping containers. After the ships come into Tacoma they are loaded on trains and trucks, some of the empties are stored out there as well has being a convenient area for manufacturing. Boeing has a plant there too. Not too much else. Some residential and small city support and a race track if I remember correctly." He took a sip of his coffee and looked over at Jan who was digging in her purse.

Jan still looked sleepy as she took the bolt out again and held it. "We're still a ways away from what we are looking for, but we definitely need to go in that direction," she said nodding toward the east.

Sarah who had been listening looked over at Jan. "I wanted to ask you about what was happening when you called me at the CDC. I felt very strange when you talked to me. I felt almost like you were touching me but of course you were several miles away and I was having trouble concentrating."

"I think our minds were linked... I wanted to ask you what you felt."

"I'm not sure. It was very strange almost like a distant part of me that I didn't recognize coming forward in my mind. I wasn't uncomfortable as much as a little disoriented."

"Later on when we get to a motel, I want to try something," Jan said. "I think

there's more to this. But we need to get going and get to that motel, I really need some sleep."

Sarah nodded as the waitress returned. "Have you decided on what you're going to order or would you like a few more minutes?"

Merrill laughed. "I haven't even looked yet."

"I think we better have a few more minutes," Grant said.

The waitress went through her coffee routine again and their cups were full when she left.

Sarah looked over at Jan who had an almost haggard look about her. "Are you all right?"

Jan shook her head. "I just feel drained."

After eating, they continued their drive west as the road curved following the Puyallup River taking them further from the lights of the city. The road was dark except for the headlights of the car and the eerie reflection from the moon onto Mount Rainier whose top seemed to be cut off by a ring of white clouds. The grayness of the rain-clouds had passed adding to the darkness and allowing just pin pricks of light from the brightest of stars. Jan continued to have trouble staying awake.

When they neared a group of highways and a turn off to Puyallup, which they could see just off to their right, Grant asked which he should take. Jan's only reply was to point east. She seemed to be struggling to do even that.

The highway they entered showed signs that took them east toward Rainier through Bonnie Lake and north to Auburn. There were also exits that took them into Sumner. Jan told Grant to exit on Traffic Street and turn left toward town. They passed a train platform that had been updated to act as a station for commuters and a block beyond Jan pointed north.

They turned left and crossed a small bridge and started take a windy road that seemed to be heading them nowhere when suddenly Jan said to stop. On their left was a large metal building sitting alone on several acres of otherwise cleared empty land with a single dirt drive. Each corner of the building had a blazing iodine lamp that filled the surrounding field with light. Near the building was a flatbed truck with a shipping container on its back and a single car.

"This is it," she said and then passed out.

Merrill was frightened. "We have to get her somewhere! There is definitely something wrong."

He tried to wake her with no success.

Sarah checked her pulse and listened to her heart. "She seems to have a normal pulse but I think you're right about getting her somewhere."

Grant saw a mail box that seemed to belong to the property and took out his

cell phone. After talking for a few minutes he hung up and turned the car around.

“Is there anything in Sumner?” he asked Merrill.

“Not that I can remember, but there is the hospital in Puyallup. I remember we were just above the fairgrounds down the hill from the motel where we stayed.”

“No, let’s get to the motel where I can look her over,” Sarah said. “She seems to be suffering from exhaustion. It might be the last thing she needs is to be waiting for a hospital staff. Merrill, why don’t you ride up front so I can keep an eye on her?”

They drove back across the bridge and took the right turn that led them back toward Puyallup. When they reached the center of town Merrill told Grant to turn left on Meridian. After about two miles and a hill that reminded Grant of San Francisco they came to a familiar sight. The South Hill Mall and behind it was the motel they had stayed at only two weeks before.

Chapter 47

Merrill lay Jan down on one side of the queen size bed in their motel room. Even when he carried her up she didn’t stir from her deep sleep. Sarah immediately checked her vital signs once again and seemed confused by how she could be out so deeply when she seemed fine just hours before and she wasn’t showing any of the normal signs of distress such as labored breathing or fever. She seemed to be just drained. “Merrill, I don’t know what to say. I don’t think there is anything more the ER could do that I haven’t done already. It just doesn’t seem natural.”

Grant had gone down to the car and retrieved the bags they would need. Fortunately they had been able to get adjoining rooms. When he came in he looked at both Merrill and Sarah.

“Well?” His voice resounded of concern, close to the point of desperation.

Merrill was staring out into space like he was trying to solve a puzzle that was deep within his subconscious. “Maybe it isn’t natural.”

He paused drumming his fingers on the top of his head. Then he turned to the others as if he’d had a revelation. “Maybe that’s the problem.”

“I need the lights dim. Turn them all off except the bathroom.”

While Grant and Sarah turned off the lights, Merrill stood over Jan and partially squinted his eyes. After a moment he gradually opened his eyes and looked at her as if from his peripheral. “Her aura is wrong. She is normally white and extends out with mostly blues with pale yellows near the outside. Right now the white area

is very thin in comparison to normal and there aren't any of the colors beyond that." His eyes went wide. "Oh! There's a black area just at the crown of her head. Damn. She's been tagged. THAT SON OF A BITCH!"

Merrill's face shown red and he began projecting so much energy that even Grant could feel it harshly. The energy was startling to both Sarah and Grant. They had never seen Merrill get truly angry. They watched as Merrill took several deep breaths and then could actually feel energy emanating off of him increase as he grounded himself and drew as much as he could handle. Merrill laid his hands on Jan's forehead and then backed away slowly keeping his palms facing her. "I'm going to need your help," he said as he looked over at Sarah.

"Me? What can I do?"

"Jan told me you have the gift. In fact I had noticed it myself but she was the one that was fully convinced. What I need you to do is ground yourself like we did during our ritual and then follow my instructions. You're going to do some psychic healing."

"But..."

"You can do this. She will do most of it herself. All you have to do is replenish her energy."

Sarah looked at Merrill who was still holding his hands facing Jan, nodded and took a deep breath. Merrill could see Sarah's aura gaining strength. "All right, think of yourself as being fully connected to the Mother Earth and feel her yield her energy to you."

He looked at her again and nodded. "I can see that you have the energy flowing. What I want you to do is put your hands on Jan's chest palms down and envision the energy flowing into her. Right now I have her shielded but she is too weak to draw for her self. Once I see that she is strong enough to handle the strain, I am going to remove the tag."

Sarah looked confused. "What's a tag?"

"Don't worry, I'll explain later."

The two hovered over Jan for several minutes. All Grant could do was watch. He hadn't fully realized the strength of the emotional bond he had made with the psychics until then. He could have and had handled having any of them in physical danger, even Sarah. This was different. This was something new and beyond of his control. This was something unknown to him and he was visibly shaken.

"Ok, you're doing good," Merrill said. "It's time for me to get that thing off of her."

He took a deep cleansing breath and then closed his eyes. He focused on the black area that was now a part of Jan's aura and in his mind he could see what looked like a wire traveling off into space. He envisioned himself ever so slowly

pulling the wire away from Jan and pulling the darkness with it. Once he saw the black lifted away he envisioned it on fire and the wire with its root disappeared. Jan's eyes opened abruptly and she tried to sit up. "What happened?"

Merrill sighed. "It's ok now. Just lay back and rest. After you have rested a few hours I'll explain everything. I'll explain it to all of you. But for now we need sleep."

Merrill lowered his hands and gestured for Sarah to back away. "Thanks Sarah. Thanks to you, we saved her."

Chapter 48

The clouds hung low over the hillside cutting the higher trees in half. He was just below the cottony billows and could see clearly down the wooded hillside to the calm horseshoe shaped lake below. The fragrance of cedar perfumed the air along with the underlying musky scent of decaying leaves.

He moved deftly and silently down through the tick undergrowth of huckleberry, salmonberry and nettle he could feel the cool softness of the moist forest litter under his paws. The lake was just ahead. He could tell he wasn't far because of the addition of the sweet scent the trilliums added to the mixture and the ever increasing dampness. Looking further down the slope he could see that his nose had been right. Slender stalks holding broad leaves rose above the ground, partially hidden among the ferns. Each green cluster held a large and lovely delicate white flower with three petals.

A splash brought him to full alertness. He had company. A pair of river otters played hide and seek at the edge of the water. It was a pleasant surprise, finding them had been rare until a few years ago since they had been trapped almost out of existence until the day of the environmentalist.

He moved further down wind and out of any possible sight before he approached the water. Staring into the water he saw himself in the mirror-like surface and realized he was now a mature wolf beginning to gray slightly on the muzzle. The only inconsistency in the image was his steel blue eyes.

A new scent joined the others and he turned to the familiar approach of his grandfather. He was a handsome and dominant male with distinctive dark lines at the corners of his eyes. As soon as he approached and sat, an eagle swooped down and landed beside him. Merrill was not at all surprised to see that the chief had decided to join them.

Momentarily the world spun as they all changed form. They sat comfortably cross-legged under the thick canopy of the rain forest among the ferns. When it was time to meet they usually came here. It was a preference of all three of them. It was beautiful and it was calming.

“Grandfather, I am glad you could join me. I am also pleased to see you as well Chief. I have a problem.”

The two nodded in agreement and the Chief spoke. “We know your enemy. His evil is known far into the other world. He tampers with dangerous things in our world, things beyond control in yours. He is bent by his own lust for power and even he cannot control the forces he unleashes upon you.”

Grandfather raised an eyebrow and Merrill could see he was about to enter in his own thoughts. “My son, this is far beyond what you can handle by yourself. We will intervene where we can. Like the snake we saw before, this being evokes things into your world where we can only dream and into the dreamscape. They are like the demon you manifest in lives past and have destroyed in this life by disbelieving. But this evil can manifest more. Only you have the heart and wisdom to destroy them.”

“Grandfather, we have captured him and he is locked away,” Merrill sounded surprised by their instruction. “I thought I just needed to be assured that I had successfully detached Jan from him. I don’t want him to be able to track us psychically.”

The Chief nodded. “You have done well and severed his control but remember this is a resourceful man. He has cut himself off from his own guides. We have gone to them and gained their permission to interfere. But there are only certain things we can do. All we can really tell you now is that you must be alert. You and yours must draw from each other.”



When Merrill sat up in bed. The room was bright with the already risen sun. Jan lay next to him gently snoring. Not really a snore he thought, it was more like a soft purring. He looked at her aura and it was once again full and strong. Closing his eyes momentarily he thanked the goddess that he had discovered the tap in time. It would not have taken the Magus much longer to bleed her dry of energy, her life and the life of their daughter. Daughter? Where did that come from? He hadn’t even considered gender until that moment; only that they were going to be parents.

He dismissed that thought. He was just relieved that they were safe. But now he had to try to explain what had happened and what they were dealing with to

the rest of his extended family. He wondered if he should tell them about his own rather colorful karmic past. He knew that eventually the story must be relayed to Jan but he really hadn't planned on it for awhile.

Grandfather had brought that up for a reason. But why?

He decided he needed his morning cigarette and got up. After sliding into a pair of charcoal Dockers, a tan tee-shirt and loafers, he put on his pendant and watch, took his cigarette case, lighter and the room key-card and slipped outside as quietly as possible.

Merrill noticed that there was no steam from his breath. The morning was surprisingly warm for early March. Either that or it was much later than he thought. He looked at his watch, 10:32 AM. No wonder, he thought. That had been the longest he had slept in a very long time. He must have been more dragged out than he had thought.

He took a cigarette out of the case, put it carefully in his mouth and lit it. The smoke that he exhaled was closer to what he thought he would see when he came out. As he looked out over toward the mall he could see that the parking lot was already filling with cars. "This South Hill area is always busy," he said to himself.

"Seems to be." The familiar sounding voice of Sarah came from behind him. He was startled not only because he hadn't felt her approach but also because he hadn't realized he had said that last part out loud.

"I heard you get up and thought I would check with you on how Jan was doing."

"She seems to doing fine," Merrill said and displayed a relieved smile. "I'm not surprised that she is still sleeping though. Even with the amount of energy we poured into her last night. It isn't the same as drawing on your own."

"I thought I would never get to sleep last night. I was so wound up from worry. It was strange though, as soon as I lay down, I was out. I really don't remember anything until about a half hour ago. I never sleep that deep."

She looked at him. Her brows furrowed and then put her hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm ok." Merrill took a drag off of his cigarette. "There is a lot to tell you about. But it will be easier to tell all of you at the same time and explain it all rather than to piecemeal it individually. But there is one thing I need to talk to you about. When we linked into Jan, I could feel the love we all have developed. I need to figure out how to explain to Grant that he is a part of that too. I know he must have felt left out somehow when I pulled you into the healing last night. But really there wasn't much he could have done."

Sarah threw her arms around Merrill and gave him a hug. "Don't worry Merrill, he and I talked about that some before we went to sleep last night."

As she released him she added. "He is well aware of the intensity of our little family. And trust me, he doesn't feel left out."

The door of the second motel room opened and Grant came out. When he looked to his right he found Merrill and Sarah talking and walked over. "I just got off the phone with Rusty."

"Let me go in and see if Jan is ready to get up and then let's get breakfast at one of the restaurants behind the mall. We can talk there."

Since Grant and Sarah both nodded, Merrill went back inside the motel room. He found Jan sitting up. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I'm so stiff, I feel like I slept for a week and I am really hungry. Other than that I feel great."

Jan spun to the edge of the bed and got up just in time for Merrill to meet her there and embrace her. "We almost lost you last night," he said. "I don't think I could have survived it if we had."

"I'm all right now and don't worry. I'll know what is happening if something like that ever happens again. The problem was that I couldn't identify what was wrong."



Merrill remembered seeing a small cafe when they were down in Puyallup and since none of them really wanted the bustle of one of the many large restaurants, they decided to try something more intimate. It was a cute little place with about ten tables that were decorated with red checkered table cloths. It was after the breakfast rush and before lunch so they were the only customers. "This is really nice," Jan said as she took her seat. "It reminds me of some of the little cafes up in the mountains."

The waitress, who was beginning to pass out the menus, smiled and said, "I'm glad you like my place. I've tried to keep it simple. I think people need a place to go that reminds them of a simpler time and that's exactly what I have tried to do here."

She handed Grant the last of the menus and smiled once again. "Enjoy your meal."

Moments later a second woman came to the table. "Who would like coffee?"

They all turned over their cups simultaneously and in an unintentionally comical manner all said, "Please."

Sarah, who was the only one to see the humor, laughed. The others looked at her questioningly and she laughed again. "Guess you woulda hada been there," she smiled. "No wait. You were there."

They *all* laughed at that.

"I think we're all a little rummy from last night," Grant said.

"Personally, I am happy to be back in my normal clothes," Jan said grinning.

She and Sarah had both put on their long peasant skirts and blouses and the men were back to wearing their slacks, collarless shirts and corduroy jackets. It was a contrast from the winter gear, then military wear and then jeans they had been wearing over the past week.

"It's the first time in over a week that I feel like myself."

The waitress brought the coffee pot, filled each of their cups and took their orders.

"You know," Grant said after the waitress left. "I'm not sure where we should begin," he paused. "I know that Merrill has a lot he needs to fill us in on and I need to fill you in on what Rusty told me. So, I suppose we should start in the order of when things happened. So, Merrill, why don't you tell us what is going on."

Merrill looked up to make sure no one was in earshot of their table before he began.

"It's a little hard to explain exactly but are you all familiar with the term 'Psychic Vampire?' He could see them all nod affirmative so he continued. "What you may not know is most people who drain others of their energy don't know that they are doing it. They have a need, whether it's from loneliness or ill health or from depression they need to continually be recharged by an outside source so they instinctually attach themselves to others and drain part of their psychic force. For those people the amount that they draw is enough to maybe limit the other person's psychic ability or make them seem slightly drained at times. They are not a good thing by any means but for the most part they are relatively harmless. That connection is what I refer to as a tag." He paused momentarily and sipped some coffee.

"The tag we were dealing with last night was different, though the same in principle. The difference was that it was intentionally placed by the Traveler and he was draining her dry. If we hadn't figured it out and removed it. She might have died. She was almost gone by the time we did react to it."

They all looked solemn. They had all known it was bad, but none of them except Merrill had realized just how close to death Jan was. "The good news is that we did take care of it and she is ok now."

The waitress returned with their meals and as they ate Merrill continued with his story. "I need to explain a little about how all of this works. Last night, what I saw was a dark area in Jan's aura and coming out of it was what appeared to be a wire or cord that led off into space. With my mind and energy I pulled it out and

destroyed it. But there really was never a cord as such. That was just a metaphoric translation of what was going on psychically. It was a way that my mind could interpret what was happening. In reality, there is no spatial relationship in a connection like that. They are simply connected through Space/Time. Since our minds are not capable of thinking in that dimension the symbols are the translation into our reality so we can make sense of it."

Merrill stopped and once again sipped his coffee and Grant opened his mouth as if he were going to cut in. Merrill raised his fingers to indicate he wasn't done.

"I'm not sure what value that explanation has for you just yet but I had a dream last night. I've told you about my guides. Well, they showed up last night and told me that the Traveler is a true dark ceremonial magician. What that means is that he is capable of summoning things from other realms of time/space and bringing them here to our world. Sometimes they are things that even the Traveler can't fully control."

He paused again to take a bite of his eggs and potatoes. "My guides have said that they will help as much as they can, so I'm assuming that they will stop him from those evocations. But the Traveler is strong in many other psychic ways that deal only in our world as well, like the vampire tag we dealt with last night. Both Grandfather and the Chief warned me that we are not done with him. And they told me that we may have to link together in order to fight him."

They all sat for a moment in silence and ate some of their food. It wasn't extraordinary food like a gourmet might desire, but it was very good. Bacon, eggs, hash browns and home made biscuits. They were all very hungry and after taking in what Merrill had laid out, they all seemed to need to just be silent and digest both the information and the breakfast. After several minutes Jan asked, "What do you mean link?"

Merrill looked at her and shook his head. "I'm not sure. I know about several types of linking. We have done some already like recharging each other or during ritual. But I'm not sure that's exactly what they are talking about. The worst part of it is, I'm not sure we will know what we'll need until we need it."

Grant looked at Merrill to make sure he was done and said, "This is a lot for us to grasp in one sitting I think. Though I have no doubt about the reality of what you are talking about at this point. I just don't think there is any more we can do with it aside from being aware of it."

"That's exactly right," said Merrill. "But I had to make sure you were all aware of it so I wanted to go through it all together and as soon as possible."

They all nodded so Merrill looked back at Grant. "Ok, well I'm done, sorry it was such a downer. But hopefully you have better news for us."

"Well, actually I have." Grant smiled and looked at each of the others. "First

off, I talked to Rusty this morning as you know and he asked me to relay a much deserved congratulations for a mission well handled. And I personally want to express my admiration on how all of you performed, especially Jan. Some of that work was more than amazing. He also told me that they took care of the warehouse last night and closed it down without a hitch, and they have been having their little talks with the Traveler, though none of the techniques have worked so far, he feels that they will have the information that they will need to go up stream on this soon. He suggested that we take a vacation and go home for a well deserved rest.”

Grant picked up his coffee cup and took a good sized gulp. “I personally would like to see how the Retreat is coming along.”

He looked over at Merrill. “I could use a smoke, how about you?”

“If you will excuse us, I really could use one too.”

Grant led Merrill out on to the porch outside of the restaurant and lit up. After taking an initial drag, Grant looked at Merrill. “Is there anything you don’t do?”

Merrill laughed, “Well there are a few things, but what are you talking about now?”

“Rusty did one of his notorious background checks on our entire team. Typically no one knows about them since he didn’t ask for a release but he also knows that I know he does them. Anyway, he looked up your military record. Why didn’t you tell me you knew how to fly a chopper?”

Merrill grinned. “I didn’t think it had any value after all of these years. That was my way of contributing to Desert Storm instead of staying low like most of my friends. I flew Med-Evac.”

Grant smiled. “It seems like there is more and more about you that I like Merrill. I was there too, but on the ground. Hell, I might have even seen your ship. What did you fly?”

“A Blackhawk. I didn’t want to try the Chinook. Those are an art in themselves.”

“Guess you ought to know. Rusty authorized a training refresh for you if you want to take it. Its only two days a week for a month and you will be civilian licensed. What do you think?”

“I like it, but why would he do that?”

Grant took a deep pull off of his cigarette. “Because of the remoteness of our Retreat, he thought it might be helpful if we had our own helipad on site.”

“That would save us a lot of response time, but how are we going to hide one?”

“Well, there is no reason we really have to, but I brought that up and he suggested a modification to the barn or an additional utility shed.”

Grant paused since Merrill looked pensive. "Don't worry, I know what he has in mind, I think you'll like it. By the way, Richard has had a little additional help while we were gone. I'm not sure exactly what we're going to find when we get back."

Merrill laughed. "A big hole is what we'll find. There is no way he could have gotten the foundation poured in two weeks."

They went back in and found that Sarah had taken care of the bill and they were just getting up to join them. As they all stepped outside, Jan looked up at the blue sky. "I'm ready to go home now."

Chapter 49

Merrill was lying on the bed in their motel room staring at the ceiling with Jan nestled asleep in his arms. They had only removed their outer clothing. It had been only 3:15 PM but she needed a nap and he wanted to be near her after all of the close encounters of the day before. Besides he needed time to think about his dream. He still couldn't figure out what Grandfather had meant when he said they must draw from each other. At first he thought he meant link but now he wasn't quite sure. They had captured the Traveler and he was in the most secure holding in the entire country. It just didn't make sense. That guy wasn't going anywhere soon.

At almost 4:30 Jan began moaning in her sleep and woke up suddenly with a start then wrapped her arms around Merrill and hugged him with all the strength she had. "I love you Merrill. Thank you."

"For what?" he asked.

"For being there when I needed you most."

He placed his hand under her chin and raised it so he was looking directly into her eyes. They were full of tears. "I will always be there. Don't ever doubt that. Don't ever fear about my being gone. Even if something were to happen to either of us, which I don't see happening, and trust me, I really should be the one to know. But even then, we would be together."

He kissed her and held her tightly for awhile and then whispered, "You know, I really am ready to go home. What do you think about getting up, finding Grant and seeing what the plan is?"

It only took a moment for them to dress. Then they tapped on the door that joined the two rooms. There was no answer. They looked at each other and Jan

pressed a button on her watch.

“Hi,” Sarah’s voice sounded a little tinny coming from the small speaker on Jan’s watch. “We’re down in the bar.”

Jan smiled, “We’ll be down in a minute.”

They went outside and felt coolness. While they had been resting a storm had begun to blow in from the coast and it had been raining lightly with gusts of wind beginning to arrive. Because of the clouds it was already getting dark. It was a reminder of where they were. After all this was Western Washington in the early spring.

Merrill looked up at the thick layer of heavy cumulous clouds that were closing in on them. “This might be a pretty wild night,” he said grinning. “This is really the one thing I miss being down in California.” He looked at Jan’s face which was collecting just a few drops of moisture carried by the wind. “You know what they say about Seattle weather don’t you?”

Jan looked at him quizzically.

Merrill laughed. “If you don’t like the weather, just wait an hour and it’ll change.”

Jan put an arm around his waist and pulled him down the walkway toward the restaurant and bar. “Come on; let’s get out of the rain.”



The restaurant was nearly empty. Only two booths were occupied when Merrill took a glance inside on the way into the bar which was also mostly empty. The only others were Grant and Sarah who had taken a table near the back. The single bartender was staring at a small television and didn’t even bother to acknowledge their entrance. Merrill and Jan went and joined their friends who were sharing a pitcher of Marguerites and had glasses waiting for them.

As they approached the table, Grant said, “I hope the Marguerites are all right with you.”

“Sounds good,” Merrill answered as they took their seats.

“Not exactly a hopping place,” Jan said as she looked around. “With all of the people traveling up and down South Hill, I thought this place would be packed. Isn’t 5 o’clock happy hour?”

“The bartender said that Tuesday night is pretty much their slow night,” Sarah explained and took a sip of her drink. “During the week they get mostly business men during the day and motel residents in the evening and census is really low in the motel right now. Usually around 7:30 they get some customers but otherwise they’re pretty dead.”

“Well that’s fine for us,” Grant said. “It is nice and peaceful.”

“Did you notice the storm coming in?” asked Merrill. “The clouds look pretty intense.”

“Pretty normal for this time of year,” Grant replied. “We’ve got an early flight out in the morning so I don’t suppose we want to go out much tonight anyway. Though I’m not sure I really want to eat here. I’m in the mood for a really good steak.”

“What do you think Jan?” Merrill asked.

Jan nodded, took a sip of her drink and then asked, “You know of any good places?”

“There is an Outback just up the hill a few blocks, a couple of trendy spots in the next parking lot and the Olive Garden we tried the last time we were here.”

“I’ve never been to an Outback,” Sarah said. “I’ve heard they’re pretty good.”

“Actually, neither have I.” said Grant.

Both Merrill and Jan shook their heads.

“Well, I guess we’ll do that then.”

Merrill held up his glass. “Here is to going home.”

After they all saluted that idea, Merrill looked over at Grant. “You mentioned that Richard had some additional help. I was curious about that.”

“I really shouldn’t have mentioned it but Rusty decided that he needed us up to speed a little faster and since he had to drag us home from Europe early, he decided to help us out a little. I really don’t know much more than that except that the project is a bit ahead of schedule now. I mean, even more than you had already gotten it.”

Merrill looked perplexed. “How could he do that? I thought we were working under restricted access and ‘need to know’ until the lab is covered.”

“Don’t worry. Remember, it was Rusty who came up with that part of the deal when I went to him about the permit problem. Trust me. What ever he has done, we will all be pleased.”

Chapter 50

Merrill and Jan sat close together on the living room couch sipping on their first cups of coffee. They had had woken early, lit the gas fireplace and let the warm glow of the flames remove the chill from the night. It felt good being in the house once again.

They thought of it as ‘the house’ because they were building their home. This was temporary. Home was where they would start their married life. “You know,” Merrill spoke in a low tone. “I am really happy about the baby but still can’t be a little sorry that we won’t be able to have the house done before the wedding.” He looked at Jan and she saw eyes that reflected love and compassion. “I know you wanted to walk in there right after being married and pronounce it a lifelong honeymoon. I just want you to know that it still will be. It will be our special place to live out our lives and to raise our daughter.”

“Daughter?” Jan’s eyes grew wide with surprise. “Where’d that come from? As far as I know we don’t know that yet.”

“I’m sorry,” Merrill replied. “I thought I had told you.”

He set down his cup and took her empty hand in both of his. “The other day I was thinking about us and when I thought of our child it just came out that way. I’m not sure how I know but I am positive our baby is a girl. I hope I didn’t ruin any surprise for you. I had planned on asking you if you wanted to know before I said anything.”

“A girl,” Jan smiled. “What do you want to call her?”

“Well,” Merrill paused. “She was conceived on the cusp of Pisces and Aries at midnight. So if we add nine months to that she should be born on the cusp of Sagittarius and Capricorn.”

“I hadn’t thought of that, she’s going to be a Yule baby,” Jan sounded delighted.

Merrill picked up his cup and thought for a bit, sipping on his coffee. “You know the story behind Yule don’t you?”

“Well I know it has to do with the gift of fire.”

“Right, it was the gift of an old oak tree to save the life of a child.”

“Ok, but how does this get to a name?”

“I’m not sure, I just thought it might be nice to relate the name to the occasion some how. Like maybe in honor of the tree. But somehow Oak doesn’t seem like much of a name. How about Amber? It’s related to trees and is associated with Capricorn.”

Jan put her arms around him and kissed him deeply. “That is absolutely perfect. I love you Merrill. I should have guessed you would come up with a name like that.”

“Amber Erickson,” he said.

“I just had another thought,” said Jan excitedly. “If we were to stay with that concept for her middle name it could fulfill a couple of interesting things. If her middle name were Willow it would be significant as a healer and that would give her initials that would make everyone look at her in A.W.E.,” she giggled.

“Amber Willow Erickson,” Merrill recited. “I love it.”

While exploring the name and getting more and more excited their voices lost the quietness they had intended and soon Grant and Sarah came wandering out of their room.

"I'm sorry," Jan said. "We really didn't mean to wake you."

Grant smiled. "That's alright, we weren't asleep and that little bit wouldn't have woken us. We just heard the laughing and wanted to join the party. Let me grab a cigarette and I'll join you for coffee."

"Actually, I could use a smoke about now myself," Merrill said as he got up and grabbed his cigarettes and lighter.

While the men went out for their smoke Jan told Sarah about Merrill's knowing and the realization that the babies were going to be born at Yule. "Do you think he could tell about ours as well? I know he is the father in your case but we seem to be so connected that I thought maybe."

"I don't know but that does remind me of some things I want to try with you."

"Yes, I remember you mentioned that before when we were on the phone."

"I think maybe tonight we should do a ritual and you and I should try joining our power in the circle and see what happens."

Sarah had a confused look on her face. "I thought that was what we did when we shared the ritual before with the cone of energy."

"No, this is different but probably easier to demonstrate by doing than explaining."

The door opened and Merrill and Grant returned to the living room. When Jan and Sarah looked up Merrill and he looked at Jan and said. "I think we need to have a ritual tonight, I told Grant about our baby name experience and he wants me to try to identify theirs."

Sarah and Jan started laughing.



After discarding the two and a half week old milk and the few other expired items from the refrigerator, Jan and Sarah made breakfast. The smell of fried bacon, eggs and potatoes filled the house by the time they sat down at the table and ate. When they were finished, the men cleared the table and filled the dishwasher and then went outside for an after breakfast smoke.

The air was cool but neither of them could really call forty degrees cold especially after the conditions they had seen over the past week. "You know," Merrill said. "I really like it here. You get the moist ocean air in the morning and it never really seems to get super hot or cold. Though fortunately for us it was an unprecedented dry winter here. On a normal year we wouldn't have been able to

get the trench dug.”

Grant nodded and stepped off of the porch, kicked at the dirt, and looked at the base of the huge pine that stood only twenty feet from the house. “I’m not sure how you did it so quickly anyway. I was half expecting to have to do blasting to get out boulders.”

“We were worried about that too until we started digging. Actually, we got real lucky. Most of the surrounding was uplift rock with a fairly shallow layer of clay and then dirt broken up mostly by the trees. The little shelf we chose to build on has about 35 feet of crumbled and packed down soils that were deposited from up above before it hits the clay layer and then rock. We had a geologist take a look and in almost any other scenario we might have bought ourselves a nightmare. But the way the ridge line lays, the soils are held in by the surrounding rock and we have a kind of secure nest that won’t wash away and the hill above is about as solid as they come. There were some water concerns but Richard worked out a drainage system. We had to make the hole a little bigger than we expected to accommodate that.

“You have had your hands full with this,” Grant observed.

“Well, the hard part was really done before we left. The rest is mostly a problem of manpower and cement. I just hope they were able to get some of the forms put together. The welding of the reinforcements was the time killer, pouring the stuff wasn’t going to take that long. We had it planned so that two trucks running loads could do most of that part in about a week. By now the foundation and lower deck should be done and they should be starting on the walls unless they ran into unforeseen problems.”

“Well,” Grant said as he put out his smoke. “Let’s go out there and find out.”



Grant and Sarah drove the rental car the half hour to Crescent City to turn it in followed by Merrill and Jan in their black Kia Sedona. Grant had been amused by the fact that Merrill preferred to keep it even though he could have chosen anything he wanted to drive. But who was he to talk. His old but classically restored Pontiac Catalina Ventura was still parked along with his crotch rocket in the storage unit. He would have to get them out and serviced after sitting for over six months but he wouldn’t even consider getting something different.

From Crescent City they went directly to the Retreat. As they approached the driveway, it looked just as it had when they left. There was a mailbox next to a plain asphalt drive that disappeared into the forest and that was all that could be seen. When they reached the top of the two switch backs however, things looked

completely different than Merrill expected. Instead of a huge hole there was flat dirt with four foundations already poured. There were multiple six foot stacks of foam core panels near each of the cement pads, and large pipes standing up in the center of what would be the courtyard.

The entire area was a flurry of activity. There were private contractors and men wearing military fatigues working on the four buildings. One of the houses already had a corner and the full length of the back of the house tilted up and the thirty foot panels to accommodate two stories were huge.

As they drove up to the mobile home used as a temporary office, stopped and got out, Roger and a man wearing captain's bars on his collar approached the van. "Hey Grant, Merrill, how's it going?" Roger greeted them with his warm smile. "Rusty said you would probably be here today. It looks a little different than it did a few weeks ago. Don't ya think, Merrill?"

Merrill was dumfounded. "What happened to the hole?"

"Come on, we'll show you." Roger waved them on and started across to the furthest pad that was quickly becoming the barn. The four followed with their heads turning this way and that overwhelmed by all of the activity and all of the bodies attacking the work. "This is Captain Miller, and these are Grant, his wife Sarah, Merrill and his fiancée Jan. Captain Miller is in charge of this detail. They are a company of Corps of Engineers that Rusty sent out. They arrived about two days after you left. Rusty told me that since he had to interrupt your honeymoon the least he could do was to help you get your home together. Besides, he wants you guys up and running as soon as possible."

When they reached the barn pad Rusty led them to a hole in the northeast corner of the barn foundation with stairs that lead down. "Careful, there aren't any railings yet."

When they reached the bottom they were in what looked to be a ten by twelve foot room fully sheet rocked. "There is a similar room under each of the buildings. The contractors believe that they are to be used for storage. Kind of a lame excuse but they seem to be buying it. But if you look over here..." Roger took a screwdriver and popped open a section of the sheet rock that was hinged on the back side. "Come on with me."

Behind the secret passage was another chamber that took up most of the area of the barn. There was a door in the center of the remaining three walls. "This area will become the pistol range. If you go through the passage on the right or left they will lead you to the other buildings and if you go through the door on the far end it takes you to the lab." He took them across the sixty foot room through the door and the next area was incredible. "Oh my," Sarah gasped. "It's was the size of a warehouse."

"It's what the specifications called out for," Roger answered. "They have just started routing the conduits. Right now the few lights we have down here are being run from the generator up top. We had to get the ventilation ducts in before we sealed it." He said while pointing up. "The bio-lab and forensic lab will be over there, the chem and spectro-lab over there, computer stations there, there and there, lavatory over there and a small kitchenette will be over there. There is some extra space back on that side that I have reserved for any additions you might need Sarah. Oh! I almost forgot, the satellite tracking and communications center will be installed over there. Of course there will be satellite television and internet access from basically everywhere."

"I'm assuming that the doors at the center of each wall lead off to their respective buildings," asked Jan.

"Yes, and that actually leads to something I need to explain." He walked back to the doorway they had come through. "I want you to notice that the walls of this entire section are triple thick. It is designed to be a 20 hour fire wall and will have hatches similar to a submarine to seal it either to keep any bio-chemical toxins sealed in or out. Basically the entire lab can become a bunker if it had to."

Merrill looked around shaking his head. "I know this is our plan, but how did you get it done so quickly?"

"Well, there is a lot you can do if you have ninety or so trained construction guys doing it. At one point we had fifteen welders going at the reinforcement steel all at the same time and we had four cement trucks moving in and out."

"How soon will you be done up above? I mean the houses and the barn?"

"Actually except for some of the electrical panel system it will be done about this time next week and the following week after the civilians are through we can open this up and do the labs. Within two weeks you can move in. I have all of the specialty glass for the labs being made now and the whole thing should be operational by then."

Jan and Sarah were both so excited they were almost bouncing. "What about the driveways and landscaping?" Jan asked.

"That's scheduled for the following week as well."

Jan looked at Merrill. "We can get married and move in like we wanted to!"

Roger looked at Grant questioningly and Grant motioned with his hand for Merrill to say nothing and told him in a private voice, "I'll explain later."

Roger nodded and then continued. "Come with me, I want to show you something else up on top."

He led them through the door, re-concealed the doorway and took them upstairs. "You'll notice that over there behind the trees where we had the refill dirt has now been asphalted."

“That wasn’t on the original plan.” said Merrill.

“No, Rusty added that,” Roger explained. “I understand that you are going back and re-certifying your helicopters license. Congratulations!”

“What?” Jan was visibly taken back. “I didn’t know you ever flew.”

“I’m sorry love; I forgot to tell you about this. I just found out about it yesterday.”

Roger shook his head. “*That* is your helipad. There will be a hanger on the mountain side and we will fence it in so that you can use it as a tennis court when it isn’t in use.”

“That works for me,” said Grant.

“That’s really cool,” said Merrill, his words walking over Grant’s.

“And we got really lucky. Remember we thought we were going to have to trench and go up over the hill to put in a well?” Merrill nodded. Grant and the others looked on with blank faces. “After the corps got here they decided to use some of their high tech sounding instruments to further check out the stability up here and discovered a deep spot that goes down to about 200 feet and is roughly the size of a football field. Water infiltrates the soil on that side of the property and is a natural filter and cistern. The water is naturally better than 99.9% pure. We have conditioners on order from DC to add minerals so the water won’t eat up the pipes. So, if you look on the slope side of the helipad you’ll find a metal plate that covers the access hole. We put the pipes in when we installed the pad.”

“Where did you put the drain field?” Sarah asked. “I’d think that might be a contained area that might be a health problem.”

“Actually, we took care of that part early on,” said Merrill. “We put it in along side of the drive when we put the road in. Its solid pipe until it gets fifty feet below the crest of the hill and then there is an above ground septic tank hidden in the woods and a perf-pipe and gravel drain field that goes most of the way down the hill. There’s more than enough drainage.”

“I can’t get over the fact that you did this in two weeks,” Sarah said. “We were actually expecting to find a great big hole with maybe some lower foundation work done. But this, this is truly amazing.”

“Where did the troops come from?” asked Jan.

“Actually, they’re part of my unit,” Roger responded.

“Ok, but where is that? I don’t think you ever mentioned it.”

Merrill laughed. “I’ve been down this road before. That’s the one thing he can’t tell us.”

Chapter 51

Gordon Weston sat at his desk watching the security monitors and doing paperwork. There was never a lapse in the number of status reports, interrogation transcriptions and security disk descriptions to be entered into the system along with other work like maintenance schedules and system procurement requests. He always thought he would never complete his work but somehow he always did. Working second shift gave him the advantage of not being interrupted by the mucky-mucks.

Finally, he thought, this one is finished. He saved the transcription he had been working on, put it in a case, affixed the label he had created and dropped it in the “to be filed” basket resting on his personal file.

When he turned back he noticed that one of his monitors had gone dark. “That tube has been threatening to go out,” He spoke out loud to no one and then pulled the monitor down off of its shelf, unplugged it and removed the coax from the back. He retrieved a backup from a shelf on the back wall and replaced the one he had disconnected. There was still no signal.

Damn, he thought, then picked up the phone and pressed the button labeled tech support. “Hey George, I have a line down in cell 3. Can you grab a guard and check it out?”

“Sure, let me get my tools and I’ll be down there in about five minutes.”

George Watkins hung up the phone and stood up from his desk. The gentle giant of a man nonchalantly picked up his tool box, checked the battery in his meter, pushed his barely regulation auburn hair out of his face and strolled out of his office toward the detention center. He hated going down there. He could never get warm. They kept it cool not only to reduce the smell from unresponsive captives who tended to do obnoxious things like throw their feces around but they also didn’t want the inmates too comfortable. It was part of the stress that was intentionally placed on those who were unwilling to talk.

“Hey Sam how’s it going?” he asked the guard that controlled access to the section. “Can you let me down to #3? We seem to have a line down.”

“Yeah,” the guard replied. “Let me to call in someone to back you up? You probably don’t need it. The guy’s been in some kind of coma for the last two days. But I don’t like to take any chances.”

“Let whoever it is know that I should be in and out of there in five minutes or

less,” said George as he took a seat in the couch opposite the guard’s desk. He put on his headphones and contented himself with listening to Led Zeppelin, bouncing his head to the music.

A buzz that George didn’t hear came from the outer door and Sam looked up as John Stevens came in yawning. His uniform was less than press fit and his hair was uncombed.

“Haven’t you gone home yet?” asked Sam. “You’re about half way through a double shift now aren’t you?”

“Yeah, Fred didn’t show again tonight and I was asked to stay.”

“From what I hear,” Sam replied. “Fred’s ol’ lady is giving him fits about working swing.”

“Well they better do something about it. These long hours are starting to get really old.”

John stretched his 5’9" average frame as long as he could reaching for the ceiling and releasing another deep yawn. “I guess we better get this done.”

He walked over and tapped the unaware George on the shoulder. “You want to do this or what?”

“Oh, hi John,” George replied while taking off his headphones and getting up.

They both went to the cell block door. There was a buzz as the magnetic lock-release the bullet proof glass external door and after George and John entered the small room that separated the guard station from the block and closed the first door, a second buzz sounded from the lock on the identical inner door. They entered the cell block and went to the far end of the hall. John looked through wire filled window in the door and could see clearly that the inmate was laying in bed with his covers over him and nodded to George. George took the lace from around his neck and swiped the lock with the security strip on the back of his id card, pressed the door open and entered carrying his box of tools.

After he went through the door he looked up at the security camera while beginning to replace the lace around his neck. He was surprised to see a dark cloth hanging from the security camera. Just as he realized all was not well, the lace tightened on his throat by strong hands behind him. He tried to turn but even with his superior strength he couldn’t break the grip. From his peripheral vision he could just make out the feet and lower legs of his assailant standing on a chair as everything went black.

Outside the door John waited impatiently. He felt tired. All he really wanted to do was go home, not baby sit some maintenance flunky. After a few minutes he heard George calling from the other room. “Hey John, could you give me a hand?”

He looked in the window and could see George standing on a chair. He looked like he was trying to dismount the security camera just inside the door so

he swiped his id card and went in.

Gordon returned to his desk after using the restroom and refilling his coffee and realized saw that the monitor had come back on. He could see the prisoner curled up under the covers as he seemed to have been for the past two days. George must not have had any problems he thought and went back to his paperwork. After another ten minutes he noticed movement and looked at the monitors again and saw one of the guards exiting the cell block.

Chapter 52

“Now that was a fine meal,” Grant said picking up the last half-glass of Merlot. Sarah had broiled some rib steaks they had picked up at the store the evening before and served it with packaged garlic mashed potatoes with butter and a salad. “What time do you want to do our ritual?”

“It’s seven o’clock now,” Merrill began to reply while looking at his watch. “I think maybe ten or so should be good. It’ll give us a chance to clean up from dinner, relax for a bit then talk about what we are going to do before actually opening the circle. Yes, ten would be a good time.”

“Do you think you will be able to sense out our baby Merrill?” Sarah asked.

“I’m not sure, but I think my best chance is to have you link up with Jan and then let me try to sense her through Jan’s senses and her apparent link to you.”

“Her?”

“Her? Did I say that? Wait what I meant to say was... No, that is what I meant to say. I’m sure of it now. They’re both going to be girls. And my senses tell me that they are going to be born pretty much at the same time.”

Merrill looked at confused faces. “Don’t ask me how I know that, this is all new to me too. But somehow I have a strong certainty that they are both girls. If I close my eyes I can sense their presence. That wasn’t there before. How could that be after only two weeks?”

By the end of his statement he was talking to himself as much as the others. He felt as much as looked totally baffled. But there were two additional presences in his world and he could feel them around him as much as the other three. “This is totally weird even for me.”

Jan looked at Sarah with excited eyes. “We both are having daughters at Yule! Merrill and I were talking the other morning about the significance and wondered what you would think about changing the courtyard to honor the babies?”

“What did you have in mind, Jan?”

“How about instead of a pond with the statue of Venus, we dedicate an oak tree. It would grow with the children if we start with a sapling.”

“That’s a wonderful idea!” Sarah exclaimed.

Grant stood and filled each of their glasses halfway emptying the decanter and then raised his. “Merrill, would you like the honor?”

Merrill stood with his glass also raised and waited for the ladies to join him. “To our daughters, our new home in the Retreat and the tree to mark the occasion, may they all be blessed.”

“So Mote It Be!” Jan and Merrill exclaimed together.

They had just sat down again when Grant’s cell phone rang.

“Forrester.”

“What? You have to be kidding.”

The others saw Grant’s eyes go wide and after only a few minutes he closed his cell phone.

“This isn’t good at all,” he began. “The Traveler has escaped. Rusty wants us back in DC right away.

“How did the Traveler escape? Sarah asked. That place was set up like Fort Knox. There is no way.”

“He didn’t say.”

“When do we need to leave?” Merrill asked.

“Believe it or not, we’re being picked up at the Retreat at 10:00 tonight.”

“That’s only two and a half hours, so much for our ritual!”



By 9:30 PM. They were back in the van driving the few miles to the Retreat. Having learned from their earlier experience both Jan and Sarah changed into warmer clothing. They both wore long underwear under dark slacks and sweaters and carried light jackets to add to the layers. Merrill and Grant were in dark slacks, plain colored turtleneck micro-fiber shirts and corduroy jackets. All of course wore their distinctive pendants and all were packing except for Jan who still would not consider carrying a weapon. Grant had also told all of them to wear their earpieces during the mission so as they dressed each of them plugged the wires into their phones, used a Velcro band just above their wrist to hold the wire in place before putting on their shirts. The wire was translucent so even with Merrill and Grant’s shorter hair they were barely noticeable.

“Rusty said they were going to meet up here?” Sarah asked Grant. “That seems a little weird. Why not just pick us up at the house? At least then we could

leave the van in the garage.”

“I don’t know,” Grant replied. “Rusty was being his typical vague self. Sometimes I think he just does things to shock people. Like not telling us about the manpower he was going to throw at our project. I had no clue he was going to do that. In some ways I feel a little put off that he felt he could just come in and make changes without telling us, but on the other hand I am awed by the fact that we are this far along now.”

They turned onto the driveway and made their way up the curving road to the top. “You realize that if it ever does snow we are going to have a hell of a time getting out of here.” Grant was looking over to Merrill who was cruising through the well banked curves.

“It’s not that bad,” Merrill responded. “With snow it might be a problem but from what I have heard we might get a couple inches a year so really I’m just not worried about it.”

They crested the hill and drove up next to the temporary building. Through the window they could see Roger. He was looking back at them and as they climbed out of the van he waved them in.

“Hi, Roger,” Merrill said as they went through the door. “Kinda late for you to be here isn’t it?”

“Normally, I wouldn’t be but Rusty called and asked me to prepare for the arrival of your transport.”

“I was wondering about that,” Grant said. “Why did he ask us to meet up here?”

The thumping sound of rotor blades could be heard overhead. Roger got up and started to the door. “Hang on a sec. I have to turn the lights on.”

Seconds later they could see bright light coming from metal-halide lamps that had been placed behind the trees where the newly laid heliport had been built and Roger came back in. “Better get your stuff. They’ll be down in about a minute.”

The four poured out of the door of the mobile home and back to the van to retrieve their bags. They had been smarter this time about how much they carried. Each had brought a single carry-on bag. As soon as the vans security beeped, Roger was waving them with a flashlight to follow. There was a clear enough path through the woods but without the light any of them might have stepped in a hole and twisted an ankle.

When they emerged fifty feet later they could see a Blackhawk just touching down and a man in uniform waving them on. “See you later guys,” Roger said. “Enjoy your ride.”

“Roger, call me before you start on the pond,” Merrill said while hurriedly handing Roger the keys to the van before he could step back. “There have been

some changes.”

They ran for the door of the helicopter and the corpsman helped them board the ship with their bags and then with a slight shudder they lifted off. As soon as the chopper was away from the pad, the lights went out.

“You used to fly one of these things?” Jan asked Merrill in a voice loud enough to be heard over the roar of the engines and rotors.

Merrill nodded. “I did my tour of duty in the Middle East running evacuations. It was plenty scary duty but I enjoyed flying. I really didn’t think I would ever have the chance to do it again, I think this is really cool.”



The Blackhawk sped across the sky, landing at Travis Air Force Base just after midnight. From the chopper they were escorted immediately onto a Lear and flown to Bolling Air Force Base, Washington, DC where they touched down at 5:00 AM. Fortunately, it was an uneventful flight and they were all able to sleep most of the way because as soon as they arrived they were again escorted to a limousine and driven back to the FBI Intelligence Division Facility where the Traveler had been held. When the car arrived, Rusty was there to meet them personally.

“Rusty, I know you’ve met Merrill,” Grant said as he reached out his hand. “But I don’t think you have met either my wife Sarah or Merrill’s fiancée Jan though I believe you already know quite a lot about them.”

“I do indeed,” Rusty smiled and looked at the two ladies. “Congratulations on your expected arrivals. Sorry I wasn’t able to meet you last time you were here.”

Both Jan and Sarah smiled and thanked him but then looked at Grant questioningly. Grant motioned with his hand that he would explain later and they all entered the building while Rusty continued. “Sorry to have to drag you out here so quickly. But as you know we have a big problem. I wanted to get you started on the Traveler’s trail as soon as possible. I figured he might be still in the DC area but also knowing Merrill and Jan’s skills, I thought you might want to go through his personal effects. Obviously he left without them.”

“What happened?” asked Grant. “How did he escape?”

“That’s a real puzzle,” said Rusty, his shoulders slumped. He looked like he had just been asked the one question that he knew was going to come but he really didn’t want to answer.

“This is one of the highest security facilities there is,” he said. “But somehow the Traveler managed to kill a maintenance man and a guard, steal the guards

clothes and just walk out through several guard stations and he did it all under camera surveillance. While debriefing the guards and security we found out that they all thought it was John Stevens, the guard that was killed, that they were letting through the gates. I'm hoping that you and you're team can figure out just how he did it."

"Is the cell still being contained as a crime scene?" asked Sarah.

"Yes, we can go there now if you are ready. And we have the bodies of John Stevens and John Watkins, the maintenance man, in cold storage if you need to see them. So far it looks like they were strangled with their security badge lariats."

"We're not going to have time for a full analysis," Grant told Sarah.

"No, but we can at least try to get enough to make some kind of sense out of this."

They went down a hall that traveled between private offices crossed two intersecting hallways and that seemed to go on forever and then came to a set of elevators. Rusty held his badge up to a panel next to one of the doors which immediately opened. After they entered he looked vaguely at the panel and selected sub-floor 3.

When they emerged they were in a small office where they were met by an officer sitting at a desk to one side and a glass security door in front of them. Rusty showed the officer his badge and they were admitted.

"Isn't this the same floor where we did the interrogation?" asked Merrill.

"Yes, the cell block is at the end of the hall," Grant answered while looking up at the two security cameras that were located at each end of the hallway and the third that pointed off to the right facing the cell block door. He shook his head in wonder.

Rusty put his badge against a sensor and the cell block door opened to another small office and like the previous one it had a guard who buzzed them through two security doors separated by only a small room.

"So, anyone who goes in and out of here has to be cleared by the guard." Merrill said, stating the obvious.

"Yes, and there are cameras on each end of this hall as well as the others."

When they reached the far end of the cell block they saw that the last cell on the right had been taped off with yellow crime scene tape. Grant shook his head. "You get a lot of intruders down here?" He asked sarcastically.

Rusty smiled at the irony. "No, but I wanted to make sure no one decided to clean up."

The cell was a 12' X 12' white room with a cot, sink and toilet. A security camera hung from the corner of the ceiling near the entrance allowing for nearly an entire view of the room aside from directly beneath. The bed was on the

furthest wall and there was rumpled bedding on top. There was a man-size chalk outline on the floor beneath the camera and part way up the wall in the blind-spot, invisible to the security booth.

Rusty gave all of them disposable gloves. "The maintenance guy was found in the bed and the guard was over there. I can have forensic tools sent down for you if you need them Sarah."

"No, I'll just take a preliminary look and if I need anything done in here I'll note it. I doubt we have time enough to do the scene thoroughly now."

"I'll be up in my office if you need anything. You know where the property room and coroner facilities are Grant." Rusty said and then left.

Merrill and Jan began moving slowly around the room with their palms facing outward while Sarah went to examine the chalked area. Grant watched with fascination as the psychics checked each area for energy traces.

After a few moments, Sarah went over to the bed. She looked at the floor around the bed, under the bed and then finally carefully moving each piece she examined the pillow, blanket, sheets and mattress. "Grant, take a look at this."

Grant went over to the bed to see what Sarah had. "Does this look like a solution residue to you? Like maybe salts of some kind?"

"It could be. It doesn't look like a drool mark, for one thing it's too far down on the sheets and it doesn't seem yellow enough for a semen stain."

"I think we should have it sent to the lab. Other than that I really haven't found much of anything unusual here aside from what isn't here."

"What do you mean?"

"There isn't any sign of struggle. No blood, no excess hair. Just the small amount of hair you would expect from someone sleeping."

"I'm picking up some sort of activity over in that corner," said Merrill. "I can tell that the two died here. In fact they both died right under the camera. There is a kind of heightened energy like from a struggle."

"Jan, what did you get?" asked Sarah.

"I got the same but I think the maintenance man was still alive when he was moved from under the camera and put on the bed. But just barely."

Grant nodded. He looked like he was deep in thought, trying to put the scene together in his mind. "Seems like we're done here," he said. "Let's go up to the property room and see if we have any better luck there."

"You can't even move without being seen by those cameras," said Grant as they went back through security.

From there they went up one floor on the elevator and then through another security station protecting that floor. The plain white hall had more offices on each side and they entered the third one they came to. The sign on the door read

Records and Property Room. Inside there were two clerks sitting at computer stations, a work table with three chairs and six rows of filing cabinets each having ten cabinets and behind them a row of wall lockers. With the assistance of one of the clerks, Grant took a filing box out of one of the wall lockers and carried it over to the worktable.

In the box were the clothes the Traveler had been wearing when he was picked up, still soiled and in a large plastic bag, a second bag containing a revolver and a third that held smaller personal effects including a money belt with containing what appeared to be several thousand dollars, a money clip with a few hundred, a ring, an earring, an amulet and a crystal wand about four inches long and one half inch thick with a large sapphire attached in the center and various smaller semiprecious stones adorning the sides.

"I think that's my earring," said Sarah. "It disappeared just after our wedding."

"Wait a minute," Merrill said. "Before anyone touches those," pointing at the jewelry and wand, "let me check them." Rusty looked up at Merrill and was about to ask a question when Merrill continued. "Some of those may be warded. If they are, either you could trigger something that could make them useless or you might broadcast to the Traveler on what we are doing."

He stood quietly and took some cleansing breaths with his hands held palms down to the ground. Then he raised his arms to the sky and lowered them over the items one at a time. "This ring has a lot of energy," he said as his left hand crossed over it. "But I don't sense any wards. Jan, you should probably check that one out, the same with the amulet."

When he came to the wand, he stopped. "This one is full of erratic energy and is heavily warded." He looked up as if just coming out of a trance and looked at Grant. "We're going to need some time with these. Let me sit here with it for a few minutes while Jan works on the ring."

Grant nodded and he and Sarah stepped back from the table. "Do you suppose we might get some coffee?" Merrill asked.

"Sure," said Grant and he left the room followed Sarah.

After they left, Merrill looked over at Jan. "I didn't want to say anything to the others until I was sure, but I think this wand is set up to be a weapon of some sort. The shaft is a very special piece of quartz and is holding a great deal of energy. I think the sapphire had been designed to activate when energy is drawn from it and some of the smaller crystals are set as a series of triangles surrounding one end pointing to it. We may be able to use it against him if I can figure out how to reroute the ward energy and then shield it until we want to use it. If I can't then it's all over. He would know where we were just as if he had a GPS tracking device on us. And that may represent another problem. I would have to lift my

own shield in order to use it.” Jan looked worriedly into his eyes. “There’s something else isn’t there?”

Merrill, who had started to place his hands over the wand once more, stopped, lowered his hands and looked up at her once more. “Yes, there is another slight problem. If I don’t get this just right, the ward might discharge the energy of that crystal directly into me.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Well, I really don’t see much choice. For one thing it may be a big advantage for us when we catch up with the guy and secondly, if someone messes with it later then they might set it off.”

Jan sighed. “And by Karma we would be responsible for leaving it as it is.”

“That’s how I see it. So cross your fingers. I have to essentially wrap my energy around only the component that holds the ward and if I am reading this right, it has to be that small gem near the tail end of wand. I’m going to try that and see what happens.”

“Do you want my help?”

“No, in this case I would rather just risk myself not you and the baby.”

Jan’s eyes went wide as she saw Merrill laying his hands directly over the wand and take the cleansing breaths that told her he was going into a fully grounded state. He was sitting perfectly still and then his breathing all but stopped as he focused.

“There! I think I got it.”

He moved his hands a few inches back from the wand and focused on it. “Yes, the feeling of the ward is gone. Now all I have to do is put a regular shield on it to keep it from being psychically visible. Of course you know he is going to think we have destroyed the thing as soon as I do that. Maybe he will actually believe that the wand discharged and killed someone. I can’t really be sure about that. Either way he’s going to think it is gone.”

Jan nodded. “I think this ring is connected to an other-world somehow. I don’t think this would be a good one for us to be carrying around. It maybe a kind of short cut to evoking.”

“Great just what we need; a demon ring. I think we should tell Rusty to have that one destroyed preferably by fire. What about the amulet?”

Jan put her hands over the disk that was worn suspended by a chain. When she had examined it she had noticed that it held a design that looked vaguely like an Aztec shield of some kind with a skull in the center.

“It’s full of his energy. Probably he uses it like you use your own pendant. By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask you if the new pendant is working in that way.”

“Not really. At least not yet, I still have my own in my pocket. Here, let me try

putting my energy around his amulet and see if you can still read it. Since you know my energy it might be possible and that would keep him from reading where it is.”

He put his hands over the amulet, closed his eyes and then picked it up and handed the brass-like disc to Jan. “Try this.”

She cupped the amulet gently in her hand and her face showed her intensity as she probed the disc. “I would need to get my orientation but I can tell you that he is that direction,” she said as she pointed. “I can’t really tell how far away he is though.”

Grant came back in to the room. “Any luck?”

“What happened to Sarah?” asked Merrill.

“She went in to look at the corpses.”

Grant handed them each a cup of coffee.

Merrill took the cup and then explained what they had found including the instructions for Rusty to have the ring destroyed and how.

“Rusty told me to take what ever we needed but to be sure to check them out with the clerks.”

“Well, these two are the only things that will help us and of course there is Sarah’s earring.” Merrill said and took a sip of his coffee and handed Grant the once missing earring. “Other than that I think we are done here.”

“I’ll take you down to the morgue to work with Sarah.” said Grant. He lifted the box and returned it to the clerks. “I’m going to go up and see what else I can find out from Rusty.



“Good timing Grant,” Rusty said as the ex-agent entered the familiar office. Grant couldn’t even guess how many times he had been there before. He liked the office. It had a warm elegance to it with dark cherry furniture and book cases and indirect lighting.

“I think we’re almost wrapped up here and I wanted to get your report from security booth. It’s hard to believe that the man could have just walked out through that maze of cameras and guards without anyone noticing.”

“I’ll get you the reports and I have that time frame for each camera loaded on a disk I can send with you. When I looked at it, it seemed pretty obvious that the clothes he was wearing weren’t his. The Traveler is less than 5’ and the guard was 5’ 9” and somehow no one notices?”

“Merrill thinks that the security guard was probably only watching casually, saw the uniform and the rest didn’t register. But for the others he thinks the traveler

used a kind of magick, something like a suggestion that made the others see who they expected or wanted to see rather than him.

“Come on Grant. You can’t tell me you believe this crap. I can kind of go along with some of the psychic stuff, in fact you’re team has more than proved to me that at least some of it works. But magic? Get real Grant.”

“A year ago I would have agreed with you completely Rusty. But after working with Merrill and Jan I’m reserving judgment on almost anything. And on this I really don’t have a better explanation.”

Grant’s watch beeped and he looked down at the dial, a small dot flashed beneath the second button. “Excuse me a second Rusty, Its Sarah.”

He pressed the crystal and spoke into the watch. “Hi, Sarah, I’m in with Rusty now. What have you found out?”

“Unless something shows up in the blood analysis, it looks like they were both strangled like Rusty said.”

“Merrill and Jan get anything?”

“Not really, only that there really wasn’t much of a real struggle that they can discern.”

Grant looked up at Rusty who had been listening in and was shaking his head. “I guess we should start following Jan’s directions and figure out where the Traveler might have gone. I’ll meet you in the lobby in a few minutes.”

“Ok, Grant,” Sarah said. “I’ll release the bodies to have a full autopsy done. I want to see the blood chemistry.” The watch went dark.

“Actually, that brings up why I was glad you came up here,” Rusty said as he got up from his chair. Yesterday, they found Bill Daley, the officer that performed the interrogation, dead in his home. I just got a call from the coroner’s office and they couldn’t come up with any specific cause of death. They said it seemed to be heart failure but couldn’t find anything specific wrong with the heart muscle. I really didn’t think it was related but since he had been on the case I wanted you to know.”

Chapter 53

Rusty gave Grant the keys to the rental car he had arraigned for them and it was waiting for them in the garage. Grant should have known it would be there, Rusty never seemed to miss a beat. He and Sarah had thanked Rusty for the massive assistance on the Retreat and he had just waved it off saying that it was

in the interest of national security. Grant supposed that it was indirectly. “Well guys,” Grant said when they reached the car. “It seems that once again, Sarah and I are just along for the ride. What do you want to do at this point?”

“I for one would like to get something to eat,” Jan said. “And then I need to sit down with a compass and figure out which way this thing is pulling me. Did anyone remember to bring a compass?”

“Actually,” Merrill said teasing. “You did. I put it in your bag last night.”

Jan giggled. “You knew I would forget that.”

Merrill grinned.

“Alright, but I think we should try to get out of the city a little before we stop. Do you have any sense of which way we need to go?”

“Pop the trunk, I’ll get the compass,” Merrill said while opening his door.

When he returned he found Jan holding the amulet loosely in her left hand. “He’s that way,” she said pointing. Merrill looked at the compass. “He must be somewhere south of us.”

“If we go south for about an hour we can get clear of the city. Then like Jan suggested we should probably stop and get something to eat and see where she takes us from there.”

After just over an hour and a half of traveling on Interstate 95 they were in a small cafe in Ashland, Virginia. Since it was 10:00 AM they decided on ordering breakfast. While they waited Jan held the pendant once again with the compass lying in front of her on the table. The waitress gave her a strange look as she poured the coffees and asked to take their order. “My husband just gave me this compass, isn’t it neat?” Sarah said to the waitress who played along as if Sarah were just a little off. “Oh yes, I’ve always wanted one of those.”

After the waitress left with their orders, Jan stared at the compass once again. “Seems like he’s moving off to the west,” she said. “He must be driving because the energy is about the same as it was before.”

“That works,” Grant said. “At least we’re keeping up with him.”

Half way through their meal, Grant’s cell phone rang, it was Rusty.

“Hold on a second.”

Grant excused himself from the table and went outside. “Ok, Rusty, what’s up?”

“They finished the DNA analysis on the body from the car that exploded. There was a screw up and I didn’t get it back until just now. It wasn’t Sharan.”

“Great,” Grant sounded pissed. “So the traitor is still alive.”

“Yes, and since everyone had thought she was dead, no one has locked out her security on the computer. She has your cell phone number and my records show that she has been accessing the location software and tracking you. I show

she had been polling the computer from somewhere here in DC all the way up until this morning, so she didn't try to follow you into California."

"This could actually work to our advantage," said Grant. "Make sure you don't turn off her access yet and have someone monitor the ISPs she connects from and let me know when they change. By the way, you don't have any pictures of my team on line do you?"

"Merrill's picture is there because he was partially in command, but the ladies aren't and there isn't anything on the computer about your facility."

"That's a good thing to know. Sharan knows what Merrill looks like anyway so that won't make any difference. Thanks, Rusty this might help out a lot."

After hanging up he rejoined the others. "The plan has now changed."



From Ashland they traveled west and then southwest across the Appalachian Mountains and into Tennessee. At 4:30 PM. they stopped to get something to eat in the small city of Kingsport. A half hour later as they were going back to the car, Grant's phone rang again, and again it was Rusty. Sharan had logged into the tracking system again and this time the ISP was in Des Moines, Iowa.

"That places her about fifteen hours off to the northwest," Merrill said while looking up from the map.

"Let's head into Nashville and see what she does," said Grant. "I want to get somewhere and let her think we are settled in for some reason."

"Are you going to ask Rusty for back up?" asked Sarah.

"Not now. I don't want any traffic on the computer that might alert Sharan and I'm not sure which systems she's monitoring. I think it would be better to just be prepared."

By 9:00 PM., they checked into a small motel on the outskirts of Nashville. They were fortunate to find three adjoining rooms on the first floor facing the parking lot. Grant used his credit card to secure the two outer rooms, paid cash for the center room and put it under Jan's name. The center room had a doorway attached to the one to the right where he and Sarah would be staying. Merrill and Jan would be in the far left. Figuring that they had no less than eight hours before their quarry would be able to reach them they decided to get a full night sleep.

Just before midnight Grant got a call from Rusty. Sharan had just polled the computer from Noblesville, Indiana and Grant recalculated her estimated arrival at about 5:00 AM, but to be on the safe side in case she really made time, he set his alarm for about 3:00 AM and went back to sleep.

At 3:00 AM the alarm sounded. Grant and Sarah got up and Sarah pressed

a button on her watch. "Hi, we're going to want to get ourselves ready for them."

"We're already whenever you are," Jan replied.

"Give us about ten minutes and we can go out and find some coffee."

Sarah turned and looked at Grant who was sitting on the edge of the bed. "It sounded like they have been up for awhile."

"Could be that they're a little nervous about taking them head on like this."

"I don't think so," Sarah said.

"You sound pretty confident about that."

"I know." Her voice was low and more to herself than outward to Grant. "It's like I can feel Jan like a part of myself that is riding along side my own feelings and emotions. Like last night when I was just on the verge of sleep, I swear I could feel an intense wave of love and warmth." She paused momentarily as though thinking. "I would swear I could feel just a sense of the erotic. Not physically, but more like. No, I really can't describe it. But I wouldn't be surprised if I found out that she and Merrill were making love just then."

Grant looked at her. "Are you saying that you are starting to sense fully what she is experiencing?"

"In a way, I guess I am. But I need to talk to Jan about it before I can be really certain. I don't know if she is picking up things like that or not and I'm also not sure if I like the idea of sharing that intimately with someone else, even if it is Jan. But right now what I am picking up is concern for Merrill."

Sarah raised her leg to slip on her thermal underwear and Grant could feel his own body reacting to the sight of her long slender calf and thigh. Glancing up to her face, the slight pout on her lips made him want to take her in his arms. He pushed the thought away for the moment and continued to get dressed. "No time for that right now," he said to himself and finished dressing trying his best not to be distracted any further by her as she put on a bra and thermal top.

Once they finished getting dressed they went two doors down and tapped on the door. Merrill and Jan were dressed and ready to go.

The only thing open at that time was a Denny's Restaurant they had seen when they drove into town the night before so they decided to have breakfast. "When we finish here I want Merrill to position himself outside," Grant explained. "How long can you hold the invisibility?"

"It's not really invisibility," Merrill replied. "But I can remain insignificant for as long as I need to. It really doesn't take much energy to do it. Just make sure I have access to plenty of coffee. It's not particularly warm out there."

"No problem, there's a cafe right on the parking lot of the motel. The rest of us are going to be in the center room. The only one I am going to have coming and going will be Sarah who will come and go through our room. Hopefully, they

will think the rest of us are gone. You remember what Sharan looks like?”

Merrill laughed. “After all the fuss Greg was making over her, how could I ever forget?”

Grant’s phone rang so he excused himself and went outside and Merrill went to the restroom. Sarah leaned toward Jan and in a low voice she asked. “Have you noticed any new feelings?”

Jan looked surprised. “You mean like intimate feelings?”

Sarah nodded.

“Actually I have. I noticed it a couple of days ago but I didn’t want to embarrass you. Are you getting it too?”

“Yes, I noticed it last night. That is, I was if you two were making love right after we went to bed last night.”

Jan began to giggle.

“Well, I guess that’s an affirmative.” She thought a moment. “I know we don’t have time now but later on we are definitely going to have to figure out how to control this. In the mean time I wondered if you are concerned about Merrill”

“You picked up on that too? Interesting. Well, Merrill said that he had another dream. I don’t know too much about it but he said that the Traveler is gaining strength and the longer it takes us to get to him the harder it is going to be.” She paused but got no response and could feel that Sarah was trying to figure what that might mean. “I think Merrill believes that the usual tactics won’t help us out much with him.”

When Merrill returned they discussed the situation further until Grant came back but Merrill really didn’t know any more himself.

“I just got off the phone with Rusty.” Grant said as he sat down. “Sharan polled the computer again and this time she went into the bank exchange system as well so we can assume that she tracked my credit card and knows where we are staying. I told him to send backup but for them to stay off site until we can be sure where Sharan is. I don’t want to spook her. From what Rusty told me, she is about a half hour away now.”

Chapter 54

Merrill could feel the cold beginning to penetrate him even with thermal underwear under his normal clothing. He had been waiting near the parking lot for two hours and there had been nothing but the normal activity of tenants checking

out, loading their cars and leaving. He stepped away from the corner of the building where he had been standing and started across to the cafe when a car with two men entered the parking lot. He pressed a button on his watch. "Car with two unknowns just came in. But I don't see Sharan."

He walked slowly back to his place of hiding in the open. "Wait. There's a second car coming in." He paused long enough for the car to come into view.

"It's her. The two men are heading toward the office. I'm going put a tracker on Sharan's car."

"Affirmative Merrill, I'm sending Sarah out toward the cafe to pick up on the two men."

Seconds later as Merrill was halfway to Sharan's vehicle, he saw Sarah leave the motel room in the middle. He could see that Sharan was watching her. "Don't look suspicious Sarah, you're being watched."

Merrill slipped under Sharan's car and set the small transmitter to one of the gas tank brackets. He activated it and began to crawl out when the door opened and Sharan stepped out. He could see her feet step down onto the black asphalt and then feel as much as hear the door close. He slowly slid his body back from under the car, squatted and pulled his gun from his shoulder holster. He could hear Sarah's voice through the phone's earpiece. "They've jumped the counter and the clerk is down," she said. "It looks like they're accessing the computer."

Merrill could see Sharan walking slowly toward the office just as Sarah entered the coffee shop. "I think Sharan bought it, we have all three in the open now."

"Ok Merrill, we're ready inside."

Merrill moved back to his observation point and waited while he watched the three approach the door of Sarah and Grant's room and one of the two men kneel, listen at the door and then pick the lock. The others stood behind him and watched for intruders. Momentarily he saw Sarah as she moved in behind some cars about a hundred feet away.

The man stood and nodded to the others. They pulled their weapons and burst into the room, Sharan first. "Now," Merrill heard himself say into the watch and then he lurched forward toward the door momentarily startling Sarah when he seemingly appeared in front of her on the opposite side of the doorway. They both flew through the door diagonally each covering the side opposite of where they had been; Sarah following right behind Merrill. At the same time Grant burst through the door between units yelling "Freeze!"

One of the men turned and raised his gun toward Grant and Sarah fired hitting the man center of mass throwing him back and down. The second man thought better of trying and dropped his weapon. Sharan started toward Merrill, who was closest to her, but stopped when she realized that she had three weapons

trained on her. She looked at Grant as though debating and then raised her weapon toward Sarah. The deafening sound of Grant's .357 was nothing compared to the display it left when the bullet past through her body taking half of her back with it, throwing blood, fabric, skin and broken bone onto the wall behind her. She never felt what hit her.

"Damn It!" Grant yelled. "I really didn't want to kill her. We needed her."

"From my perspective you didn't have much choice Grant," Merrill said. "I think we need Sarah a lot more than we needed her."

Two minutes later the two rooms contained too many people. Rusty's men arrived and took over the scene.

While Grant gave them the blow by blow, Merrill and Jan decided to check the office to make sure no one was hurt. The clerk, a man in his thirties they had seen earlier was just beginning to sit up holding his head. "Are you alright?" Jan asked.

"I think so," he said questionably. "What happened?"

"What's your name?" Jan asked.

"John. John Hamilton."

"Well John, there is quite a mess in one of your units and the FBI has it blocked off. I think you better go to the hospital and be checked out," said Merrill. "Is there someone you can call in?"

The man nodded and picked up the phone to call the owner. Merrill activated his watch and Grant answered. "You probably should have an ambulance sent over, the clerk was knocked out and he seems a bit woozy."

"Thanks, Merrill. I forgot all about him."

After hanging up Merrill noticed that Jan had a strange look on her face. "You don't look well. Are you ok? I know you don't like scenes like this. Not that any of us do but I know it really takes its toll on you."

"That's not the problem. I knew that there was a possibility that we couldn't contain things with out force. No, I am sensing a presence."

She went silent as if trying to sort out what she was feeling. "It's the Traveler. But the energy doesn't feel the same, like it's incomplete but its right here!" She paused looking up at Merrill's face which showed signs of shock. "No, wait it's moved over that way." She was pointing toward the rooms where the shooting had occurred.

"I think I know now why he calls himself the Traveler," Merrill said. "This isn't good. Stay here with John and make sure he doesn't fall asleep and let me know if you feel any changes in the energy."

Merrill went outside and activated his watch to Grant. "Don't talk about any of our plans, where we are going or anything like that. I'll explain later."

Merrill went to the room and Grant looked at him oddly but went along with what he was told. Within minutes the local police, the ambulance, the coroner and the local crime lab were on the scene. The Federal Agents told the locals that it was an FBI action, that they had the required statements and that they were taking the remaining intruder with them. Grant had given them instructions to take the man immediately to DC for questioning and then the four of them packed up their bags and hit the road.

“What are you feeling Jan?” Merrill asked.

“No change. He’s just behind and above us.”

Merrill glanced at the map. “I think we should proceed on to Memphis. Jan, I want you to squeeze my arm if you feel like he is right here in the car.” Jan looked at him oddly, “You think he will do that?”

“Actually, I’m counting on it.”

Grant drove the car onto Highway 40 heading southwest. Ten minutes later Merrill felt Jan’s grip tighten.

“Grant,” Merrill said casually. “When we get to Memphis I want to find the courthouse. There are some records on their system that I think might help us figure out who Pendentive is and hopefully put us on track of the Traveler.”

“How’s that Merrill?”

“He’s gone Merrill,” Jan interrupted.

“Change direction Grant!” Merrill said. “Take the next exit going anywhere but toward Memphis and do it quickly.”

Grant noticed that the next exit was a connector for Highway 24 West. He took the exit and heard Merrill sigh in relief. “Now can you tell me what happened?” Grant’s voice sounded both concerned and confused.

“While we were at the motel, Jan felt the Traveler as if he were right with us. Only the energy seemed slightly different and though she had the amulet with her she was not focusing on it. When she told me this, I realized that the man was projecting himself. He wasn’t with us physically. He had put himself into a trance state and was here spiritually. My guess is that since he no longer had the earring, he used Sharan’s presence to track us here. This means he knows that she’s dead and now he has to follow us himself. I assumed he would have to disconnect to recharge himself so when he was close enough to listen I suggested that we were headed to Memphis. It takes a fair amount of energy to stay out of body for long. But he will be out again and will be looking for us. From my experience projecting when I was younger I know that when he is out he can go to an area almost instantly but once there he can only travel about as fast as a helicopter so I want to change course a few times so that he can’t figure out which direction we went.”

Sarah looked dumb-founded. “You mean he might have been spying on us all

along because he had the earring to tune in on me?"

"That's exactly what I am saying. Fortunately you only went to the house for a short time before we were gone on the case. My guess is that he doesn't have a clue about Klamath. Odds are better that he knew you were in Europe most of the time he was setting things up and then would have been too busy to bother with you until he knew you were on the case. He probably learned that through Sharan and by then it was too late. By the time we went back to the Retreat, he no longer had the earring."

"I'm not taking any chances on that," said Grant. "We've got to take that guy out either way. Did it ever occur to you that if this guy is so powerful and knows so much about the organization that he might have let himself get caught? Catching him was too easy."

"But why would he want to get caught?" Sarah asked.

"To put those damn taps on people," Grant said. "I didn't really make the connection until now but Rusty told me that the other interrogator was found dead in his home."

"Shit!" Merrill was obviously anxious. "You better have Rusty round up anyone who had direct contact with the Traveler when he was there. No wonder he had enough power to pull off those illusions. We've got to go back there and undo them."

"We don't have time. We have to track him down before he figures out where we are and what we're up to. Right now, he's a security problem that we will have to deal with sooner or later and I really don't think Rusty is going to be very happy if it's later and neither will I."

"Trust me," Merrill said with conviction. "I don't think we can back away from him either but you better understand. It is not going to be easy."

"What do you have there," asked Sarah. She was sitting in the front seat of the rental car looking back at Merrill who was examining the crystal wand.

"It's the Traveler's wand. I was trying to figure out exactly what it does. But it still eludes me. It seems to want to emanate power. I think my drawing off of it would act as a triggering effect and I don't really know what it would trigger. The quartz itself seems pretty heavily charged; like a battery. I keep feeling that it is a weapon of some kind which is what I assumed when we found it."

"Can I see it?"

"Sure, but don't allow yourself to draw any energy from it."

As she took the wand from Merrill's hand her face shown of wonder. "I see what you mean; it has a very odd feeling. It's an interesting piece of work. The gemstones seem to grow out of the quartz. You would think who ever made this would have had to use metal to attach them but except for the small strip of silver

connected to . . . Is that a sapphire?"

"Yes. Pretty isn't it?"

"The entire piece is beautiful. I just can't figure out how it was made. There isn't any caulking around the stones as far as I can tell."

"Nope," Merrill said while reaching forward to retrieve the wand from Sarah.

"That's because it wasn't made by any traditional method. Grant there's an alchemist in Los Angeles who might be able to give us some better insight into this. Is there any chance of us taking a detour there?"

Grant looked up from the road into the rear view mirror. "That depends mostly on where the Traveler is leading us. Jan? What's going on with the Traveler?"

"I've been checking on his movements about every fifteen minutes. About two hours ago I sensed he was south of us again and then about fifteen minutes later he went back to being northwest of us. He has just continued to go west since then."

Grant bit down on his lip. "Merrill, what do you think that means?"

"Well, we took what protection he had with him including his amulet. That should limit his abilities some at least. My guess is that he feels vulnerable without them. Not that I would ever think of him as ever being truly vulnerable. But, if that is what he is feeling, then he would be headed home for whatever other tools he might have."

"That was my guess too."

Grant pushed his fingers through his hair and scratched his head. "Since we don't really know where his home is. I think going to the west coast might be just as well. We could catch a flight into Los Angeles and wait there until he settles in somewhere and then move from there. That would give us the time we need for you to see what the alchemist can figure out. We'll be in Kansas City in about an hour. Sarah, see if you can get us some tickets to Los Angeles."

Merrill put the little wand back in his inner coat pocket and looked out the window. They were passing the small city of Concordia. 'The city sits here all by itself,' he thought, 'with its pretty houses with multiple stories and adequate yard space separating them. Even under the gloomy sky the area looks inviting. It's almost like the town is left over from another time, pre-civil war maybe. Certainly the area is too far removed from the ocean for my taste but still it would be nice to stop and visit for a few days and experience what these people are about.'

He closed his eyes and thought about what he had seen and perhaps more importantly what he was feeling. He wished he were home. It had been a month since this adventure began and in that time they had only been home for a day. Just long enough to realize how much he missed the day to day trials of building the Retreat and coming home to a loving evening alone with Jan and the comfort

of their evening rituals. In the month they had been gone so much had changed. The joyous return of their friends, the pregnancies and the profound advancement of the Retreat were all positive events but they were also reminders that things move on emphasized by the dangers they had experienced and were entering into. He realized that the sleepy little city, the quaintness, the quiet and the remoteness were symbols of the life they had left.

He put his arm around Jan and kissed her.

She looked at him with soft concerned eyes and a gentle smile. "What was that?"

"Just a realization of how much I love you and how lost I would be if you weren't here to share all of this."

"I feel that too," she said seeming to fill in the rest. And then she added, "We need some time alone together and I think we need to make that trip to Vegas as soon as we finish with this... this craziness."

"We're all set," said Sarah loudly enough to be heard through out the car. "Our flight is in about two hours that gives us just about enough time to get there and check in."

Jan sighed.



Jan ambled slowly with Merrill and gazed down at the numerous stars that lined the sidewalk. It wasn't what she had expected. Tinsel Town? She didn't think so. Throngs of people like cattle being herded nowhere pushed passed them while others seemed to be casually walking aimlessly. The Hollywood buildings looked old and tired. Even the colorful lights that flashed to draw attention to Ripley's Believe it or Not and the Wax Museum had seemingly lost their luster. They had passed Grauman's Chinese Theater which was one of the few still maintained artifacts of the once pristine city of glamour. As they followed the star walk, Merrill tried to remember exactly where to turn. Each street crossing they came to seemed to fall off the world. There were hillsides of cracked and uneven sidewalks. "I think it's just a few more blocks," he said to her.

She had looked forward to their excursion having never ventured into Los Angeles, but it was nothing like she imagined it to be. Now it was just another fanciful vision lost to reality. It felt good to be in the California climate and in her normal outfit of peasant skirt and blouse but that was the only real pleasure she found. Maybe at a different time it would be a better experience.

They traveled another block and Merrill pointed down the steepest of the hills they had encountered. "There it is!"

Merrill had thought it best if he and Jan went alone. Carl, the alchemist, was

not only the best he was more than a little eccentric. This was obvious from the notoriety he enjoyed by supplying most of the occult stores in California with his ointments, oils and incenses and from the fact that most of the buying store owners were afraid of his practices and avoided personal contact at costs. Merrill was afraid that Carl would smell official all over Grant and that would pretty much all end the conversation..

When they entered the store, Merrill realized immediately that the energy of the place had changed completely. He watched as the woman behind the counter helped the only other customers in the store. He handled and smelled some of the bags of prepared incense. They seemed familiar enough, so the formulae had not changed, but something about the store had. Then he realized that the sense of foreboding that he always associated with being there was no longer there.

"May I help you?" the sensual young woman asked. Merrill thought she couldn't be much over twenty and had a seductive manner that made him feel uncomfortable having Jan with him. She was wearing a dark dress that hung well above the middle of her thigh and low enough to almost cover her breasts which were made almost decent by her long black hair. "Oh, hold on a second."

The woman turned and bent down to pick up a small plastic bag of powder that had fallen from the counter behind her. She seemed to take great efforts to not bend her knees allowing her dress to hike up and reveal that the dark dress was all she was wearing.

Merrill, feeling a little helpless, looked over at Jan who was rolling her eyes. Merrill blushed which was not only obvious to Jan but to the woman at the counter when she returned. The woman glanced at Jan with a hint of satisfaction before readdressing Merrill in a low and seductive voice. "Sorry about that, we can't have Dragon's Blood floating around. Now, how can I help you?"

"Is Carl around? I need to talk to him." Merrill's tone was a little strained.

"Sorry, he hasn't run the shop for over three years. He had a falling out with the owners and from what I hear it was a little ugly." Her tone was on the edge of being huffy.

"Then I don't suppose you know where I can find him."

"No," she replied in a voice that can be only described as patronizing. "But if it has to do with the Arts, I might be able to help."

Merrill stopped as if in thought for a moment and the woman's face went from self-assured to amazement as if someone had slapped her. "I don't think so," he said and turned toward the door. "I think you have a long way to go before you are ready for the real world."

"That little girl is going to get herself in lots of trouble if she goes into alchemy with that attitude." Merrill said while they started climbing back up the hill. "That

false security is going to blow up in her face and who knows how she'll get used."

"What did you do to her? She looked completely astonished."

"Nothing much, I just gave her a blast of energy that made her very uncomfortable. She needs to understand that there are a lot stronger forces out there than she ever dreamed of being. Hopefully that will send her a message."

Merrill looked down at Jan who was looking up at him, her face was beaming. She said nothing; she didn't have to. She just put her arm around Merrill's waist and leaned into him as they strolled back to the hotel.



They stayed the night in Los Angeles. They were booked in the Hilton but none of them were appreciative of the environment. All they could think of and all they talked about was how to handle the Traveler and get on with their plans. By 10:00 PM Jan was convinced that the Traveler was north of them and was no longer moving. Since the first incidence had occurred in Washington they decided that if he hadn't moved by morning their next stop would be Seattle.

Chapter 55

"Deja Vu," Sarah said as they moved slowly up the ramp of the ferry dock. "Isn't this the same ferry we caught last year when we were up here?"

Coleman Dock is the main ferry terminal in downtown Seattle. It was the same terminal they had used when chasing the rapist / murderer. His trail had led them to Bainbridge Island and part way around the Olympic Peninsula to the north.

"No, this terminal has two routes," Grant replied. "From what Jan is describing about the direction we need to head southwest from here. My guess is that the Traveler is somewhere either on the southern part of the peninsula or south toward Shelton or the ocean. We should be able to get better bearings from Bremerton."

Merrill drove the newly rented town car up a side ramp to the second level of the car deck. It had already been a long morning. Even though it was only just after noon they had been on the move since 5:00 AM and Merrill and Jan had been up well before that doing their morning ritual. None of them had slept well the night before so they decided to get moving right away. They had been lucky to be on the 7:30 flight to SeaTac. Just as six months before they decided to use

the Seattle Center as their starting point and just as before they were drawn across the water.

When they reached the passenger deck they found that the concessions were closed. There was a notice on the closed chain mesh that enclosed the kitchen. 'Due to a contract dispute with the State of Washington all services are suspended. Vending machines are located in the seating areas on either end of the ship for passenger's convenience.' As a consequence they were standing in the bow breezeway looking across the gray and turbulent water. Drizzle covered the glass and a cold wind cut through their clothes. They had not planned for the deceptive northwest spring which could bring up a squall with little or no notice and they were definitely not dressed for it. When the wind caught Jan's skirt and lifted it up above her bare thighs she pushed it down and went back inside to a warmer vantage point. It didn't take long for the others to decide that she had made the better choice.

Once the ferry had made its thirty minute crossing of Elliott Bay it turned up into the channel heading to Sinclair Inlet. "How far does this ferry go?" Jan asked.

The wind began buffeting the side glass and rocking slightly with the waves then as the boat moved into the channel it was calm. "Not far, we'll be there in about another twenty minutes," Merrill replied. "We go through a series of curves between Bainbridge Island, there on the right, and Southworth on the left until we enter a bay that's about three miles long and a mile across. Bremerton is on the western side of the bay."

"That may be very close to where he is," Jan said. "I can feel him very closely now."

As they entered the bay Jan noticed the direction change with the final turn and continued to shift as the boat slipped across the calmer waters. The wind had begun to die altogether and the rain stopped.

They went back out on the deck and Jan stared at the eastern beach-line. "There!" she exclaimed while pointing to a small group of houses that lined a short straight part of the shore. "He's in one of those houses."

She discovered that her grip around the pendant had tightened to the point that her fingernails were digging into her hand almost breaking the skin. As she consciously loosened her grip the boat's horn sounded one long blast. They were docking.

They went quickly down to the car and only moments later the deck hands were waving them forward and off of the boat. Merrill followed the signs that took them to highway three and around the end of the bay. Grant took out his cell phone and called Rusty to let him know that they found the Traveler and to send some agents to Port Orchard. "He had to pull some agents out of Tacoma," he

said. "They should be here in about three hours. It's about 1:00 now, so let's take a drive by and isolate which house it is."

Merrill looked at the old buildings that lined the little town of Port Orchard. Each had been given a false facelift to make them look like a seaport attraction but the poor design made it look tacked on. "I spent a fair amount of time here when I was a kid," he reminisced.

"My grandparents lived in the next town. Though, Annapolis is not much of a town. It's just a general store that used to double as a post office. They have a really nice dock that extends out beyond the end of a sand bar enough to have a floating dock for fishermen to come to shore. We had a lot of fun..."

His voiced trailed off and his face went blank.

"We need to do a ritual," he blurted out, "as soon as we locate the house."

Jan looked at him. She had a questioning expression on her face. "I was just interrupted. You know, I couldn't tell if it was my grandfather or the chief but I could tell that it was imperative."

"Ok," Grant jumped in. "Where can we go to do that?"

"There used to be a small park near the top of mile hill that should work. Once we check out the houses on Beach Drive we can go up Retsil Hill."

They all looked at him with blank stares.

"Never mind," he laughed. "I know you don't have a clue what I am talking about. The houses you pointed out should be just around the next curve. That's where the water goes under the road into that little grotto. That pool empties and fills with the tide. The houses are just after a slight turn. Jan what do you feel now?"

He slowed the car until while they passed by a group of four houses. Jan pointed up at an old gray house on an embankment that was almost hidden by trees and large bushes. They could make out that it had a daylight basement that faced the road and water. There was a garage on one end of the property at street level and a very rough, overgrown drive that went to the other side of the house. "This is it," Jan said. "I'm sure of it."

Merrill sped the car and went a quarter mile and then turned around in a road that looked like it might lead up and behind the property. "Could we approach the house from behind?" Grant asked.

"You might, but you have to cross some farms, some very thick woods, a gully and then a steep climb down to get there. It wouldn't be my first choice."

Merrill drove back in front of the properties toward Port Orchard. "We might be able to send some people up from the third property down. If the hill hasn't shifted too much over the years there used to be a landing only about fifty yards back that is relatively easy to cross. I had a friend that lived along there and we

climbed around in those woods quite a bit. But in any case I really suggest that we change into some other clothes including boots if we can. It gets really muddy back there and the ground is pretty unstable. There's an outfitter up near where the park is so maybe we should take the time to change."



The park was as Merrill remembered it. It was surrounded by trees which provided some privacy. There were three fire pits, each with a large cement slab surrounding supporting two picnic tables. There was a well kept lawn where, during public events, people would play badminton and there are a couple of horseshoe pits. He and Jan set out their candles around one of the fire pits, lit the charcoal, added Frankincense, asked Sarah and Grant to join them and began the ritual. After the circle was cast Merrill threw some of his Fast Luck Incense onto the charcoal and began a spell. "Goddess, give us the luck and courage to stop the Traveler. Give us the wisdom..." He could not finish. His mind slipped into the other-world momentarily and then slammed back. He shuddered.

"That was abrupt. In fact I don't like that at all. But I now know that three of us have to join. I don't know why. But I know it's imperative. Sarah, I am going to need you and Jan to link with me."

He looked over at Grant. "I'm sorry Grant. I don't mean to leave you out but it must be a triad."

"To tell you the truth," Grant laughed. "I'm just as glad. I think I am going to need all of my wits with me for this and don't need to be learning something new right now."

Merrill nodded and took each of the women's hands and the three formed a triangle. Even Grant could clearly see the energy this time. It was like a blue and yellow sphere that surrounded the three of them. And when they separated, each of them carried a part of that glow with them.

"I believe we're done," Merrill said. "Let's close and go get those clothes."

The store Merrill remembered was an Army/Navy Surplus store and with a little persuasion they soon had even Jan dressed in long underwear, fatigue pants, heavy socks and army boots. Just to be on the safe side Grant had each of them put on their feather-light body armor and wire their watch/phones under the dark sweaters they found at the store.

Once properly attired and looking like local hunters, they went down the mile hill to Port Orchard. They decided to get a late lunch while waiting for Rusty's reinforcements and headed for a restaurant that overlooked the city parking lot and the water. The ladies both had to get accustomed to the stiff army boots and

were grumbling to each other about it while they walked. Merrill and Grant followed. “You know how great they look, even in these getups?” Grant mused.

“Are you kidding,” Merrill responded. “Those two are the most dynamite ladies I have ever known. I still can’t figure out how all of this happened.”

Grant looked at him questioning.

“I mean, I can see how Sarah would have been right on you,” Merrill continued. “You’re tall, dark, and muscular and have all of the moves. Me, I’m short, blond and a not exactly...”

Grant laughed. “Don’t worry Merrill. Jan knows exactly what she has. And I know she feels just as fortunate as you do. But, still I have to admit we are both really lucky. I’ve never met a pair like that before. Beautiful, intelligent, brave, loving, resourceful and even more that, that, I don’t know. Right now there is something more.”

As they approached the restaurant the gap between them closed and Sarah caught just the tail end of what Grant was saying. She turned and raised one eyebrow and grinned. “I think you two better stay focused.”

Chapter 56

A dark blue car pulled into the parking lot below where they sat drinking coffee. “Our guests have arrived,” said Grant. “Let’s head down.”

Merrill and Sarah stood and were half way out of the restaurant before Merrill and Jan were half out of their chairs. “What do you think, Jan?”

“I think we are going to be in for a rough time,” she said as they slowly followed the others. “The Traveler’s energy has been growing stronger just while we have been here. At first I thought he was moving closer but that just isn’t the case. He is gaining energy.”

“Do you think he knows we’re here?”

“I can’t tell. But when we get there, we better move in fast and carefully. I know that sounds like a contradiction but both are equally important.”

“I know. And I think we should test the link between the three of us before we go in there.”

Jan nodded.

When they reached the others they were standing behind the agency car with the trunk open. There were two agents dressed in tactical clothing. From the trunk they were unloading gear and handing it out to everyone. Each were handed

a web belt that supported a gas mask and an M-16. Jan frowned and only accepted the gas mask. "I wouldn't even know how to use that," she said looking at the assault rifle. "And I really don't want to know."

Grant nodded and they piled into their respective cars with their gear. "They are going to park by that property three doors down and work their way up and around the back. I told them you would tap the breaks twice when you are in front of that property. When they are in position then we're going up the front."

"Sarah," Merrill said. "I'm going to try the link again, so you are sure what it feels like. I wouldn't like you startled at the wrong time."

"Ok... Ahh..." She looked a little shocked and then calm.

Grant saw the glow around all of them and then it was gone.

"Sarah, are you alright?" asked Jan.

"I'm fine," Sarah's voice was unsteady.

Merrill tapped on the breaks twice and then continued until they were a few houses beyond the subject house and pulled off the road. Once outside of the car he reached into his pocket and pulled out the small crystal wand as if assuring himself it was there. "I sure wish I knew what you did," he said to himself out loud.

The four put on their belts strapped the gas masks to their legs, the three gripped their M-16 and took off the safety. They looked over at Grant, who activated his watch and checked to make sure everyone heard, "Let's get down behind the car until they are in position. We really don't need to be seen too soon."

They all moved.

Jan sat down next to Sarah. "Are you alright with the link?"

Sarah blushed. "I was expecting some kind of energy surge or draw or something. I really wasn't expecting what it did. It felt different this time. This was more personal, almost sexual."

"I guess I should have warned you. When we are in ritual or touching we are already in an intimate relationship so the bond feels natural and warm. But when we aren't, the energy hits you out of context."

"That's exactly it. I mean it wasn't unpleasant, just abrupt."

"Don't worry. It's something you get used to once you know what's happening."

Sarah nodded.

Jan noticed Grant nodding as if talking to someone. She hadn't realized that he had the earplug from his watch in one ear and a soft pad headset on the other. Then they all heard his voice, "They're in position. Their route was just as Merrill had described. Let's move."

They waited until a car that had been approaching passed before getting up

and moving toward the house. "Merrill and Sarah, I want you to go up the path by the garage. Keep low when you cross the front. Jan, you're with me."

Grant motioned Merrill and Sarah across the front and he kept Jan back until they were all in position then waved them on. He moved like a cat as he crossed the drive and leaned against the stones that marked the entrance to the drive with Jan deftly moving right behind him. They moved in quick starts pausing to assure no one was observing their progress. They crossed a small patch of lawn and were up against the wooden siding of the house. From there he saw the progress of Merrill and Sarah as they made it to the upper edge of their walkway and motioned for them to keep their ground. After that order all he could see was the tip of their gun muzzles pointed up toward the house. "We're going in."

Grant positioned himself to kick the door. Reconsidering, he decided to try the doorknob first. It was unlocked. He looked over at Jan with a raised eyebrow and then turned and flew through the door taking off to the left and checking the right. Jan followed. There was no one there. The basement was divided down the middle so they each took a side. On Grant's side there were just boxes of old papers, tools, some workbenches and uncountable bottles of nuts, bolts and misc. Jan's side had an alcove that was filled with boxes of old magazines on the left and cabinets on the right.

Jan reached in her pocket and felt the amulet between her fingers. "He's above us," she said into her watch.

"The basement is clear," Grant said so all could hear. "There are stairs at the far end of the basement. We're headed up."

"Wait a minute. Look at this." While Grant completed his circle of the basement, Jan was looking at a table that lay under the windows on the garage side of the house. The shelves beneath it were filled with mason jars filled with herbs and specimens; some looked like body parts but she couldn't be sure what she was seeing.

Grant looked at a few of the jars, "Sarah," he said into his watch in a whisper. "I think you should join us. Work yourself around the way we came in. Merrill, watch that upper door. Sam do you have a view of the front door?"

Jan saw him nod in approval and looked at him questioningly. "I think we better find out what he has been up to."

She picked up and examined a few of the jars of herbs. "I know some of these, we use them in ritual but there are some here that I have never seen before."

Sarah came in and Grant pointed at the shelves. "Oh my," Sarah said in a disgusted tone. "What kind of monster is this guy? That looks like a human liver and a heart and by the size I would say they came from a child no more than about four or five years old!"

“That’s what I wanted to know. The rest of it we can look through later. Let’s go get that bastard.” His voice was filled with hate. “We’re moving up,” he whispered into his mike and the watch. As he stepped up the first few stairs to a cement landing he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Somehow he knew this was not going to go the way he planned and when he stepped on the next wooden stair and it creaked, he knew he was right.

CRASH! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! RRAHRR!

“That sounds like a big cat!” exclaimed Sarah. “I’d swear to it.”

RRAHRR! The sound repeated but had the distinct shift in tones as if moving away quickly.

They ran up the remaining stairs crashed through the door at the top and all spun with their weapons pointing in all directions. They were in a kitchen. Sarah moved off to her right toward the living room while Grant went to the left to check out the kitchen nook and porch entry and then took a right around the stairwell they had climbed to find a bathroom and a rear bedroom. The living room was empty aside from a Franklin stove full of burning logs and an altar which stood facing a large double circle painted on the floor. It wasn’t until she got near the center of the room that she realized that the circles made of an astrological nativity. There were dark stains in the wood that looked like dried blood. As she rushed through she gasped when she stubbed her toe on one of four eye-hooks that were driven symmetrically around the inner circle.

The walls were wood wainscot from floor to waist high and above that the décor looked like a medieval dungeon with chains and manacles, swords, maces and ritualistic blades.

Sarah moved quickly to her right and found a front bedroom with the window broken through. Just as she entered she heard Grant yell “CLEAR” from the kitchen and a second yell of “CLEAR” from Jan in the back bedroom. She moved to the window and looked out. “Grant! One of the agents is down. He’s on the north side of the house part way up the hill in some brush. The window is broken out in here; I think the Traveler jumped out of here.”

“You clear the rest of the house; I’m going out the back door.”

She checked the stark room, it smelled rank with mildew and contained a single cot and dresser, she opened the small closet and found a young woman tied and gagged lying near the back; her dark blue eyes were as large as saucers with nothing covering her but her long blond hair. “Oh!” she almost screamed, then into her watch she yelled, “There’s a live victim in here.”

“Call 911 and keep moving,” she heard Grant calling back.

Jan ran through the living room to an extension where the floor changed. It looked like it had once been a deck but had been enclosed to enlarge the living

space. When she passed the connecting wall she could see the front door. It was closed. "Front room is clear," she said. "I found a door to an attic that I think we should check it out before we go on."

Sarah came out of the bedroom, putting her cell phone back in her pocket. "Ok, let's do it quickly, the police should be here soon."



Grant went out the door and saw Merrill starting up the side of the building.

"Merrill, circle around the other side of the house," he said into his watch and then keeping his M-16 pointed skyward turned the corner to his left.

There was a cement retaining wall just over waist high leaving a path behind the house. Using it for cover he started toward the fallen man. "Grant," he could hear the man breathing hard when he spoke. "He's headed up the ridge. I can just make him out."

Grant looked up the hill and could see the other agent struggling to climb through the thick ivy and mud. "Now I can't see him at all, but I know he's there somewhere."

SNAP!! BOOM!!!

Grant could see what was left of the agent's body smoking and rolling part way down the hill once his eyes readjusted from the lightening flash. "Everybody down!" Grant yelled into his watch and then he moved on to the first agent. He looked severely clawed and his throat was gone as if torn out by massive jaws. "Regroup behind the house."

Merrill had rounded the back of the building just in time to see the flash and came up behind Grant. "As much as I don't like this, we are going to have to go after him."

"I know. We may never get another chance."

Sarah and Jan had gone up the narrow stairs to the attic and looked just long enough to see it was clear but not long enough to inspect the clutter of cases and chests that were strewn about the floor. Then they dashed back down and out the back door and around the house where they found Grant and Merrill.

Grant picked up the fallen agents M-16. "Are you sure you don't want this Jan?"

She took the weapon. "Are you kidding? After what I've just seen? I'll take it now."

Merrill looked at her, he seemed totally surprised. "Do you know how to use it?"

Jan snapped back the bolt and released the safety. "I'll figure it out!"

Grant raised his eyebrows, obviously impressed by her conviction, and waived the group forward up the hill. The muddy hill was slippery and made worse by the thick ivy and patches of nettles. They reached the first clearing and fanned out, all of them scanning the hill before starting up again. They were anything but quiet. Broken branches, Oregon grape, fallen trees covered with moss and deep ivy and seedling trees seemed to be under every step. Sarah half fell over a log that was hidden beneath the undergrowth trying to get to the bottom of the steep hill.

"I didn't realize we were going to have to do mountain climbing," Grant said as he looked up the almost vertical hillside.

"Look," Jan said excitedly. "He's up there."

Merrill raised his rifle, aimed and fired. The figure disappeared over the crest just as the round struck a tree behind where the Traveler's head had been. "Damn!"

It took another ten minutes for them to reach the top and to get over the crest. They had to sling their weapons and use tree roots to pull themselves up the crumbling sand face. They were all covered with mud and had sand inside their clothing adding to the misery. Merrill looked back down the hill and realized that in the commotion he hadn't heard the sirens of the police cars and the ambulance that were now parked on the road between the house and the bay. He pointed down and when they looked, they could all see the blue and red lights flashing and half a dozen men in police uniforms searching the area.

"We have to keep going," Sarah said urgently. "That guy is probably half way down the next valley by now."

They had an easier time for the next hundred yards. Even though they still had to climb over nurse logs and slide on moss the area was flat and sparsely populated by young trees, thimbleberries and huckleberries. They followed a single path headed by Merrill with Grant taking the rear. They couldn't see the Traveler but Jan could still feel him ahead of them using the amulet. The vegetation grew thicker again as they approached the far side of the hill which fell off to a cliff almost as steep as the one they had climbed. This side wasn't sandy however and they could kick their heels into the muddy hillside for steps or slide short distances on the backs of their boots. At the bottom was a small creek and deep mud. Merrill spotted a thick tree trunk that had fallen across the mud and signaled them to follow him across. When they reached the other side they could just make out the path the Traveler had taken. It looked more like a rabbit hole than a path. It was definitely much too small for any of them, even Jan. To Merrill's dismay the path was guarded by tall bushes with club shaped leaves.

"Unless you have a machete with you, we aren't going this way, that's Devil's Club," Merrill said while folding back one of the large leaves exposing very sharp, barbed thorns some as much as an inch long. This stuff would make short work

of us. As he lowered the branch he looked down and noticed that a fog was building around his ankles and climbing quickly. "We have to go back! Now!"

He turned and bolted across the log and started climbing up out of the mist with the others hurrying behind him. The fog followed them up the hill until they were once again on the firmer flat level. The entire valley was filled with the thick gray moisture and they could no longer see more than about a foot down the hill. Then there was a blinding light that traveled the length of the valley.

"Was that lightening?" Sarah yelled out.

"Ball lightening, I think," Merrill yelled back.

Jan felt the amulet and then looked up. "There he is."

Merrill saw The Traveler point to the sky and a dark cloud suddenly formed above them. The Traveler's arm started downward toward them. "Down!" Merrill cried out.

As they all quickly moved to the side and down they were all momentarily blinded and deafened by lightning and simultaneous thunder. Fortunately the bolt had missed them and hit a tree leaving a black smoldering scar and missing bark. But in the process of getting out of the way, Grant had stepped between two branches. He couldn't stand back up. His leg was broken just above the ankle.

"Give me a hand," Merrill shouted at Sarah. They grabbed Grant by the shoulders and helped him hobble further back away from view from the other ridge. "He's getting away," said Jan. She was waving the amulet. "I don't think so," Merrill said with determination.

"Grant, you're going to have to sit this one out my friend. Let's get you over near the other ridge."

They moved through the huckleberry field with relative ease and Grant eased himself down at the base of a tree. He laid a hand on his head and took a cleansing breath. "That will shield your energy, now just wait here Grant. We'll be back for you."

"What are you going to do?"

"It would take me too long to explain. Just trust me. Jan, I'm going to need that amulet."

Merrill placed a shield on each of the ladies and one on himself then guided them out into the middle of the huckleberry field. He pointed out low hollows on two sides of the area that were densely covered with underbrush and instructed them to stay low. Then he went to the most open part of the field, focused on the amulet, laid it down and then hid himself. "Ok, everyone keep very still. Now we wait."

After a little while Merrill, who was fingering the crystal wand and scanning the far ledge, could hear the voices of the police officers. They were beginning to

scour the lower hillside between them and the house. “Hopefully the Traveler will think that’s us down there,” he thought, “That distraction may actually help this situation.”

Merrill was momentarily distracted by the sound of a small hawk as it swooped down in front of him and then up onto the branch of a tree near the edge of the clearing. Nodding in relief he turned his head back toward the gully and saw movement. It was very the top of the Middle Easterner’s head. As the head rose, Merrill could see his dark hair and then his stern face which was a smear of dried blood that was coagulating in his beard appeared moving directly toward the amulet. When he reached his treasure he scanned the area around him, looked toward the voices then reached down.

For the first time Merrill saw the matching tattoos of black leopards on back of the man’s arms and lightening bolts tattooed on his palms. He bit down on his lip and made no sound. He grounded himself as fully as he could and focused on the ladies. Yellow light beams flowed between the three that looked like focused lasers surrounding the Traveler in a triangle. The dark skinned man’s eyes went white and his face became distorted with anger. His yellow teeth showed gritted like a wild animal readying for a kill. One of his hands rose suddenly toward Merrill and a panther the size of an elephant materialized and leapt. Just as the razor sharp claws were about to make their crushing blow onto Merrill’s head, Merrill heard the howl of a wolf and the panther turned into smoke and vanished. Merrill was visibly shaken.

Further angered, the Traveler reached down and grabbed the amulet and then raised a hand to the sky. A dark cloud formed quickly above Merrill’s head and he could hear the Traveler laughing. As the Magus’ arm began it’s decent, Merrill pointed the arrow end of the wand toward him and drew energy from it with all the might the three of them held.

The arm never completed its journey. A red stream of light emanated from the Traveler’s chest directly into the wand and the triangle of beams glowed like the sun. Merrill and the others went into spasms that in comparison would have made even the most seized epileptic feel that he was having a good day. The Traveler screamed, shaking even more than the others until he fell dead; his eyes sunken into their sockets.

The triangle of light faded and the three lay there quiet in a moment of dizziness. Then one by one they stood. “Is everyone alright?” Grant’s voice filled the earpieces.

Merrill looked at the ladies who were moving slowly toward him. “It seems we survived it.”

As they met on one side of the Traveler’s shriveled remains Merrill raised his

arms and pulled both ladies to him in a great hug. There were tears in all of their eyes. "How are you?" he asked.

"I feel fine, strong in fact," said Jan. Sarah nodded in agreement. "And Amber is doing very well too."

"So is Holly," said Sarah.

"What? I mean, how do you know?" Merrill sounded surprised.

"They told us," Jan responded and then added. "I can hear them now."

"So can I," said Sarah. "Both of them. And they know their names."

Chapter 57

"Congratulations!" Richard's voice boomed as they got out of the stretch limousine that Rusty had arraigned to drive them from San Francisco. It had been a busy week since their battle in Port Orchard and all of them were anxious to see the progress on the Retreat and to go home and relax.

"Oh Goddess!" exclaimed Jan as she looked from the drive into the newly completed courtyard. "I'm sorry," she said catching herself, "Thank you. But more than thank you, I mean." She looked almost faint.

Merrill put his arm around her and they walked to the center, barely slowed by Grant's walking cast. They all stared in all directions barely able to focus on any one thing. It was as they had planned and more. There was an eight foot diameter planter designed as a large circular bench where the fountain had originally been planned. The houses were complete and even the lawns had been seeded. The sides of the houses had been fitted with brick siding which was a touch that Grant had suggested to Richard on the phone and the entire complex looked clean. It was like a cross between a university campus and a Courier and Ives painting.

"I hope you don't mind," Richard interrupted their moment of awe. "I took the liberty of moving your furnishings up from the other house and I had the new furnishings you ordered for Grant and Sarah moved in. So, unless you want to, you don't need to go to the other house tonight, in fact its pretty much emptied out. I wanted it ready when you got here, I knew about Jan's wish to start married life in your new home."

Merrill pulled Jan to him. "I hope you like our new home." And after kissing long and completely, they turned to see Grant and Sarah pulling apart from the same sentiment. Grant reached out his arms to the others and the four of them

took hands and literally jumped up and down and screamed in happiness.

“Well?” asked Richard. “Did you want to take the tour?”

“Absolutely,” said Merrill, “But to tell you the truth, I am a little overwhelmed. Could we find a cup of coffee to carry around with us? I really need to ground myself enough to take this all in.”

“Actually, that was my next little surprise. Let’s start the tour in there.” He pointed to the third house intended for the cook and grounds keeper, lead them to the front door, opened it and went in. The sweet smell of roasted turkey and herb dressing greeted their arrival and as they stepped into the entry that adjoined the living room they were all astounded by the wood parquet floor that adjoined the white carpet. The room was decorated with naturally tanned leather and heavy oak with accent decor that should have come directly from the 17th Century. It was clean and perfect but somewhat disconcerting when they realized that the room could seat at least twenty people.

“There is only one person I know who would have decorated like this. But I don’t see how that could be possible since I haven’t even had a chance to present the idea to him.”

“No, but Grant did.” A familiar voice caused Merrill to look down the entry hall toward what appeared to be the kitchen as Kalen stepped into the living room with his arms extended. His long arms surrounded both Jan and Merrill. “And last week Rusty called and told me the updated time table. Congratulations, my dearest friends.” His face was an enormous smile and his clothes were as white as the carpet. “I’m sorry for the lame excuse for not showing up for the wedding. But if I had, we couldn’t have had this moment.”

“But how did Rusty get your number?”

“I doubt there is much of anything about us Rusty doesn’t know,” Grant piped in. “But in this case it was my doing. We had talked about having him join us before Sarah and I went on our honeymoon and I knew that if he were going to join us there would have to be a security clearance. So, I called Kalen and filled him in. After that I arraigned for a couple of agents to come out and fill out the paperwork. I wanted it to be a surprise for you and Jan.” He smiled, “Apparently it was.”

Sarah crossed the soft carpet and stroked her hand across the mantle of the great stone hearth that filled the living room wall. “All of this is just amazing.”

“How about that coffee?” asked Richard looking over at Kalen.

“Come with me,” Kalen announced. “You have to see this kitchen.”

They went back to the entry, turned away from the front door, passed a set of stairs and followed the entry which opened into the kitchen and dinning areas. On the far side the room rejoined the living room like a big circle. The kitchen looked

like something from a television cooking show. All the appliances were industrial size and stainless-steel with synthetic countertops that looked like marble. The wide space was divided by an island topped with a three inch cutting board. Filled knife racks were built in on both ends and a large stainless steel hoop above that suspended every size of All-Clad cookware imaginable. On the shelf below were racks for the cookware lids and bins containing cooking essentials like flours, sugars and spices. There were dual industrial sinks with long counters on either side that sat below a service counter that overlooked the dining room. The service counter was fitted with walnut slat sliding doors which could be closed to provide privacy to those dining.

"You're going to appreciate this part," said Kalen. A full service barista station stood on one end of the counter. It was complete with a dual espresso machine. "The coffee is always on." He said, pointed out to the next room and continued, "Check out the dining room and I'll have some lattes' in no time."

When they entered the dining room they realized how big it really was. There were six bar stools tucked under a counter just a few inches lower than the service bar that were not crowded at all by the walnut banquet table surrounded by twenty chairs and beyond it a wall of all double insulated glass with sliding doors that let out to a wide deck and the forest beyond.

While they stood admiring the decor they could hear steam rushing through the espresso machine. They sat at one end of the massive table.

Sarah looked confused. "I don't understand why all of this is so big. I can understand the kitchen for Kalen. He's going to be cooking for us for special occasions and for the occasional guests but I don't understand all the rest of it."

Merrill looked at Grant who waved it back to him. "It's really part of our cover story," Merrill explained. "As you know Jan has been becoming very visible in town and to both them and the rest of the world we are a Geological / Environmental Research Station. We are going to need to have receptions and visitations from local and governmental officials and we need somewhere to entertain them. Upstairs, there should be a conference room with nothing but pictures of the area, wild life and if I am not mistaken there is supposed to be an active seismograph from sensors that were planted at the base of the hill. Jan and I have always been in love with the earth and nature so part of what we are going to be doing is learning about the subject. We have all the information we need since Grant got us tied into the University Library Databases."

"Then where does Kalen stay?"

"Right here," Kalen said as he carefully lifted a large steaming cup off of the tray for each of them including him. He set the tray on the pass-through and joined them at the table. "I have a master bedroom suite upstairs that could match

any of the best hotels including walk-in shower and huge garden bath, an extra bedroom in case my daughter wants to visit and an office. There is also the conference room and an executive suite in case some of our important guests need to stay.”

“Oh my,” Sarah seemed overwhelmed. “How big are these houses?”

Merrill smiled and then said, “About 5,200 square feet. We were really able to economize on the space with the layout. I doubt we will ever have more than about fifty guests at a time. The outside deck can handle about eight tables if we need them.”

“I had no idea. I mean last time I saw this place they were just starting to build our house and that was just two weeks ago.” She looked at Richard. “How did you do it so fast?”

“Actually you haven’t seen the half of it yet,” he said. “At one point I had about 150 guys up here. They learned how to build the panel houses by helping with the first then broke up into teams. It was really great training for my guys. We’ll probably start using the panels for most of our projects now that we understand them. What none of you know is that the lab is complete too except for some of bigger high tech equipment. We had a delivery late last night and from what I understand, you are going to pretty busy for awhile.”

Sarah’s brow furrowed, “What delivery?”

“Rusty didn’t fill me in too much but apparently there was a crime scene in Port Orchard, Washington that was filled with unknowns that they didn’t want the locals to be involved with. So, they sent all of the evidence here.” Richard stroked his beard as if thinking. “The biggest pieces I saw were sections of wood floor and there are a couple of bodies in the ice box.”

“Bodies?”

“Yeah, I wondered about that too. The driver told me that the plastic bags they were in had been filled with some kind of gas to keep them from deteriorating.”

“You mean I can finally actually do my work?” Sarah was beaming.

Merrill sipped his coffee and took a long look around him. The place really had turned out beyond expectation. It was beautiful. “Let’s check the rest out before it gets any later.”

“Have at it,” Kalen said. “Dinner won’t be ready for another two and a half hours. I soaked the bird this morning and it’s been slow cooking since 1:00. It should be perfect around 5:00.”

They all stood and Merrill gave Kalen a big hug. “It’s good to have you here.”

Then they all went outside. “Now I want to warn you,” said Richard. “We brought in all the furnishings you had and set them up temporarily, but we thought

you would want to decorate yourselves to we left it at that. Except for a little surprise that Rusty arraigned.”

Grant stopped. “What surprise?” His expression took on a look of concern. “My God, what else could the man have done? I mean look at all this. It would have taken us another year to get this far, maybe even more. We didn’t even expect the houses to be barely livable for another three to four months.”

“Come on,” Richard said. “Rusty told me that his efforts on the Retreat were both personally motivated as a kind of wedding present but also Agency related because he needed you up and running as soon as possible. He realized just how much they needed your services when this last threat first presented itself. But this last surprise is completely different. You’ll see.”

Richard led them back to the center and then turned to his left. “Let’s start out with Merrill and Jan’s.”

As they entered the house it was obvious that even though it looked exactly like the central facility the layout inside was completely different. In front of them down the entry was a long set of stairs that climbed to a hall that went in both directions. To the left a few steps inside was a door and beyond that before the stairs was open. On the right side of the staircase, as in the other house, the entry extended into the kitchen area. Instead of the huge living room, the area had been divided into separate areas. There was a small parlor just off of the marble entry way that had two chairs with small tables and lamps, built in bookcases and a small fireplace already lain with wood. “The sliding door seals and there is a very strong air exchange system in this room,” Merrill explained looking up at Richard who nodded. “It’s designed as a smoking room. I never have liked smoke in the house but I hate running outside all of the time for a cigarette. We had one built into the other house as well.”

Around the corner was the Great Room, a living room slightly more than a third the size of the one in the other building but still adequate for entertaining up to about eight people. It was mostly barren of furniture, but it had an impressive stone fireplace and lush dark carpet. They went through the Great Room to a door leading to a family room that was about the same size. There stood the wall unit that they had in the other house containing their flat panel television and audio visual surround system and the other decor that had been their living room in the other house. “It turned out that our electricians had no problem at all in running the extra lines for the surround,” Richard said. “They just notched to floor panels and hid them under the carpets. Also, the satellite system has already been set up and you have both television and internet. We didn’t set up the server system since we knew you wanted to do the configurations Merrill, and since you are going WIFI it didn’t really concern us as far as running lines.”

“Were they able to put the panels in between in these rooms?” asked Merrill. “You remember that was still a question before I left.”

“Are you kidding?” laughed Richard. “All of the walls in this room are 10” Styrofoam core. You can crank that stereo all the way up and not even hear it in the living room. Even the door has been sound proofed. If you look up you’ll see that there are strips of vents. I was able to put smoke ventilation in here too. It exchanges air from the outside so I wouldn’t use it during the winter. Just keep the doors open most of the time. But during the summer months it should be on anyway because this room is so sealed. There is a timer on it so it will run automatically for an hour each day to keep out mold. Which reminds me, I needed to tell you that there is one of those exchange fans upstairs as well to vent the rest of the house.”

They walked through the door at the back of the room continuing the circle. The door opened into a dining area suitable for seating six people, the table that had been at the other house seemed small only seating four. “You might want to get a different dining set Merrill,” Grant said. “But I’ve been thinking that maybe we should keep the other house for guests. We own in it anyway and we could use what ever furnishings we change out here to fill it again.”

Jan smiled brightly. “I suspect there will be things you two need as well, and I know exactly where we need to shop Sarah.”

Merrill grinned. “It sounds like we’re spending a few days in San Francisco, Sausalito and Carmel to me.”

Jan blushed. “You got me pegged.”

They all laughed as they moved into the kitchen which was about a third the size as Kalen’s, but with the same quality of equipment and still plenty of room for two to cook. “It’s perfect!” Merrill exclaimed. “It couldn’t be better.”

“There is a large guest bath there off of the entry hall opposite the stairs and a second small one off of the kitchen there,” Richard said and pointed at a doorway on close end of the kitchen. “There are three more bathrooms upstairs. The door next to this bathroom goes down to the pantry and of course the lab. As you know we purposely decided on central parking which is in the barn. The way we have it laid out, you can put eight cars inside and there are a thirty more parking spots on the north end of the property behind Grant and Sarah’s house.”

He led them back down the entry to the stairs. “You’re going to love this,” Richard said as they climbed the stairs. “Sorry the stairs had to be this long but there was no choice with the high ceilings of the main floor.”

Grant had to take the ascent very slowly with his disabled leg but after a minute they were all standing in a hallway that was much wider than they would have anticipated. “Merrill and I decided that the halls should be fairly wide to

make it easier to move in the larger pieces of furniture. At first I wasn't really convinced but I really do like how it turned out."

He took them to the left over the living room passing a door on their left. "This is a walk-in linen closet." Two steps further they came to a door that ended the hallway. "This is your office area."

Jan was the first to enter and she gasped. "It's so big!"

The room was at least as large as most peoples living room. The small work stations they had used in the other house were dwarfed by the space. "Well, I guess that's one more room we are going to want to refurnish," said Merrill. "And I know exactly where I want to go for that."

Jan smiled. "Ikea?"

Merrill grinned.

"Go down to the other end of the hall and check out your master bedroom," said Richard.

On this, Merrill was the first to head down the hall. When he opened the door and looked in his mouth fell open. Even though he had designed it himself he couldn't believe the result. "Jan! You've got to see this."

The bedroom was as large as the office and once again dwarfing the furnishings they had used in the other house. There was adequate room for their queen size bed set and dressers but more room to allow for a sitting table and chairs. There were two walk-in closets, a dressing room, private bathroom and a marble walk-in shower and garden style sauna bath. Sliding glass doors on the north side of the room led to a deck that oversaw the courtyard.

Jan stepped into the room and started to cry. "It's all so much. I really had no clue."

Sarah put her arms around her. She had tears in her eyes too and looked up at Grant. "Thank you," she whispered just to him. "You have fulfilled so many dreams that none of us ever dared to hope for."

Grant leaned down and kissed her. "The dreams are just beginning."

"You notice that you passed a couple of rooms on the way down here," Richard said.

"Those should be the extra bedrooms and a bath," said Merrill.

"Yes, but there is something I want to show you in the next room."

Richard led them back out into the hall and stopped holding the doorknob of the room next to the master. "This is the gift from Rusty I spoke of." He started to open the door and stopped. "Jan, Sarah. I want you two to go in first." Then he opened the door.

Jan and Sarah both shrieked as they walked in. Their eyes were as wide as they could be with tears flowing down their cheeks and their hands covering their

mouths. The room was painted in soft pastel colors; soft pink walls pale blue ceiling accented with clouds and rose colored carpet. There was a small white dresser, a changing table, supplies chest, a crib and even a toy box.



Both Sarah and Jan's eyes were red from tears as they sat down to dinner at Kalen's banquet table. It had taken over two hours just to walk through the new homes and it had taken an emotional toll on both of them. Richard had gone home after showing them the first house and they continued the tour by themselves. The second house with a few alterations of color and much less furniture was a reverse version of the first one including the baby's room.

None of them could speak during the wonderful dinner Kalen presented of Turkey, dressing, green bean and toasted onion casserole served with fresh cranberry relish and salad. They all were in awe with all that they had seen and the wonderful home cooked meal was a fitting closure for the day.

After dinner, Kalen got up from the table, went to the kitchen and came back with brandy for all. After serving, he handed Merrill and Grant each a cigar. "I thought you might want to celebrate," he said with a smile. "I, for one, am truly happy for all of us."

Grant and Merrill both thanked Kalen for his thoughtfulness and the four of them went outside onto the deck. It was only 6:00 PM but the sun had already retired and the automatic deck lighting had come on.

"You know, it really is pretty out here," Jan said while Grant and Merrill lit their cigars. "I'm sorry I lost my composure earlier. I ..."

"Don't apologize," Grant said. "We have all been through a lot over the past month or so. Between the potential epidemic, chasing after the Traveler, finding out about the pregnancies and then your wedding, I'm surprised all of us held together this long. At least you and Sarah's crying was from joy. I personally am ready for at least a week of rest before I try to do anything, even decorating. I think we all need some time off."

He took a deep drag from his cigar and blew a smoke ring. He took a sip of his brandy and looked across the table at Merrill. "You know, I haven't wanted to bring this up until now because things have been so crazy but there are a couple of things that I don't understand."

"Oh, what's that Grant?"

"When we were chasing after the Traveler at the beach house the one agent was taken down by what seemed to be a big cat. At least that's what the wound on his neck looked like. Then later when he saw you I saw a leopard jumped out

at you and then just seemed to vanish into smoke.” He took another drag from his cigar and blew it out to illustrate his point. “Also, when you used the crystal I could see all of the energy trails. They were bright. And what was with the girl in the closet? I can’t even fathom what all that was about.”

Both of the ladies were nodding in agreement. “To tell you the truth Merrill,” Jan added, “as much as we have worked magick together I really didn’t understand most of that myself aside from our linking. And even that was a lot more than I have ever experienced. You realize I have had a running conversation with our daughter ever since then.”

“Ok, I’ll try to explain as best I can. Part of it I am only guessing at since I’ve never worked with dark magick but I think the girl was going to be a sacrifice to one of the war gods. Probably she was supposed to be a token for some spell he was building. When we intruded he crashed the window, shape-shifted into a leopard and made his escape. It was only the agent’s misfortune that he was standing in his path. The lightening you undoubtedly figured out. He actually had that spell tattooed on his palms. The second leopard was a summoned protector and since it was an entity of the other-world my grandfather canceled the evocation. That’s why it turned to smoke Grant.”

Merrill paused and took a sip of the brandy. “This is the part I can really only guess at. I think when I linked us while I was holding the crystal, the power it generated was strong enough to become visible light and when I drew on the amethyst it activated its spell. I’m pretty sure it was a vampire spell designed to drain the victim and give the holder their energy. Like the tag he placed on Jan and that interrogator guy, only much stronger. So when I activated it, we literally drained him to death with his own magick.”

Merrill took a drag from his cigar and then looked at Grant once again. “I really think we should destroy that thing. Nothing good can come from something like that.”

Grant nodded. “If you think it best to destroy it, then let’s do it.”

“But what about our being able to talk to the girls?” asked Sarah.

“Well, the only thing I can come up with is that early on I was able to feel their presence. As you remember I was able to tell that they were girls. That in it-self should tell you something about how strong they are psychically. Then we all got blasted with more psychic energy than we probably generate individually in a year. Even though we were grounded and the energy didn’t stay with us, it still passed through us. My guess is that it has accelerated their psychic growth. Only time will tell how permanent those effects might be. But I can feel them both very strongly and they seem to be very healthy and content. So, I wouldn’t worry about it.”

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“I think I’m tired.” Sarah said as she stood up. “And I think it’s time to go home.”

They all stood to leave and Merrill shook his head. “Oh! One last thing. Did you ever find out what this Pendentive organization is?”

“Nope,” Grant said as he went into the house. “Rusty told me that they sent a contact to Madrid. He called in three days ago saying he had some information and no one has seen him since.”

They walked through the kitchen and said good-night to Kalen before going out the front door. “See you in a couple of days, guys.” Grant said.

They all hugged then Grant took Sarah’s hand and they started around the circular path leading to their house and at the last second he turned his head. “Be careful driving.”

They all laughed as they, for the first time, walked home.

