


J BENNINGTON



114
MIMOSA

114 Mimosa

J. Bennington

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Chapter One

Jonas Stricky sat in a dimly lighted room breathing in the heavy, thick smell of often used incense. Across a round table, draped with a dingy grey cloth, sat Sister Grace, a fortune teller of renowned fame. He waited nervously, palms' sweating, for her to reply to his inquiries concerning his future and his marriage.

Sister Grace watched the crystal ball on the table between them. More intently, she watched the reaction of her client from the corner of her eye. She exercised caution, for she had met many strange persons during her career. Jonas was more unsettling than most, and she found herself wary. Since he had spoken the first time, his demeanor had kept her on guard. She vowed she would not let it down, until she discovered what he really wanted.

"I see much trouble in your future, Jonas," she said after a few motions of her hand over the ball.

"I knew it!" stuttered Jonas "It's the wife, right? There's been nothing but trouble for me since I married her."

Ah, Sister Grace thought. *Now we make progress.* "I see grief, plenty of grief, and death. It looks as if your wife will die."

"When?" whispered Jonas anxiously.

"Not soon, I'm afraid. I see long years of suffering for her. Much time will pass before release of life comes. The grief is for you and your thoughts, Jonas," replied Sister Grace.

Jonas sat silent and thoughtful for a spell. "I don't want her to suffer more than she has. It isn't right for people to lay and suffer. Can you hasten her death?"

His voice carried a pleading quality that sickened Sister Grace. She sat up straight, staring icily at him.

"Sir, I cannot do things such as that, nor would I if I could. I see only the future as it will be. I don't try to change it."

He was pensive for a few moments as the fingers on his right hand drummed top. "Well, if you can't, do you know someone who can? Surely you must."

Sister Grace sighed. "People like you disgust me. You give honest fortune tellers a bad name. Why not live with her and let it pass?"

Jonas scowled. "I can't live with her."

"You could divorce her."

"Money. She has lots of money."

"Then just never mind, but stop talking for now." She left the table and disappeared through a set of hanging beads in the doorway. She returned shortly with a scrap of paper with a name and address on it.

“Here,” she said, as discourteous as possible. She handed the paper to him. “The man’s name is David Bascombe. He has no phone, doesn’t believe in them. He can help you if he wishes, and he probably will. Furthermore, mark my words, you will live to regret it. Now, remove yourself from my place. For as long as we both live, I wish never to see your face again.”

Jonas read the address with little expression and let himself out of her front door. The sun, that June day of 1959 was a little too warm for him. He sweated before he reached his car. The address was in Klamath Falls, Oregon, nearly an hour’s drive south. He looked in that direction.

“Prepare yourself for a visitor, Bascombe. I’m on the way,” he said with an evil grin. He got inside the car and headed south.

In Portland, Oregon, the day before Jonas’ enquiries of Sister Grace, John Everly took his seat on an Amtrak coach car. He noted with some satisfaction, that for the moment, he had no travel companion near him. His destination was New York, and he needed the time alone to sort out his life plan. As he waited for the train to move forward, his mind ran over the parting mini-scenes on the platform. His mother cried and did not understand his need to leave home. After all, he had been born and raised there. His father was noticeable in his absence. John was the first Everly in three generations to leave Portland, so his father divested all interest in his welfare or fate. One sister had sided with the father and also did not appear. The second sister phoned to wish him luck. She also asked him to let her know of any decent jobs available in New York.

John cleared the scenes from his memory and settled back into his seat. He gazed out the window as the city and suburbs began to pass and recede. Thoughts of the fullest life possible, and his future in New York, filled his head. He sighed and saluted the city border sign, relaxing with a sense of freedom and relief.

Jonas found Bascombe’s Residence the outwardly bland residence on the northern side of town. He parked across the street and studied it for a few moments before approaching the door. The sides were wooden shingles, painted tan. The trim and roof tiles were nearly the same color, presenting a dull, boring appearance. The unevenly spaced windows, and doors were the only breaks of contrast. He shook his head, unsure of the future of his efforts, and crossed the street.

He knocked sharply on the door, and instantly there came a loud barking sound from inside the house. There followed a husky voice calling for quiet. The door knob turned, and the hinges creaked mournfully as the door opened.

Bascombe stood in the doorway, looking up at a bewildered Jonas. That was normal, and it did not irritate Bascombe in the least. He stood five-foot, two-inches tall but his manner commanded respect from those he chanced to meet for business or pleasure.

“May I help you, Sir?” Bascombe asked, shushing the dog again.

Jonas nodded his head. “I think so, uh, Mister Bascombe. Sister Grace sent me. She said you can be very helpful in certain oppressing matters.”

Bascombe regarded him a moment and blinked. “Sister Grace, sent you, huh? So you dabble in fortune telling, and you don’t like yours.”

Jonas nodded again.

Bascombe stepped aside and invited Jonas inside. He ushered him into a small living room decorated with a country atmosphere. There were deer, moose, and bear heads mounted on the walls. Jonas sat in a chair after a chilling look at two shrunken human heads hanging from the ceiling in a corner. Bascombe cleared his throat. “So, precisely what can I do for you, Mister?”

“Call me Jonas. I wish to hasten my wife’s death. She’s very sick and suffers greatly.”

Bascombe’s eyes narrowed to tiny slits. “Then why come to me? Why not simply strangle her, or maybe put a knife in her throat? I could shrink her head.” He pointed to the two heads with his thumb.

Jonas winced and shook himself. “I don’t want the risk or involvement. I don’t relish the thought of prison, and I dislike blood.”

Bascombe continued watching Jonas with unblinking eyes. After a period of stifling silence, he spoke again. “What do you think of my dog? His name is Joshua.”

Jonas jerked and eyed the ball of fur perched on Bascombe’s right leg. “Oh, it’s only a dog,” he said with little interest.

“Joshua is only a dog?” He sounded hurt. “Does that description fit my only reliable friend in life? Does anything in life interest you, Jonas?”

“Sorry if I offended your only friend. Look, Sir, can you help me? She’s worth much money. That interests me. I’m sorry if I’m not fond of your dog. I never cared for animals.”

His eyes bored somberly through the man. “That’s clearer now. Joshua is my friend and more. He, better than I, can choose whom, I help and whom I don’t. He tells me that you are unstable, and that, my friend, bothers me. I can help anyone I wish, but the help I give is deadly serious and you must not treat it lightly.”

Jonas uneasily eyed the dog on Bascombe's lap. Joshua regarded him in the same manner as his master. Jonas swallowed hard and said, "Joshua, I'm sorry if I offended you. I will control myself and be serious." He felt silly.

To Bascombe he said, "Maybe I'm a bit nervous, but I am serious. I just never thought I'd go this far. When she first got sick, I didn't think she'd hang onto life for so long. However, she keeps recovering and relapsing. During the periods that she is in pain, it's most depressing."

Bascombe nodded slightly. "I understand, Sir. Murder is one thing; untimely death of a suffering loved one is quite another."

Jonas relaxed slightly on those words. "So you'll help me?"

"What do you say, Joshua?"

The Pekinese yipped once.

"Okay, return to me at midnight the day-after tomorrow. Don't arrive five minutes before, or after. The transfer of essence will work only in that window. Do you understand?"

Jonas nodded.

"I will give you all you need at that time. I will also tell you what to do once it has completed its task."

"Uh, what's the cost of your work for me?"

He waved his hand. "Eh. Give what it's worth, afterward." He stood swiftly and escorted Jonas to the door. "Good day, Sir."

The train stopped for passengers in Cheyenne, Wyoming. One of the people was a very attractive blonde, looking nervous and distraught. She took a seat beside John and did her best to ignore him. She did not keep up the efforts for long. For soon he had her talking all about her life history and what her plans were for the future.

She relaxed visibly and John found out her name was Heather Lockman, and she was nervous about leaving home with no notice to her family. He assumed, incorrectly, that there she was about to become an unwed mother. He was told no and with quite a rush of embarrassment from her. She was simply tired of living in Wyoming and sought her fortunes in New York.

Before the train reached St. Louis, they were both friends and lovers. He was worried about her chance of success because she seemed naive, and he decided to adopt her for some time to come.

CHAPTER TWO

Jonas returned promptly at the appointed time to Bascombe's house. It was one minute before midnight when he knocked on the door. It opened quickly, and Bascombe told him brusquely to enter.

The living room glowed from the light of several flickering candles. On a card table, in the center of four candles, lay an object made of glass, or at least a similar material. Bascombe motioned Jonas to join him at the table.

Bascombe touched the object gingerly. "This is what you require, Jonas."

Jonas looked at the clear ten-pointed star with the candle light glinting from it on different edges. To him, he was clearly doubtful of its intended use.

As if Bascombe could read Jonas, he spoke. "It's okay if you doubt it, Jonas. It will work, regardless of your faith."

"If you say so."

"I do say it. It's my creation, not yours. Now, some precautions, sir. One, don't be in the house when it decides to complete its task, or you may go with her. Two, when it has finished, you must follow these steps. I have written them down, for they are vitally important. It is better not to rely on memory." He handed a piece of paper folded in half to Jonas.

Jonas unfolded the paper and read them through. "Seems simple enough," he said, but still remained uncertain.

Bascombe lifted the star partially from the table. "This is a gift, Jonas, to both of you. Within six days, your wife will have the gift of peace. You will have the freedom you seek also."

Jonas only nodded.

Bascombe picked up a small cardboard box from a chair and placed the star inside. He closed the box and placed it inside a brown paper bag, which he handed to Jonas. "You may go now. Good luck and prosperity until we meet again." He dismissed Jonas with a wave.

Jonas thanked him, took the dubious gift and departed. Upon his arrival at home, he placed the bag on the kitchen counter and drank a scotch and water before he went upstairs to bed.

The movement of the bed awakened his wife. She stirred and rolled over.

"You're back late, Jonas? I waited until eleven before I went to bed. What time is it now?"

Jonas cringed inside at her touch. "It's a little after one-thirty. I sat in on a card game after the meeting was over. I'm sorry I left you alone for so long."

She patted his leg. "That's okay, honey. I know I'm becoming a burden. I do get lonely at times, but I try not to let it bother me or you."

He experienced a flicker of guilt as he lay down beside her.

She searched under the sheets and grasped his hand. "I wonder sometimes what will become of me. Life was easier before I got sick. At times I have such pain; I would gladly welcome death. I even pray for it occasionally. Would you miss me?"

He was glad the darkness hid his white face. He regained control quickly and said, "Of course I would, sweets. Don't be silly, please."

"Sometimes I have to wonder. Good night, love."

John clung to his companion and kissed her. They had started as strangers and were parting friends. He was proud that he was right about her being naive about the world and hoped he was correct about her ability to make it on her own. She gave him the address of a friend she was to live with and requested a promise for him to write. Now it was time for him to leave her.

His original plan for New York changed. He decided to leave the train in Wilmington, Delaware. It was a quick decision that had them both distressed. He still did not know why he had made it. He kissed her again, wished her luck and stepped onto the platform. He watched in sorrow as the train pulled away with her leaning out of the window, waving good-bye.

When she was no longer visible, he picked up his suitcase and walked inside the station. It was early evening, and the crowd of people was not heavy. He inquired at the information desk and the woman recommended he call J. G. Exec for transportation to Dover. He did that and walked around simply observing the people.

He stopped walking and looking when his eyes beheld a young woman sitting by herself. In contrast to his departed friend, this one was striking in her features. She also stood out due to her short bright-red hair, giving her a tomboyish air.

She wore faded jeans, and a red plaid shirt with the tail pulled outside the waist. She sat, her legs drawn up, her knees holding her chin and her hands holding her ankles. A suitcase in the chairs on either side of her, announced her desire to be alone.

John was not put off by that sign, and he approached her. "Is this seat taken?" he asked, pointing to the one on her right.

She sat staring straight ahead, making no reply.

John hesitated a few seconds, watching her. After he was certain she was not going to respond, he moved the suitcase to the floor and sat down beside her.

She responded then. "What are you doing? That's annoying!" When she faced him, her intended anger softened. Instead of disliking him, she enjoyed boyish look and innocent smile and she felt herself affected by it.

She gestured to all the other empty chairs across the aisle. "Why couldn't you go over there?" she questioned.

He shrugged meekly. "Because you're not over there."

She sighed and regained her pose. "Oh, well. Then sit there, but don't talk. I was enjoying my solitude."

"Waiting for someone?" John asked politely.

"None of your business."

"Yes it is."

Her defenses bristled swiftly. "I beg your pardon? Just how do you figure that?"

"As your future boyfriend, husband, and partner in life, I'm concerned about your welfare." He said it with confidence but with little volume.

She started to laugh but stopped herself. "I won't get married for many years, and it won't be to some strange nut I encountered briefly in a train station. Now be quiet."

She had tried to be stern, but it did not come across that way. She was angry with herself for that reason alone.

"That's comforting to hear. It's weird to marry a total stranger and a nut at that. However, I'm a patient man. Is five years long enough to become my friend, my lover, and then my wife?"

His response caught her off guard. "You're impossible!"

"No, I'm John Everly."

She shook her head. "Well, I'm gone when the limousine gets here. I'm going to Dover to meet my brother. He's taking me home to Delmar. It's been nice talking with you." She followed up with a sarcastic smile.

"J. G. Exec?"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I don't believe this. No way."

"See? Our luck is holding. It gives us some more time to become acquainted. You could start with your name."

She opened her eyes as her head shook faintly. She turned her face away, to hide the dazed feeling. "Tina Tanner if you must know."

CHAPTER THREE

Jonas awoke early and went out before Linda awakened. When he returned, he had two plants with him, and a hanging planter. He carried them to the bedroom, opened the curtains, and proceeded to hang the planter from the ceiling. He placed the two

plants in the holders and stepped back to view his work. He found Linda awake, sitting up in the bed, watching him.

“Morning, love. That’s very lovely. It adds such a nice touch to the room.” She stretched and sighed as joints cracked.

He raised both windows and a gentle warm breeze drifted through the room. He sat beside her on the bed.

“How you feeling today?”

She wrapped around him. “I feel much better this morning. I want it to last.”

“Me too.” He returned the hug, sniffed the air and noticed the normal sick smell of the room was gone. “Tell you what. You take a shower and I’ll go fix breakfast for you.”

She laughed and kissed him on the cheek. “Umm, that sounds wonderful. Do you still remember the first time you did that?”

He chuckled. “Do I ever. Burnt toast. Leathery scrambled eggs. However, I did not screw up the orange juice or milk.”

She laughed with him. “Yeah. You’re better now though.”

He stood and offered a hand.

She took it and pulled herself out of bed. She looked at the plants once, took a deep breath of fresh air and went to the bathroom.

Breakfast was ready when she entered the kitchen. The menu consisted of soft scrambled eggs with ham, toast, and fresh-squeezed orange juice. He had added half a grapefruit.

He surprised himself with the calm manner he talked with her over breakfast. Inside his mind was full of curiosity over how and when her demise would come to pass. He glanced occasionally at the top kitchen cupboard where the bag from Bascombe lay waiting. ‘It will work, no matter where it is placed in the house,’” he heard Bascombe’s voice again.

After they finished breakfast, he announced that he must go to the office. If he did not sell some insurance and handle some affairs, there would be a serious lack of funds in the house.

She walked with him to the door and kissed him good-bye. She stood outside on the front porch and watched him walk down the driveway to the car. When he opened the door, she called to him.

He turned to look at her. Her skin was pale and she looked out of place in her bathrobe. With a faint smile and a trembling voice, she spoke.

“I love you, Jonas. Please drive careful and please come home safe tonight.”

He blew her a kiss and promised he would.

John Everly opened his eyes alone in the Dover Motel. He was not sad with his condition or situation. He was proud that he could elicit so much conversation and information from Tina, and he ran the scenes over in his mind.

Before he exited the van, he caught Tina in his arms and kissed her lips. He could still taste the sweet flavor of her mouth.

Like he had, he knew Tina had felt the rush of excitement and as hard as she tried, she could not respond with anger. She just smiled and said farewell.

“It’s a great beginning,” John had told her, and all the passengers agreed.

He told himself that again and got out of bed to start his day.

Jonas returned home to a much-improved Linda. Gone was her robe and in its place was a white flared skirt and loose fitting blue blouse. She had prepared dinner and waited for him.

As they ate, he broke the news to her that he had to go to Seattle, Washington for a convention the following day. He said it would last a week or less.

She listened to the news with ease and smiled at him across the table. “Jonas, I don’t mind, really. I don’t want my illness to drag you down. Just stay home with me tonight. Okay?” Her smile and tone of voice conveyed a clear message to Jonas.

He moved his plate aside and regarded her. He considered that he was a normal male, and he was married. *Yes, I’m married to her, so why not? When she’s not in pain, she’s a most desirable woman,* he thought silently.

“Yes, of course I’ll stay, sweetheart. Tomorrow is soon enough to leave.”

John went out for breakfast at a local diner. He bought a paper and read the articles and classified section. He asked many questions of the waitress, and by the time he finished breakfast, he had a good feel for the neighborhood of Dover.

Later that day he applied for employment at a new drug store that was opening in a shopping center. The manager hired him for a cashier. A visit to a used-car lot provided him with some necessary transportation.

Jonas slept well. He could not remember a time that making love with Linda was so intense and pleasurable. He awakened the next morning to an empty bed. She had risen earlier and he could hear her in the kitchen downstairs. He suddenly realized who he was and what he was doing, and guilt hit him hard. He ended the lazy stretching

routines and quickly sat upright on the bed, shivering from the foolishness of actually sleeping there.

The nervousness was nearly unbearable and the urge to leave was strong. Still he opened the curtains to allow the sunshine warm his body before he went downstairs. He quelled an impulse to take the bag from its secret place and trash it.

Linda helped him pack his bags and kissed him good-bye. She requested a phone call when he reached Seattle and he promised he would. She watched the car until it was out of sight before she went inside and closed the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Five days after his arrival in Seattle, Jonas decided to call home. When the connection went through, the change was recognizable.

“Jonas!” yelled Linda. “Oh, thank God you called! It’s terrible!”

He could absorb the panic over the phone lines and he shared it. “What is it, Linda? What happened?”

“I don’t know, honey! I haven’t slept since you called two days ago. The nightmares are horrible. The doctor said it’s only anxiety because you’re away. I don’t think so! Oh, Jonas, please come home! I can’t take much more of this. I’m afraid!”

Jonas listened painfully, emotionally torn between rushing home and staying. “Try to calm down, darling Linda. I’ll be home tomorrow night.”

“You don’t understand! I’m scared that I won’t live until tomorrow. Something’s inside this house and it’s watching me! I know it! No one will believe me, but it’s true! It’s not in my mind. I can feel it!”

His heartbeats throbbed in his ears, nearly blocking out her voice. The hand holding the receiver trembled, and his knees shook. Feelings of guilt attacked him relentlessly.

“Okay, sweetheart. I’ll come home early.” He hung up the phone and leaned against the wall of the booth for support. “What have I done?”

He composed himself and went back to the hotel bar.

The girl he was with all night took one look at him and asked, “What happened to you? You’re very pale. Did you see a ghost?”

He sat down without answering. He picked up the fresh, double scotch and water in both hands and drank it without stopping. He caught the bar girl’s attention and ordered two more.

The following evening, at eight o'clock, Jonas pulled onto the driveway of his home on 114 Mimosa Drive. A light was on in the living room, visible through the drawn curtains. Another light was on in the master bedroom upstairs. He exited the car and left his bags inside. He ran quickly but cautiously to the front door and fumbled until the key slid into the lock. He opened the door and stepped inside, and winced at a musty odor like that of a damp cellar.

"Linda?"

He received no reply. He closed the door and went to the dining room.

"Linda! I'm home," he called again." He gulped a drink of water to suppress the nausea building within.

It did little to quell the starting panic. Disregarding all caution, he ran up the stairs two or three at a time. He stopped short at the closed bedroom door. Conflicts raged inside his mind. One was the thought of finding a deceased Linda. One was the fear of what he would find. And the last was the ever-present nagging guilt of knowing what he had done was wrong.

You'll live to regret it, came Sister Grace's voice.

"Linda?" he called one last time and listened to himself breathing. It was the only sound he could hear.

He turned the knob with a sweaty hand and pushed the door open. The odor he smelled downstairs was much stronger here. On the bed, he could see Linda's inert form. She lay motionless, appearing to be sleeping peacefully, with the blankets pulled up over her head. He stepped cautiously to the bed and pulled back the top edge of the blanket. Linda's lifeless face stared up at him with bulging eyes; her mouth opened as if prepared to scream. Around her neck, there was a dark purple line. Jonas gasped and jumped back. His hand pulled the blanket further backward from her in his sudden move. His eyes darted to every corner of the room, searching for something, anything. He found nothing out of place. When he once more convinced himself to look at the bed, he discovered the rest of it.

"Oh, My God!" With a hand over his mouth he backed away from the bed shaking his head. His back touched the unclosed bedroom door, and it slammed shut. He screamed, whirled and beat the door severely, casting wild glances about the room until he calmed sufficiently to jerk it ajar. He ran down the hall to the bathroom. Without a second to spare, he was on his knees retching.

When he could, he stood and rinsed his mouth and washed his face with cold water. He looked at the wild man in the bathroom mirror, hurried out of his confinement and ran down the stairs. He moved the living room phone close to the door as possible,

propped the door open. Only then did he feel safe to call the police and report Linda's death.

He closed the door behind him and walked to his car. He felt better with some distance between himself and the house. He fumbled around in the glove box and found a pack of seldom smoked cigarettes. He lit one and sat on the hood of his car to wait until the police arrived..

Jonas stood gazing out of his living room into the dark cloudless sky. His house was a flurry of people in uniforms and suits. On the street outside he saw the ambulance and counted six police cars. The police photographer walked past him to the door.

"It's disgusting," he commented. "I've never seen such a grisly mess in my life. What did the guy use?"

Jonas did not move or attempt an answer for the question; he was oblivious to everything.

Captain Morris and a detective from the Portland City Police Department came downstairs and approached Jonas. "Mister Stricky, could we trouble you to come upstairs a moment?" Morris asked.

Jonas stood immobile. The words never penetrated the turmoil inside his mind.

Morris tapped Jonas' shoulder. "Excuse me. We need you a moment."

Jonas screamed and jumped forward into the window. He grasped the curtains for support and both he and the curtains fell to the floor.

Morris and the detective helped him up with worried glances at each other.

"Are you okay, sir?" asked Morris.

Though he visibly shaken and afraid, Jonas nodded yes.

"We need you upstairs for a moment," repeated Morris.

Jonas shook violently. "No! I can't! It's horrible!" he shouted, his voice cracked and hoarse. "You'll not get me up there again!"

The detective looked at Morris. "I don't think he'll do us any good right now. We'll have to wait for that. However, I don't feel he should be left alone."

"Do you still think he did it?" asked Morris.

"No forced access or weapon," the detective replied. "However, I don't see how he could have done that. It requires much strength to break bones and tear apart muscles like that." He looked at the twitching, frail man by the door and shook his head.

Morris studied the wildness in Jonas' eyes. "Well, I agree we need to take care of him. He's in bad shape, but then, who wouldn't be under the same circumstances."

He took Jonas' left arm and with no coercion, led him to his police car and put him in the back seat. The ambulance attendants carried out Linda's body and Morris released everyone. He locked the house and took the keys to Jonas.

Jonas said nothing during his ride to the hospital.

CHAPTER FIVE

David Bascombe sat on his sofa in the living room of his home. With lassitude he read the article in the Portland Press completely for the second time.

Portland - AP - Jonas Stricky was pronounced DOA, Dead-On-Arrival, yesterday afternoon at St. Mary's Hospital. Witnesses at the accident scene reported that Jonas proceeded through a red traffic light when the light was yellow for cross traffic. A tractor-trailer truck, ironically carrying empty coffins, struck Jonas' car broadside on the driver's door. The car was dragged over fifty feet before the back wheels of the truck passed completely over the car and the truck stopped. Jonas was released from the hospital earlier in the day. He had been taken there for a nervous disorder over the strange slaying of his wife of twelve years.

"Joshua, this is not a good development."

Joshua whimpered in reply.

"He died before he achieved his task. That means trouble for many people. Because he's the owner and the only one who can stop what has started. Drat!" Bascombe frowned at the fatigue invading his husky voice.

Joshua lay his head in Bascombe's lap. He whimpered again, matching the mood of his master.

Bascombe folded the paper and lay it aside. One of his hands rubbed Joshua's head. "I think you're right. It's time we retired. What life we have left is short and precious, but there's a problem. We're responsible for this tragedy. We can't die until we see it finished," he said absently.

Joshua gave a throaty and mournful cry.

"I don't know when or where. All we can do now is wait. And feel sorry for anyone living at 114 Mimosa anywhere," he coughed.

He stopped stroking Joshua long enough to place a cough drop inside his mouth.

John Everly felt happy, spending the first night in his one-bedroom apartment on Mary Street in Dover. Although he had no furniture, he loved it because he possessed a

place he could call home. He unrolled a sleeping bag on the floor of his carpeted bedroom and fell asleep, dreaming of Tina.

A week later, John let his fingers do the walking through the white pages of the telephone book. He found four families of Tanners listed. The second phone call netted him the house where Tina lived.

The call surprised Tina. “John Everly! What do you think you’re doing? You’re rude and conceited, or maybe you’re plain stupid. I thought I was rid of you.”

John laughed. “None of those adjectives are kind or do they fit us. Self-assured is closest. I have a job, a place to live and a car now. Life in Delaware will be good to me. The only empty spot I have at the moment, is the place where you need to be. Which is why I’m calling you. I’ll pick you up later for dinner tonight, if that’s okay with you.”

Tina remembered his kiss on the van and felt herself becoming excited. *I have you now, John the Sucker.*

“Okay, John. I accept that offer, but on one condition. We must leave within ten minutes.” She laughed, realizing the distance from Dover to Delmar.

“No problem.” He disconnected while she still giggled.

Tina lay the receiver down and turned to her mother. “He didn’t say good-bye. That was rude. Oh, well. One date canceled.”

Five minutes later, she stood open-mouthed, gazing at a grinning John on the other side of the screen door.

“Is this how you’re going out to dine?”

“You little imp! This is exasperating. That’s not fair. You didn’t tell me you were in Delmar.”

“You didn’t ask.” He maintained his innocent smile.

“Okay. You win this time. Let me go and change.”

“No problem.” While Tina was changing, he tried his utmost to gain favor with her mother.

CHAPTER SIX

It was dark but the full moon provided some light to the back yard of 114 Mimosa Drive, Portland, Oregon. Randy Walters knelt on the grass beside a basement window. With a screwdriver, he worked at opening the window he had chosen.

“I’m not so sure this is a good idea,” said the girl standing behind him. “Suppose they come home?”

Randy continued with what he was doing and talked to her. “Will you relax? The house has been empty for three weeks now. I told you that already.”

Sue Morris said no more, but she was clearly nervous and did not like the idea.

There came a solid clunk from the window and a satisfied sound from Randy. "See there! I did it." He twisted the window and lay it on the grass. He lay on his stomach and slid into the dark basement.

Sue bent down on hands and knees, peering inside.

"Come on, Sue. Put your feet in first and squirm in. I'll help you down."

She followed Randy's example and inched her legs through the window. She felt Randy grab her between her legs and giggled. "Randy. Stop that. Only the legs. I don't want to fall."

With that comment, her head cleared the window, and Randy set her down gently and slowly.

"This is wonderful," he said.

"I still don't understand the need."

"We've been making love in my car. We've parked along railroad tracks, deserted roads; every lonely, isolated spot we can find. Tonight we'll make love on a soft bed. What could be better?"

Sue laughed and hit him. "You forgot that tomorrow we may spend a day in jail."

"No. Tomorrow morning we will check the kitchen. If there is any food left that is still edible, you fix breakfast."

"Oh, really? You're talking like we're already married."

"Someday, my love." He kissed her before he replaced the window.

Taking her hand, he felt his way through the dark basement, until he found a door and a light switch. He turned on the lights and checked the room. The light illuminated a large family room and the stairs.

"I'll go up first. I'll turn the light on up there, and you follow."

She nodded in agreement. She surveyed the family room and tried to picture what the former residents did there for entertainment and what happened to them. It did not make sense to her. How could someone simply leave all their possessions and disappear?

Another light illuminated a moment later over the stairs. "Come on and join me, Sue."

She turned the light off and hurried up the stairs. "It was spooky down there alone."

He grinned broadly. "Fear releases a bunch of horny hormones in women. Is it working?"

She put her hands on her hips and eyed him steadily. "I hope you plan to do something that earns money after we marry."

"Oh, I know that already. For now, though, let's enjoy it while someone else, like our parents, are taking care of our financial needs."

Her face lit up and she gave a thumb up. “Okay. Just wanted to set the record straight.”

He led her up the stairs to the second floor. He stopped short on the top stair. “Shhh!” he whispered.

“There’s a light coming from under the door. I haven’t noticed that before.”

“You’re crazy, Randy! Your ideas are going to get us killed. Let’s get out of here.”

“Wait a minute, will you?” He let her hand drop and moved quietly toward the door.

“Randy! Let’s just go!” she whispered desperately.

He pushed the door inward until he could see most of the room. A second push opened it all the way, and he stepped inside.

“Randy! Stop, please!” she whispered.

Randy was out of sight, but she could hear him. “Excuse me, Madam. Could we use your bed for tonight? When you’re finished with it, of course. We want to do that too. Okay. Thanks. We really appreciate that. You’re too kind, Madam.”

He reappeared in the doorway. “The lady says it’s alright, honey. Come on and watch. Maybe we can get some ideas from what they’re doing.”

“You idiot!” she snapped. “Let’s get out of here!” Her heart beat wildly; she felt dizzy and nauseous.

He leaned against the wall and doubled over with laughter. He finally stopped and wiped his eyes. “This is too much. Come on over here, silly. The room is empty. Did you really think I’d do something like that?”

She calmed down and put her hands on her hips again. “Randy! Sometimes your mind is sick and twisted. Speaking of that, I’m ill now. My head hurts. My stomach hurts. And I’m extremely nervous. All I can do tonight is take some aspirin and go to sleep. Sorry. It’s your fault.”

He walked close to her. “Oh, I didn’t know we were already married. You sound like a wife of five or six years.”

She stared at him and tried to maintain a stern expression, but his blue eyes softened it into a smile. “Touché. If I ever do that for real, remind me of tonight.”

“Right on.” He caught a hand and led her to the bedroom.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jonas’ relatives arrived at Portland to settle the affairs of his estate. They were shocked and angry to find Randy’s and Sue’s bodies in the bedroom. A phone call to the

police solved two missing person files but added two more unsolved homicide files. The police were at a loss and the bodies were removed. The entire contents of the house were sold and the property put up for sale.

Joe Stafford drove his car into the driveway of 114 Mimosa Street, and paused. He finished whistling the tune of a radio commercial before proceeding. From the seat beside him, he picked up a small transmitter. He pressed a large red button which would send a signal to a newly installed device, a garage door opener. He smiled at the luxury and the convenience of modern technology. That time, however, nothing happened. He sat inside the car and stared malevolently at the unmoving door.

“Four months,” Joe muttered. He pressed the button several times with no response. “One month after the guarantee expired. It’s so beautiful. I wonder what else will go wrong.” His happy demeanor vanished with the inactivity of the garage door.

Leaving the engine running, he got out of the car and walked toward the garage. Before he reached his destination, his wife ran from the house and confronted him. She cried and flung her arms helplessly.

“Danny’s missing! Half the neighborhood is looking for him! Oh, I’m glad you’re home. I’m so frightened, I don’t know what to do.”

“Today is just full of fucking wonderful things!” he shouted, venting his frustration on her. “How the hell did that happen? What kind of mother are you anyway? Were you watching television again? How many times do I have to tell you? Watch Danny.”

“I’m sorry,” she replied, ignoring the insult. “He was there in the back yard one minute. I went to the bathroom, and the next minute when I came out, he was gone. I told you the gate needed fixing. It must not have locked all the way; it never does. He must have wandered off.”

He wiped a hand across the hair on his forehead. “Damn! It doesn’t pay to get out of bed some days. Well, let me get the car in, and I’ll go find him. A five-year-old boy can’t find all that many places to hide.”

“I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Hey, honey, just let it go for now. We’ve had nothing but trouble since we moved to Chintuk, Nevada.” He bent down and grabbed the handle on the folding door. The door moved up about one inch and wedged. His hand slipped from the handle and he lost skin from two knuckles.

“Ouch, that hurt!” he swore and kicked the door. “What ails this thing today?” He sucked at the broken skin. “Come over here and help me. Don’t stand there like a dummy.”

Sylvia looked at her husband in disbelief. “Why don’t you forget that until we find Danny?”

“Maybe he’s inside the garage. Have you looked there? Come on.”

She reluctantly moved to him. “I opened the side door and yelled for him.”

Together they caught the handle and pulled upward. The door raised over a foot and wedged again. Joe tensed his legs and strained. The door yielded and rolled up effortlessly.

“Alright! We did it.”

“What was that?” asked Sylvia. “I thought something moved back there.”

With the angle of the sunlight, they could only see shadows. They stepped inside the garage together.

“Danny!” called Sylvia, shading her eyes and squinting.

A rumbling sound answered her as the garage door slammed down and latched behind them.

“Danny? Are you here? Don’t play the hide-and-seek game now. Come on out, please.”

“Can it, will you? I’ll turn the light on. Maybe he fell asleep under one of the work benches. He likes to lay there when he’s out here with me.”

He moved in that direction, feeling around in the dusk and cursed himself for not adding windows.

“Joe, something’s wrong here! I’m not sure it’s a good idea to look here. I’m afraid.”

“Just shut up until I turn on the light! Damn all the silliness!”

“Danny?” she called again and her voice ended in a strange choking sound.

“What’s wrong with you, honey?” he asked and his hand found the light switch.

He flipped the lever up, and lights bathed the inside of the garage. He turned around to scan the interior and see what happened to Sylvia. He gasped when his eyes beheld his son, hanging limp, one arm wedged in the vise on his work bench. He turned quickly toward Sylvia.

“Oh, God!” he screamed as her right arm hit him in the stomach “What the hell?”

Sylvia hung suspended as if by some invisible rope. Her face was blue and she clawed at her throat with her left hand, her body jerking and kicking.

“Sylvia! NO!” screamed Joe. He lunged toward her, but his feet caught and held fast in a tangle on the floor. He tried to use his arms to break the fall, but they would not respond, and his forehead split open when it hit the concrete floor.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bascombe relocated his home to an even smaller shack, twenty miles east of Klamath Falls. It had electricity, but he still chose not to have a phone. The only link with the outside world he maintained, was the mail system. He notified just four people, the newspaper, and one neighbor to transport him to buy the essentials he could not grow or make. He settled into a routine of reading the papers, gardening and waiting.

He entered his home one morning after gathering some vegetables from his garden. Shortly he had them cleaned, washed and boiling in a pot of water with some beef. The approach of a rather noisy car disturbed the serenity of the place. It rattled, coughed and backfired; so loud it appeared to have exploded.

Joshua's ears pricked up, and he barked once.

"Yes, Joshua. It appears we are about to receive visitors." He went to the living room window and peered out.

The car stopped around twenty feet from the house. It clinked, coughed once more, and the engine quit. A funnel of steam spurted from under the hood. The driver threw his hands into the air and emerged, shaking his head.

He wore a thread-bare black suit and a gray hat with a blue feather in the band. He brushed his suit with his hands, glanced at the car, then turned his attention to the house. He stood for a moment, hands-on-hips and surveyed the house and its surroundings. He adjusted his hat and strode toward the front porch.

Bascombe stepped outside on the porch with Joshua at his feet.

The visitor stopped three feet away, and the two men viewed each other closely.

David gazed at an old and wrinkled face. The skin was a white sickly color that surrounded sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. The eyes conveyed such an aged aura that David's heart filled with sympathy. He smiled warmly and spoke first.

"Hello, George, my brother. It's been a long time since I last saw you."

"Hello, David." His voice was strong to dispute the image. "Yes, and it's not fair. You don't appear to have aged even a year. How do you manage to stay so youthful when you're eight years older?"

"My life is free of stress, and I live right. I'm not out there saving souls, so there's little to worry me."

George snorted and pushed his hat back on his head. "Dave, the only soul I have left to save is yours, and I wonder sometimes if that is possible."

"Come on inside, George. By the looks of your car, you couldn't leave right now anyway."

The two brothers talked of the last ten years over several glasses of water and a bowl of David's delicious soup.

"Are you still in the ministry?" asked David.

"No, I finally retired. I more or less had to retire. My brand of preaching the gospel isn't wanted today. Fire and brimstone scare them. They want to hear how excellent they are and living sinful existences are okayed by God. How about you?"

"I quit too. It became a burden."

"I've been reading the papers about mysterious deaths across America." He cast a furtive glance to his brother. "I don't know, but I'd almost swear they have your trademark about them."

His face gained a distant look. "You're probably right, George. That's the reason I retired. It's a burden I must bear. Outside I look young; inside I feel one hundred."

"Was it the last demon evoked?"

David nodded, and Joshua wailed mournfully.

"And you can't stop it?"

He shook his head. "No. Your church has binding rules. So does mine. I can't stop it, nor can I die before it does. All I can do is wait. Wait!" He sighed heavily.

"Bit off more of the evil than you can handle, huh?" His brother's activities in the past worried him, and now they saddened him also.

David sat still and made no reply.

The subject changed abruptly to a deep discussion of theology which lasted for hours. George stayed with David for the night and for several years following.

Bedtime for the family called Nester's came early, save the youngest daughter, Sabrina. Two hours after being alone and scaring herself silly watching a horror show; she switched off the television. She shivered at the dreadful things she had viewed.

School had ended three days earlier, but she was not bored, nor was there a likely chance of it during the summer, not her. The farm, named 114 Mimosa Acres after the 114 Mimosa trees that lined the lane, always provided much work for the children. That was normal for Missouri's families.

She did her share of the chores assigned. Still she managed to ride her horse, Night Hawk, and watch television. At times, she felt out of place, for she had no aspiration of being a farmer or a farmer's wife when she grew up. No. She and Night Hawk would do something else. Horse shows and competitions or maybe racing, but no planting, hoeing, etcetera.

She yawned and stumbled upstairs to her own bedroom. She turned the light on, and paused to gaze lovingly at the two trophies won recently by Night Hawk. She took a very deep breath, filled with pride in what she had done with him.

“It’s only the beginning,” she whispered.

She changed into her night gown, switched off the light and crawled under the covers. Moonlight brightly bathed her side of the house. Through her low bedroom window, she could see the barn without sitting up. She blew a kiss in that direction, where Night Hawk stayed, and closed her eyes.

Seconds later, she sat upright and gawked at the barn. The loud whinny from Night Hawk followed by the insane barking of the family dog, Roger, disturbed her. She felt compelled to go to the barn quickly.

Without changing her clothes, she held up the bottom of her gown, and raced down the stairs. She stopped to unchain Roger at the back porch. Try as she might, she could not keep pace with his wild flight toward the barn.

She was breathless when she grasped the latch of the wide door and lifted it from its stops. The door swung out and Roger lunged inside, growling and snarling. Sabrina followed cautiously and paused as she groped for the cord for the lights in the ceiling. She heard Roger yelp once, painfully, and become still. All she could hear then was Night Hawk’s hoarse rasping breaths.

Her hand found the rope for the lights, and she pulled it down with a jerk. The naked bulbs illuminated and flooded the barn’s interior with light. She saw Roger, lying on his side close to the stall that housed Night Hawk. An object that looked like a horse’s hoof stuck out of his side.

She gasped and felt nauseous, but she ignored all caution. She ran to the stall and swung the gate open. Night Hawk lay on his right side. Both his front legs were missing at the knee joints and blood oozed from the torn veins and muscles. Something dark and barely visible wrapped around his mid-section, squeezing tightly. That was the cause of the labored breathing.

“Oh, no!” she screamed.

The horse whinnied at the sound of her voice, and his lack-luster eyes turned toward her.

Sabrina moved toward him, but something caught her around the waist.

Against her efforts, the force dragged her to the opposite side of the stall, and it held her there firmly. She struggled in vain to get free, clawing at the object holding her fast. Unseen things grasped her arms and pulled them outward to her sides.

“Night Hawk!” she screamed, tears flowing and forgetting her own distress. The horse’s head dropped, and the painful breathing ceased.

Sabrina then encountered serious problems. The squeezing of her waist increased. She took a deep breaths against the mounting pressure and screamed, “Daddy! Please help me!”

Somewhere, in the distance, through the fog of pain, she heard a reply.

“Daddy!” she screamed once more. “He’ll take care of you,” she told the air.

She felt something cold and sticky touch her forehead.

Her head jerked backward and her neck broke.

CHAPTER NINE

On the outskirts of Louisville, Kentucky, there is a small area known as the “po blocks”. The people living there are not poor in money, rather poor in other ways. The streets are controlled by two gangs, the Acers and the Daggers. Dennis Montin lead and controlled the Acers. The purpose of the group is to keep the peace and to keep the Daggers from plundering and terrorizing the neighborhood.

Dennis sat in his back yard, one day under a shade tree. He sipped slowly on a large glass of iced lemonade. Nathan, his life-long friend, opened the back gate and approached him.

“What’s up, Den?” asked Nathan.

“Not much, Nate,” responded Dennis. “Lemonade’s on the porch. Help yourself.”

Nathan came back and sat down facing Dennis.

“Have you heard there’s nothing going to happen tonight?” Nathan asked.

“Do you believe it?”

“Not in the least. However there’s something I must talk over with you, Den.”

Something in the tone of his voice caught Dennis’ attention and he set the glass down and straightened his position. He looked at the intelligent black eyes behind brown glasses and knew he was about to say something important. He learned that from experience.

“Well, Nate, let’s have it.”

Nate arched his neck and looked over Dennis’ head at the leaves of the tree. He glanced all around and then lowered his voice. “We’ve been invited to a meeting with Ken tonight.” He said it like it was a major triumph.

Dennis sat immobile, letting the words digest in his mind. A meeting with Ken, the leader of the Daggers? It sounded nearly beyond belief. “When did this happen?” he asked, outwardly calm.

Nathan removed a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Dennis. A strip of tape covered one side of the paper.

“It was fastened to the seat of my bicycle. I found it there when I prepared to come here. They have a lot of nerve entering my garage, but they did.”

Dennis read the note twice. “So, it’s as we expected. The Daggers Den is the old abandoned shack, five blocks from the dump. But why the meeting at night? This is confusing.”

Nathan adopted a fatherly posture. “Dennis, my boy, simply look at the writing. If you pay attention, it looks like it was written by a madman. It’s also too literate for Ken. We all know he doesn’t do that well in school.”

Dennis frowned at the note. He could see it then. “Yes. I agree. It actually looks feminine. It’s someone female, and she’s afraid?”

“That’s my conclusion exactly.”

“Are we being set up?”

“Don’t know. Either that or it is a warning of something major about to happen that we should know about,” said Nathan.

“Do you think anyone else got it?”

“I doubt it. Our closeness is known. I figure that’s why it was delivered to me; I live remoter than you. It’s more accessible with fewer chances of detection.”

Dennis picked up his glass and leaned back against the tree. He took a sip and considered the meaning behind the news. “The note says it’s for only you and me. So, Nate, do we go?”

“The only thing that worries me is the time. It’s excessively dark there at nine o’clock, no street lights in that section of the city. Should we have the rest of the gang hung around somewhere close?”

Dennis rubbed the back of his neck with the cold glass. “That might be asking for trouble. This whole mess of gangs is useless. So, let’s go alone. We’ll just watch each other’s back and split at the first sign of danger.”

Nathan stared into his friends eyes. “Sounds like an operational plan, Kemo Sabe. Tonto’s ready.”

John and Tina lay on the beach at Rehoboth, Delaware. The crowd that surrounded them all day dwindled to a mere few. The rest resigned themselves to stroll the boardwalk, or dining in air-conditioned cafes. The two sat side-by-side watching the sunset over the ocean. On that particular day, the departing rays gave a sensational display on the white clouds over the beach and water.

“That red cloud is redder than your hair, Tina. I see that. I see you everywhere. You’re with me always.”

“You flatter me too much.”

He turned toward her and his face grew serious. “You know, love, I asked you before if five years was long enough for you to become my friend, lover and wife. I’d like to adjust that now, if I might. We’ve passed the first three years. How about moving up the last one? Will you marry me, Tina?”

She sighed and lowered her face without answering immediately. “You’re so determined, and patient. I resigned myself to have to wait a full five years before you asked. Of course, I’ll be happy to marry you.”

“You will?” No arguments stunned him.

She giggled at his bewildered expression. “Why not? We’ve been married for three and a half years already. Why not make it legal? However, do you realize what troubles we’ll face? It’s not going to be easy and painless.”

“I know what you’re talking about,” he said John and hugged her close. “However, short stuff, I can take on the world and win with you on my side.”

She pulled away and stared at him. “You keep calling me that, and I might just side with the world, Mr. Neverly.”

At 8:55 that evening, Dennis stood in an alley way off Night Shade Street. It was eleven blocks from his destination and three blocks from the end of the street lights. He waited, alternating between patience and nervousness as he had for twenty minutes. Then he saw Nathan’s gangly form wandering toward him. He noted proudly that Nathan frequently cast glances over his shoulder. When Nathan was nearly even with the entrance, Dennis stepped out and greeted him.

Nathan jumped and adopted a fighting stance. He swore when he recognized the laughing Dennis.

“Very funny!” Nathan spurted. “It’s a very funny way to get yourself hurt or killed.”

“I didn’t mean it. It just sort of happened. I had to greet you so you wouldn’t walk on past.”

Nathan held his chest and felt the calm returning to his heartbeat. “Well, watch it next time!”

“We’ll be a few minutes late.” Dennis walked toward the dump. “Do you suppose they’ll wait or give us up for cowards?”

Nathan caught up with him. “I think whoever wrote that will wait for us. However, something tells me we won’t find Ken. It will probably be someone else.”

“So long as it’s not our parents. We would probably both be dead if they knew we were coming here alone.”

They turned right onto an unpaved street. They knew where it was even though they could not read the sign that said, “Mimosa Strip”.

“Mimosa Strip,” said Nathan. “I wonder why they called it that? I have never seen one Mimosa tree anywhere in the city. Why name it at all? No one lives here.”

“It was probably named for the Mimosa trees that were stripped away for progress, like stolen,” said Dennis. “You are also wrong about life. There are at least two thousand rats and snakes who live and play in this area near the dump.”

Nathan glanced around and down to the ground in front of them. “Thanks for reminding me, ass hole.”

Between the breaks in the clouds, they could see that they were near to the Daggers Den. Dennis estimated they had one block to go.

A short distance later, a whistle and rustle of bushes on the right side of the road stopped the boys in their tracks.

“Wait! Don’t go in there yet!”

Dennis and Nathan stopped and spun. The bearer of the voice was hiding behind the beam of a flashlight.

“I’m really happy to see you guys. I’m pleased you came.”

“Who are you?”

The beam traveled up and shone on a girl’s face.

“Kristen? So we were right in saying a girl wrote it.”

Kristen switched off the light and sighed. “Yes. It was me.”

“What’s this all about? Is Ken waiting for us?” asked Dennis.

“No. This is my idea. I needed someone to talk to. There’s no talking to Ken about anything. I need help, lots of help.”

After a moment’s silence, Nathan asked what help.

Kristen turned and switched on the light. “Follow me, please. My car is only a few feet away through these bushes. We can talk better there and then go to the house.”

Nathan and Dennis exchanged puzzled glances and cautiously followed.

Inside the car, Kristen sat in the front seat with Dennis. Nathan occupied the back seat. Kristen lit a cigarette and watched the red glowing tip

“I’ve been in jail, Dennis. Did you know that?”

“Only rumor.”

“Well, it was a fact. I sold some weeds to a cop’s son. It was the wrong thing to do. In jail, I learned that jail is no place to stay. It was only a month but it opened my eyes, and I guess it saved my life. Anyway, I never plan to go there again.

“That’s where you and Nathan, come into the mix. I know we have been on opposite sides of the street, but I would wish jail on no one. No one should ever go there.”

Dennis shook his head. “I’m sorry, Kristen, but you’ll have to explain this further. I’m lost as to what we can do, unless you join us.”

The cigarette tip glowed, and Kristen exhaled. “That’s what I have in mind. However, there’s a major complication.” She paused, and the cigarette glowed again. “Ken set me up for that sale. He gave me the name and address. He knew all along what was going to happen. All because I don’t want any part of his sex games.

“Now, either I, or you two are in deep trouble. It would be a tossup as to who will suffer.” She flipped the cigarette out the window.

She opened the door and got out. “Come along to the house now.”

Without waiting, she headed through the bushes to the street.

Nathan and Dennis followed, very cautious at the moment, and Kristen stopped at the posts which once held a gate.

“This is as far as I go. When you open the front door, the light switch is on the right side. I would not advise going all the way inside.”

“Here, put these on.” She handed a pair of gloves to both boys.

“This is strange, Kristen,” said Nathan. “Was there something in that cigarette besides tobacco?”

“No. It would take much more than that to help me.”

“Just what is it?” asked Dennis.

Kristen turned her back and said nothing else.

A year of moments passed before Dennis and Nathan approached the door. Dennis turned the knob slowly and pushed the door inward. Quickly he stepped to the side, staring at Nathan on the other side. Nothing happened but the stench was nauseating. Dennis reached inside, located the light switch, and when he flicked it up and a patch of light shone onto the porch floor. Slowly, both he and Nathan peered around the door frame.

The room smelled of a damp basement opened recently after a thirty-year closure. Furniture and books lay strewn all around the room. The only piece still upright was a round table. Ken’s head rested in the center of the table, surrounded by four of his gang. Their bodies and limbs littered the room amongst the debris. All were in a nauseating state of decay.

A shuffling noise from a back room and a growling set Nathan and Dennis into action. Dennis held his nose and switched off the lights. He closed the door and ran after Nathan, already near the sidewalk.

“See what I mean?” Kristen asked, as she ran with the two boys toward her car. They stopped only once when Nathan had to empty his stomach.

Neither boy answered until they were inside the locked car and driving away. "I see what you mean, Kristen," said Dennis. "I also realize what you need, an alibi. No way could you do that."

"But can I rely on you?" She sounded on the verge of tears. "What he did upset me off, but I couldn't kill him for it."

"I believe you, Kristen. I also realize that you'll need our help when the police get involved. It could turn nasty and be pointed at us too. I can see it now. 'Rival gang slaughters the Daggers'."

"There's one thing you're forgetting, Kristen, Dennis. Neither of you nor I could do to Ken what was done. There had to be something else, non-human perhaps that did that.

"Do you still have that note, Dennis?"

Dennis felt inside his jeans and withdrew the crumpled paper. He handed it to Nathan.

"Kristen, may I borrow your cigarette?"

She pulled over to the side of the street. "Once you would have applauded my jail sentence." She handed him her cigarette. "Circumstances change, huh?"

All three watched as the paper ignited and turned into ashes.

"There's a pay phone before we reach the lighted area," said Nathan. "We stop there and make an anonymous call to the police. I feel we can vouch for the location of ourselves and each other. Let the cops find or not find whatever's in that house."

Kristen leaned across the back seat and hugged Nathan. "Thanks. Maybe you Acers have a lot going for you after all."

CHAPTER TEN

Cassandra Wessing was eccentric, at least to the people in the village of Winnsboro, Pennsylvania. She was a loner at the age of forty-two. However, she did not live entirely alone. She had two pets that were her family, a cat and an orangutan. She was comfortable with her life and could not care less what stories the townspeople spread about her.

Her home was a three-bedroom house in the suburb of Winnsboro. Her mail box was a swan whose breast opened to allow delivery of mail. The black lettering on the swan's white wings read, "114 Mimosa Lane."

One day, she came home from a shopping spree. She had visited every auction, garage sale, and bazaar that she could fit into a Saturday. She filled the back of her five-color SUV to overflowing with bags and boxes. She spent thirty minutes carrying the items inside and one hour showing them to her roommates.

She always found a place to put the things she purchased. She was a genius at space utilization. Rare visitors considered her dwelling a garbage dump and some so stated. She laughed at them and pitied them for their lack of understanding her library system for the items. She boasted that she could find any object within three minutes, if a guest asked. She was correct with only a 1% margin of error.

The following Thursday, she arrived home from her job as the janitor for the Winnsboro Daily Newspaper and felt really depressed. She took a hot shower, hoping it would improve her disposition. It did little to lift the veil of ill feelings. She left the bathroom in her robe and went to the living room.

Chester, the orangutan was moody also. He would peel a banana, take one bite and throw the remainder in the direction of Cassandra on the sofa.

He stuck out his tongue each time she scolded him and picked up another banana.

Daisy, the cat, was an imp. She would systematically leap to the top of the book shelf. From that vantage point, she would jump onto Chester, landing on his head each time. She would then run, because Chester would squeal and chase her. She would hide behind the sofa and wait patiently for Chester to retreat and do it again.

Cassandra watched the two until she became too nervous and irritable. She was in the middle of their weird antics and tired of them.

“Chester! Stop with that banana and go to your room! You’re being childish! I don’t know what’s wrong with you and Daisy, but I’ve had enough. Go to your room, now.”

Chester stopped his hand before it reached his mouth and looked at the banana. He rolled his eyes around and turned his face toward the floor in his movement of shame.

Slyly, he looked across the room to Daisy, who sat licking her right paw and washing her face. He threw the banana and caught Daisy solidly in the left side. He turned and ran from the room, hooting wildly.

Daisy squalled and snarled, raising the hackles on her back, until Chester departed. She walked daintily across the floor, jumped onto Cassandra’s lap, and lay down.

“Care to tell me what’s wrong?” Cassandra asked.

Daisy replied by purring.

Cassandra fell asleep sitting on the sofa. It was dark outside when she awakened and stretched. Daisy still lay in her lap. She scooted the cat off onto the cushion beside her and stood. She yawned and scratched her stomach, moving in the direction of the bathroom. She washed her face and hands and started to apply some night cream.

Daisy entered the bathroom and leaped onto the commode tank.

“You want some cream to help you look sexy?”

Daisy growled and switched her tail in a tight arc. Her back arched, and her hair stood straight.

“Daisy? What’s wrong with you?”

A crash from the end of the hall startled her. She dropped the night cream jar, and it shattered in the sink. “Oh, shit! What was that?”

She heard another crash, and it was followed by Chester’s fighting screams and growls. She saw a flash of movement in the mirror. Before she could move, Daisy landed on her head. She screamed from the pain of the claws digging into the skin. She raised her arms to tear the cat away. It was a success, and Daisy howled as Cassandra fell to the floor.

Cassandra got up in time to see Daisy streak from the bathroom and down the hall. She stood, wiping at the blood oozing from Daisy’s scratching claws. Emotions tore her between leaving and following Daisy. Chester’s anguished screams decided for her; she followed.

Daisy stopped outside the door of Chester’s room and hissed, arching her back. She did not move when Cassandra stood behind her.

“Chester? Are you okay? What’s going on in there?”

There came a final scream from Chester and the door bulged outward, once, twice. The third time it tore from its hinges. Cassandra leaped to the side, holding her chest with both hands. If she had remained in her position, Chester would have crushed her.

Chester hit the opposite wall and fell on his back. He lay at her feet, cut and bleeding with a piece of the maple head board from his bed protruding from his chest. He opened his glazed eyes and looked painfully at Cassandra.

She became intent on examining and helping him. She did not notice the presence of the musty smell or the shadowy arm snaking from the doorway. She knew nothing until Daisy hissed and backed into her. She decided to run, but the arm grabbed her around the waist and drew her into the room. She moved quickly through the air and screamed only once. Her eyes caught a glimpse of the foggy form before her body embedded into the plaster board wall with killing force.

UPI Wilmington, DE - John Everly was arrested in Delmar today for aggravated assault. The victim was Jerry Tanner, a mechanic working for Simmon’s Car Repair center. It was reported that John Everly approached Jerry Tanner with a request. Tina Everly, Jerry’s sister, was in the hospital, being treated for cancer. She wanted a visit from Jerry or any other member of her family. Jerry refused the visit and accused John of causing the cancer. John is reported to have slammed the hood of a car, on which Tanner was working. The hood caught Tanner, pushing him into the engine and

trapping him for nearly an hour. The incident caused minor cuts and bruises to his (Tanner's) face, head and upper body. Tanner could not be reached. However, John reported that Mr. Jerry Tanner was a simple-minded hick.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

John Everly came home to Crossgates Development one Saturday afternoon in June of 1987. He felt good after a profitable day of visiting yard sales and auctions. He held two bags full of new treasures, one tucked under each arm. "Tina! Honey, I'm home!"

Tina's voice answered from upstairs. "I'm aware of that. Probably everyone on Mimosa Drive knows it by now. When the door slams, they know John's home."

"Sorry about that. I really got some great bargains today."

"I'm sure. I'll be down as soon as I finish changing the sheets."

John dropped the bags on the dining room table and went to the downstairs bathroom to wash up. It was a habit acquired from his father. He was uncomfortable if he didn't follow the ritual. He returned to the dining room table to find Tina already there.

He gave her a hug and kiss before he started previewing his treasures.

"I love you, short stuff."

"You're the only one whom I let get away with that. What treasures do we have today?"

He released his hold on her and moved to the table. He opened one brown bag and pulled out ten wooden tulips with pointed metal posts. They were about one foot tall and two each was red, yellow, orange, purple and blue. "These cost one dollar each. They'll look nice across our front flower bed."

"They are colorful. I think you're right about that one."

Next there was a blue glass frog whose use was decided as a paperweight for his desk. Last was a clear glass jar molded in the shape of a head. It was originally a peanut butter jar and John declared it to be an antique and very valuable.

He opened the other bag and removed what looked like a large tangle of ropes. He shifted it around, held it out at arm length and shook it. It unfolded and spun slightly. "This is what I like best. It's a two-story plant hanger. Do you like it?"

She gave it a rather dubious glance. Hanging from his hand, it was taller than she. It was woven out of dark brown string with four pillars forming the sides to hold up the

bottom set of rings. Black beads were spaced evenly around the upper and lower layers and in the four supports. Knotted tassels hung all over it.

She made a face. "Where do you plan on putting it?"

"Well, I don't want to hang it in the living room. I know it really doesn't match. I was thinking of putting it in our bedroom. I'll put two grow-lights in it and you can put two plants inside. We can use it as a combination planter and night light. We have no plants in the bedroom and it will give a nice touch." He stated his case well, as he could tell she was not enthusiastic.

"You're a great politician, love. Cover all the angles to please both of us. Okay. The bedroom is the best place for it. At least there, no one will accuse us of poor taste."

Before the Everlys went to bed that evening, the planter hung from a hook in the ceiling, holding two plants in the baskets. John had wired it with two plant lamps controlled by a dimmer switch in the cord. He turned on the lights dimly and through the holes of the weaving, they spattered an array of shadows over the ceiling and walls.

Tina surveyed the work with a small amount of admiration. "I must say, that it does add a little romantic touch."

"Yes. It's almost like making love by candlelight." He ruffled her hair.

"Oh, really?"

Three days later, John came home from the drugstore to find Tina distraught and moping in the living room. To find her in that condition was unusual for her moods were very stable.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"The plants died."

He frowned. "The wooden ones? Was it termites?"

"You're not funny at all! The ones in the bedroom are dead and shriveled."

"The lights were low wattage and not on for that long a time."

She sighed. "It's not just that. There's plenty of sunlight in the daytime. Maybe it's just the sudden death that has me bothered. They were alive and well yesterday, as I recall. I know this morning they were living. I know it." She finished talking with a solemn look.

"Maybe something was wrong with them."

"I don't think so." She stood, took his hand and led him outside to their back porch.

The two plants sat there in the pots, and John could clearly see what she meant. They were both several sizes smaller than usual, and a sickly brown color. The leaves and stalks were covered with yellow splotches.

He touched one of the leafy stalks, and it turned into a fine powder.

"Hmmm. Are any others in the house like these?"

She shook her head wearily. “No, it’s only these two.”

“Let’s try two more. If they turn sick, I’ll take the planter and have it inspected and treated for insects or whatever.”

She was reluctant to sacrifice another two plants. After a long discussion, they settled on one plant.

Both John and Tina watched and checked the plant closely over the next three days. It was still alive on Saturday morning when they awoke. That fact relieved her for she didn’t relish the loss of another baby. John told her good-bye and went bowling with the drug store team.

John found her upset once more when he returned home. The dead plant was on the back porch with the first two and in the same condition. He hugged her and told her no more flowers in the planter, and he would remove it Monday. He would take it to a garden shop along with one of the plants and investigate the matter. He assured her it was nothing serious.

Later that night, they lay silently in bed. An hour had passed before Tina broke the silence. “John, are you asleep yet?” she scarcely whispered.

“No.” He stirred and stretched under the blankets. “I really don’t know why, though.”

“Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“No, you’ve lost me with that question. You’ll have to be more specific?”

“Are you seeing another woman?”

He sat up and turned on the light. “What are you talking about, Tina? There’s no other woman but you. Have you been watching too many soaps?”

“It’s not the soaps; it’s you. Do you realize you haven’t touched me in a week? That’s not normal behavior. What am I supposed to think?”

He did not answer immediately. She was right, and he had not known. He always felt tired when he came home, and he usually went to sleep when he went to bed.

“Tina, my love, it’s not another woman. This past week, I’ve felt tired and worn out, for some reason. Sex just hasn’t entered the picture. I really didn’t notice until now. I’m sorry that I upset you without knowing.”

Tina accepted the answer, relieved although she did not understand him fully. “I’m sorry too. I know what you mean about worn out. I go through periods of deep depression at times.”

She sat up and kissed him.

They sat there in bed and looked at each other, both feeling awkward. They kissed again and attempted to make love with each other. It was unsuccessful and it left them rather frustrated. They said good night and fell into an uneasy sleep.

Tina walked through a luxurious and beautiful flower garden. The sun shone warm and birds sang in the trees. Here and there, hummingbirds drank nectar from orchids. Every flower and plant imaginable grew there and those that could, bloomed. She walked slowly, stopping to touch and smell each variety she passed.

Suddenly, the birds ceased to sing. The breeze died, and she felt a dread that caused her to shiver. A movement behind her caused her to turn quickly. A black-haired plant grabbed her before she could move. One hand of the plant held her upper body and one held her waist. With one quick jerk, the plant pulled her body apart and dropped her.

She stared at the lower half of her body, flapped her arms wildly and screamed in pain as the plant pulled out and chewed at her intestines. The pain was intense, and she screamed and begged for a death that would not happen.

Tina sat up in the bed, screaming and flailing her arms. She hit John twice before he awakened fully and turned the light on.

He grabbed her, held her, and soothed her.

Tina calmed until she only whimpered. She sweat profusely, leaving the top of her night gown wet, cold and clinging. She held desperately to John and related the dream.

“What does it mean? Am I going to die soon?”

“No, sweetheart, you’re not going to die. It’s your mind expressing your feelings. You’re upset over your plants dying, and you’re worried about being hurt over me and another woman. And somewhere, you may still hold a worry about the cancer that’s gone. That one dream covered it all. It is not a premonition of your death.”

She sighed and stopped crying. His words touched her and helped to ease the worry a little.

He wiped away the last of the tears and suggested a quick shower.

“I guess you’re right,” she said half-heartedly.

He looked at the clock on the wall. It was five-thirty. He stared at and traced with a finger the wet outline of Tina’s body on the sheets. With little success he tried to convince himself that he was correct and she was okay. However, he was unsure, for he could feel an unknown fear growing inside himself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Three days passed and the Everly couple became too quickly bitter and snippy with each other. Each failure with love making, left them further depressed and frustrated. Wednesday evening opened with a non-productive, heated argument. It was their first in over three years, and it surprised them both. It began over the seasoning in the dinner meal, and ended over a child, they both wanted, but neither could provide. Her earlier cancer episode terminated all hope of that happening.

In the quiet after the violence, Tina cried softly to herself. She approached John in his den and suggested a short vacation to the mountains of Vermont, to get them away from Dover for a few days. She said it was one thing they could do together, enjoy and not argue over it.

John praised the idea. It had been a long time since they had been away together. He agreed readily, but said they would make plans tomorrow. Wednesday was his night out with the boys. He wanted to join his friends for their routine poker game.

They hugged and kissed tenderly, the bitterness quickly forgotten with the promise of a break from the house.

John said good-bye and departed after stating he would return promptly at eleven o'clock.

Tina sat in the empty living room and read quite a few chapters of the book she purchased. It was a book on how to solve problems in relationships. At ten, she lay the book aside with a vow that she would do her part to get them over the rough period.

She showered and afterward, sprayed on the perfume John liked the best. She wrapped herself in the damp towel and walked to the bedroom. She turned on the lights in the planter and reminded herself to tell John to take it for disinfecting the next morning. She walked around the bed, closed the door and sat down on the bench in front of her vanity to dry her hair.

In the middle of a brush stroke, she stopped and caught her breath. She thought the planter shadows moved in the mirror. She held the brush and turned on the bench. The planter hung steady, not even a slight quiver. She exhaled with a small laugh that sounded flighty.

“It must have been a gust of wind, self. Calm down. I need to be calm, especially tonight.”

However, she finished brushing her hair while her eyes watched the shadows in the mirror. She applied some lotion to her face and arms, and viewed herself closely. She smiled and told herself she was attractive and appealing.

She went to her dresser and pulled out one of her two sexy night gowns and slipped into it. She checked both windows before going to the bed. She discovered they were both closed and locked. She looked at the planter thoughtfully and shook her head.

She lay down on the bed, John's side, and dimmed the lights. She fluffed up the pillows under her head and waited for John.

"He should be here soon," she whispered to herself. "It's nearly eleven."

Tina was trapped inside a house with no windows and only one door. The door would not open, and she desperately wanted to leave. She ran through the rooms trying to keep out of reach of the multi-limbed shadow creature. She had seen it before; it followed her from the garden. She screamed for John to help her, but John was not inside the house.

She woke, breathing hard. She glanced at the clock which read, 10:55.

"Please hurry, John!"

Something grasped her left leg and arm firmly. It yanked her body to the left, and she hit the floor before she knew she was off the bed.

"What the hell?" She looked above her to see shadowy lines racing down the planter.

"Oh, God! This isn't a dream! It's real! John, help me!"

She struggled to move to get away from the planter.

Several shadow lines extended from the planter, caught her hair, entangled themselves and yanked upward.

She screamed from the pain and scrambled backwards on the floor as she attempted to disentangle her hair.

The lines yanked again and did not relieve the pressure.

Tina lowered her hands and pushed herself up to relieve the pain. Her butt was a few inches from the floor when she stopped. She rested there, balanced herself on one hand and reached up to her hair with the other. Her hand encountered the tassels on the bottom of the planter.

The lines exerted pressure again.

"John! John! Help me, please! Oh, Damn!" She moved her feet back and with both her hands, caught the bottom ring of the planter. She just knew it would not support her weight; it must not. She would jerk it from the ceiling, and she could get away from the shadows then.

She was wrong. John fastened it with a very large hook, securely in one of the ceiling studs. It held solid, even when she rocked and jerked it from side to side.

Tina held herself steady again, in a very precarious position, supported only by her hands on the ring and her heels. Her head was inside the planter, past the second smaller ring. She saw no way out other than dislodging the planter or John's arrival.

"Shit, John. Why do you always have to be so thorough?"

The pressure on her hair was absent. She took the moment to breathe deeply and plan. She knew she could not hold herself for too long the way she was then, and she thought of the pain of having her hair torn out. She listened intently and could hear nothing downstairs.

"John! Help me!" she called out once more.

No answer arrived and she felt sick from a wave of terror. She cried at her predicament, and a thought appeared through the frustration, stand up.

She laughed at herself for not thinking of it before, and started moving her feet.

She moved less than an inch before the second smaller ring pulled into itself, tightening around her throat.

"No!" she cried.

The ring closure shut off all her screaming. Her body jerked violently and her struggling ceased. Her arms fell limp at her sides as death claimed her.

John entered his home at 11:20. It was not too frequent the game ran into overtime, but it had that night. He did not think there would be a problem since there had been none in the past. He called for Tina and waited. There was no answer.

He walked upstairs with a feeling of dread and stopped outside the bathroom. He inhaled and enjoyed the lingering fragrance. He smiled to himself and walked to the bedroom door.

"Tina?" he called as he pushed the door open.

His smile faded to shock from seeing Tina hanging from the planter.

"Tina! NO!"

He ran and her body with one arm and grasped her right wrist with the other, feeling for a pulse. He did so in spite of the fact he knew there would be none.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The shock of Tina's death and the grief of her loss were difficult for John. His friends did all they could to help him and be around him. He stayed with one friend for two weeks. They insisted, for they inwardly feared his being alone. So intense was their

love for each other, they feared he might try to join her. He willingly stayed because he could not imagine the house without the smiling and cheerful Tina.

After the two weeks, he appeared to make progress toward recovery. He was still very withdrawn and refused to engage in any conversation about Tina. He answered all questions of her with the same short phrase, "I don't remember."

The statement was true. The torment in his mind blocked out most of his memories of that fatal night. The police and the questions helped to keep it mercifully away. What was her state of mental health, fidelity, drug use, etc.? He simply unconsciously, chose to forget. However, they were slowly coming back as a healing happened inside him. There was a small voice that kept calling, "Help me, John." There was something he must do; all he had to do was find the what.

Amid protests one day, he stated he would return to his home. He would hear of nothing else. His family was across the country in Oregon, and Tina's family hated him, as usual, holding him responsible for her death. He told his friends that he must get on with his life and would be only four houses away.

He went home after work the next day. The empty rooms seemed ominous and oppressive without the laughing and the loving.

He cleaned up some of the house and went out to dinner. He entered the bedroom for the first time on his return. It had a musky odor that was pungent. He opened the door and blocked it open with a chair. He opened both windows and the cross breeze slowly cleared away the smell.

It did not surprise him to see the layer of dust on the furniture. He decided the dust could wait until the morning. He would clean it then, pack Tina's clothes in a box and drop them in the Salvation Army Collection Box.

He picked up a picture of Tina and himself from her vanity. It was a photo, taken on their first wedding anniversary at Niagara Falls. It brought some tears to his eyes. He held it and sat down on her bench. He wiped the tears away and looked at himself in the mirror.

It surprised him to see the stranger looking back at him. His eyes had dark circles below them from many sleepless nights. He had faint wrinkles starting to show on his forehead, the corners of his mouth and eyes.

"We've got to make a change," he told his reflection. "Tina would not want us to waste away. It hurts, but we must get over it."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "No. We can't waste away."

He opened his eyes. "Six months is the deadline, and we will live again. We're too young to be a widower. We can't love Tina," he paused. Through tense lips, he continued. "So, we will have to love someone else." He looked at the picture. "There, I've said it, Tina. We discussed that before when you had cancer and we agreed." He stopped

again and his eyes darted to the top right corner of the mirror. The shadows were moving. He placed the picture down and turned around. The planter was moving gently. He closed and locked the windows, looked at the planter and had a flash of memory.

“You killed her!” he told it harshly. “You’re coming down tomorrow. You’re the reason that I hurt now.”

It hung steadfast and silent, like a rock and just as indifferent.

John sat on the foot of the bed and took off his shoes and shirt. He looked at the dresser near the bed. There was yet another picture of Tina and himself. “Third anniversary,” he whispered.

Something sticky grabbed his left upper arm and jerked him backwards, off the bed.

“What the fuck?” he said as he hit the floor. He looked around and saw a flurry of activity from the shadows. Lines ran down the planter and across the ceiling.

The second jerk moved him closer to the planter. The lines were hanging down, reaching for him.

Unlike Tina, John did not panic. He moved toward the planter quickly, and with his right hand grabbed the phone. He twisted around and hit the gray shadows that held his arm. He heard what sounded like a groan, and the planter shook. The grip on his arm slackened and he moved away.

The lines reacted fast. John felt his right leg grabbed at the edge of the bed. He fell forward, and the lines jerked him backward once more. He cursed himself for dropping the phone. He grabbed hold of the corner post of the bed and with all the strength he could exert, he pulled away toward the closet.

He got up to his hands and knees and lunged. He made it to the closet door but not free. He slid the left door open and reached inside.

“All I have to do is get the hunting knife,” he said. “Then you’ll become a shadow salad!”

The shadows pulled at him. He grasped the door frame and tightened his grip. He felt as if his leg would pull from its socket before the tension eased.

John seized the chance to reach inside. His hand felt and closed around the baseball bat as another line grabbed his right foot.

He pushed himself up on hands and knees and pushed backwards. He fell on the lines that held him. He sat up quickly, twisted to the left and swung the bat around and down. It was not a moan that came from the planter. It was a loud gargling scream.

The result of the action was the release of his legs.

He gave it zero chances to recover itself and try again. He hit the flopping lines with the bat several times and moved toward the door. He hesitated only to grab his shoes and shirt.

The lines across the ceiling moved toward the door and raced down the wall.

John saw them and prepared himself. He swung the bat and hit the two closest lines to the door knob. The blow left a dent in the wall and a dark liquid squirting from the severed line.

The shadows retreated and the planter danced and screamed.

John did not hesitate. He opened the door and stepped quickly into the hall. He closed the door and ran to the other end. He switched on the light and looked at the bedroom door. A shadow appeared under the door and moved around in all directions, searching.

“What the hell are you?”

He turned and hurried into the bathroom. He first checked the window to be certain it was closed. He took the time to put on his shoes and shirt.

When he stepped again into the hall, one line was almost to the bathroom door and more were coming under the door. He stomped on the closest one and it retreated only a foot. A second later, it advanced again.

John checked all the other windows upstairs, and returned to the top of the stairs. He jumped up and landed with both feet on top of the line by the stairway. It jerked, and the tip broke off, squirting black liquid as it flopped around. He watched entranced as the wounded end healed and moved on its original path.

He went downstairs and checked all the doors and windows. He picked up his car keys from the kitchen counter, and locked the door behind him.

When he finally got into his car and closed the door, he found he was trembling and breathing hard. He lay his head on his hands on top of the steering wheel and sat still until calm returned.

A slow-burning anger took seed inside his tormented mind. “Don’t leave, whatever you are,” he said evenly. “You’ve taken a lot from me and I’ll back to make you pay for it. Believe me, you will pay.”

An hour later, he stopped the car in front of another house and shut off the engine. He looked around the area, confused and lost.

“What the hell am I doing?” he asked himself.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

John had parked in front of Jerry Tanner’s house in Delmar. “Why am I here? I’m on the family hit list. The only help I’ll get is being held until the police show up.”

He started the car engine and paused before placing it in gear. The urge to stay was so strong that he chose not to overrule it.

“Or would I get help?” He shut off the engine, stared at the house and after some consideration, he walked to the front door. He rang the doorbell seven times before he received a response.

“Wait a damned minute, will you? This better be worth it!” a gruff voice yelled.

A light turned on in and upstairs window. Shortly the locks clicked open and the door swung inward. Jerry stood there looking harshly at John.

He wore only a pair of boxer shorts and a sleeveless tee shirt. “What the fuck are you doing here?” he growled.

John remained calm under the circumstances. “I need to talk to you, and it needs to be soon.”

“I ain’t interested in listening to any of your mouths or talking to you! Get gone ‘fore, I shoot your ass for trespassing!”

John did not move or show any expression, other than determination. His mind was clear, and he was staying. “I need to talk to someone in this family about Tina, and you’re it. You might as well accept it.”

Jerry winced at the mention of her name. “You drove her to kill herself. Isn’t that enough? I told her not to marry you. I should have shot your ass long ago. Get gone or suffer the consequences.”

John stood fast. “Jerry, maybe you can’t understand loving someone as greatly as I loved Tina. Possibly you can’t or won’t love Binti the same way. However, you married her over the uprising of the family. Tina married me. Is that so much difference that you can’t understand. Maybe someone needs to shoot Binti’s ass to save her from you.”

Jerry stared stonily at John for several moments before he stepped aside and motioned for him to enter the house.

Partially satisfied, John walked past Jerry. He heard the door close behind him and followed Jerry into the living room. He chose to sit on one end of a well-worn sofa.

Jerry turned a lamp on and sat down in an easy chair. “You’ve a pretty slick tongue, John, but so do snakes. Don’t try to feed me any bull, though. You may exit the door without it being opened. I kill every snake I find!”

John simply nodded.

Before he could start, Binti appeared with three cups of coffee on a waiter’s tray. She had remembered to bring cream, sugar and a selection of cookies. Binti was a small woman. However, what she lacked in height, she made up with beauty and personality. Her long and silky black hair hung down to her knees. Her skin was a dark tan, and her black eyes were large and penetrating.

Her voice broadcast waves of unconditional love. “Hello, John. Are you okay?”

“Not really, Binti. The hurt doesn’t stop too easily. The nights are hellish without her love and laughter.”

“I know what you mean, John. I recall my pain when my sister died. It will get better as time passes. Pain can’t last, although it appears it will.”

“Thanks, Binti.”

Binti handed Jerry a cup of coffee and sat down gently on the opposite end of the sofa. She remained quiet and listened to the conversation.

“Okay, John. You have the floor, so talk.”

“I’ve lost a lot of memories due to the sudden pain, but they’re coming back. I know the papers said that it was a suicide, Jerry, but the papers are not right in that statement.”

Jerry leaned forward and eyed him with hatred.

“I remember the coroner when he talked to me about the autopsy. He released that suicide report, in agreement with the police. Neither truly knew what to place on the report.

“There were several small puncture wounds all over her body, almost in a pattern. The stomach was ripped, I mean ripped open and her intestines were pulled out. There was no blood or fluids left in her body, Jerry. None.

“Inside she was shriveled. They asked me about drug abuse. That was stupid.”

“Stop it, John!” Jerry stood with a menacing stance. “That’s enough of the sick talk.”

“She was killed, Jerry, and after what happened to me a short time ago, I know what did it.”

He continued with an account of what had taken place before his arrival at Delmar. He finished speaking and sat back, waiting for a reaction from Jerry. The reaction, when it came, was not from Jerry, but Binti.

“John, it’s voodoo. The planter is voodoo. I’ve witnessed much of it in Swahili where I grew.”

Jerry interrupted. “Binti, don’t start that voodoo stuff ”

Binti’s voice raised. “I know what I’m talking about! I’ve seen it work.” She reached out, hands trembling and touched John’s arm. “I’m so sorry, John. I don’t know why people resort to such things. Sometimes someone else gets hurt from it also.”

“Binti,” pleaded Jerry.

Both parties ignored him “Voodoo? How, Binti? Tell me.”

“It doesn’t work unless you believe it,” interjected Jerry.

“Not so,” stated Binti. “Some of the voodoo curses evoke demons that are pure evil. They kill and hold to no laws, save their own.”

The concept interested John. “The planter is possessed?”

“Yes. Maybe it was called forth from the Dark Isle to rid someone of an unwanted wife or husband. Now it continues to kill without discrimination.”

“How could it live?” asked John.

“The evil, once started, feeds on itself until people are present. Then it feeds on their emotions until it kills them. It views the fear and death as one.”

Jerry wished to change the subject, even though he knew that what Binti said was truthful. “Well, John, what do you plan to do?”

“I’m going to kill it.”

Binti gasped and trembled again. “No, John! It’s much too dangerous to try.”

John patted her hand. “It’s okay, Binti. But, when I return to the house, I don’t wish to go alone. I’ll need some help.”

Jerry snorted and shook his head. “No way will I help you, John. I’m not crazy enough to go with you. If you want it dead, then you kill it.”

“You’re not crazy, Jerry, but I can’t go alone. It’s killed enough. It’s cunning and I need someone to cover my back.”

Jerry sat silent and considered what to do. “Well, maybe I will help you, but only to avenge Tina’s death. I couldn’t care less about you. Where are you going now and what are you going to do before you go back?”

John took a deep breath and let it out. “Right now, to a hotel, I guess. Then I’ll go to Philadelphia for a couple of days. I want to find someone there whom can help me, at least I hope so.”

“The spare bedroom is ready, John,” said Binti.

Jerry frowned but nodded. “Yes. Stay here tonight, but don’t make a habit of it. I’m not sure I want to like you just yet.”

John thanked him and followed Binti to the bedroom.

“You’re foolish, John, but I know I can’t stop you. While you’re gone, I will talk with a voodoo doctor to learn what I can to help you. You’re playing with something that will not die easily. It will kill you if it has the chance.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

John bought some new clothes and withdrew some money from the bank on his way to Philadelphia. He checked into a hotel on the southern border of the city and waited for night to arrive. While waiting, he read a book on voodoo which left him with several emotions: fear, anger and belief.

He took his notebook from his shirt pocket and made a hasty note. Finally, he slept.

He awoke at eight o'clock, had a fairly decent meal at a restaurant across the street from his hotel and set out for his destination on foot. He walked for fifteen blocks, through congested streets until he arrived at a bar named The Low Dive. He hesitated and went inside.

The noise of music and loud people filled his ears. He glanced around the interior, taking in all the people through flashes of a strobe light. He found few changes since his last visit, except the bartender. He wove his way through the crowd and took the only empty stool at the bar. When it was his turn, he ordered a drink, and sipped it slowly, talking with the customers and the bartender. And he learned that the person he wanted to find no longer worked there. Several people told him to check on Second Avenue.

John nodded sadly and walked three more blocks and turned right on Second Avenue. After he had walked three more blocks and turned down five propositions, he felt depressed. He wondered if it might not be better to go home to Oregon. *Why not go and forget Dover, Delaware, the Tanner family, and Tina?*

As he considered that seriously, ahead of him, he saw what he wanted. A woman stood leaning with her back against a brick wall. Her hair was blonde and curled, falling over her shoulders. She wore a short black skirt and a tight red blouse. She smoked a cigarette and spoke to every man whom passed.

John watched wearily for a short time, then walked toward her. He was nearly past her when she spoke.

"Hey, Handsome, where you going?"

"I'm not really sure." He stopped and glanced at her. *She doesn't recognize me.*

"If you're looking for a good time, you're here already. Baby will take good care of you."

He hesitated a second, choosing how to respond. "What I'm really looking for is a train ride from Cheyenne to New York, and a waitress from the Crystal Diner, off to a better life in the world."

The woman's mouth opened and her eyes narrowed as she stared at him. "Is that you, John?" She moved as if she were going to hug him. Instead, she turned around to face the wall with her right hand over her face. "Oh, no!"

"How's it going, Heather?"

"Go away, John. I don't want you to see me like this."

"It's a little late for that and this is no way to greet friends."

"I have no friends. Baby doesn't need friends. Please, go away."

John moved close to her, placing one arm around her and one hand on a shoulder. Gently, he turned her around to face him.

Heather lowered her face. "Please don't. How did you find me?"

“I kept the one letter I got from Manhattan, with a phone number. I called it, and your ex-roommate told me where to find you. I’m sorry, Heather. I need you for one hour.”

Her voice choked and she cried. “Oh, no. I can’t do that, not with you. Heather is dead. Please go and let her remain lifeless.”

He pulled her chin upward and winced at the tears rolling down her cheeks, streaking her make-up. “Heather, I need you for one hour, not in bed. The corner of a bar, restaurant, or a coffee shop will do just fine. I only want to talk. I need to talk with you.”

He pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to her. “Take care of your leaky nose, and let’s go.”

“I can’t go.”

“Why not?” he asked, then, “Oh,” as he understood. He took two fifty dollar bills from his wallet and gave it to her.

Heather looked at the money and sighed. “I feel small and cheap, having you find me in this condition. This doesn’t help matters.”

“Heather, I didn’t mean to hurt or embarrass you, and I don’t want you to feel cheap with me. I don’t look at you that way, I never have. It’s important to me that we talk. This is to keep you out of trouble, okay?”

She shook her head and sighed. She took the money and barely whispered thanks. She took him to a small and empty coffee shop close to their location.

Over coffee, they talked of themselves until Heather asked about Tina.

John’s expression clouded over and he grew silent.

“Is something wrong there?”

John gave her a brief account of what had led him to Philadelphia.

“She was killed, Heather, and I mean to have revenge.”

“Killing someone will not change her and give her life.”

John’s mouth tightened, and he slammed the table with his hand. “It’s not a person! It’s a thing, probably a demon from hell. I’ll return it, to hell, C.O.D.”

She felt sorry for him. “Okay. Sorry about Tina. How do I fit in?”

“You work for a pimp,” said John. “I’m sure he knows the specialists I want to see. If he doesn’t, it will be a good start.”

She stared into her coffee cup. “He’s not a nice man to talk to,” she said flatly. “I don’t even think he’s a man sometimes.”

He asked his name.

“Frank Miller, and he’s one nasty s.o.b.”

He did not reply instantly. He watched a group of young boys on a street corner outside. He returned his attention to the inside and looked at his watch.

“Our hour’s nearly over, Heather. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed it. Wait for me a few minutes. I think those boys over there can help me with one item I need. Then we’ll go have an intimate discussion with the s.o.b.”

He slid off the bench and walked away before she could object.

Fifteen minutes later, he returned. He lay a ten-dollar bill on the table and held out his hand. “Excuse me, miss. We have a date.”

“Nothing I can do or say to stop you?”

“Place an ocean or mountain in my way and watch what happens.”

“No, I won’t do that to a friend.”

“You’re learning.” He kissed her lightly and led her from the coffee shop.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

John and Heather stood outside a door, inside a decrepit apartment building. The door, a dirty brown color, bore no name or number. Heather hesitated, glanced to John, and knocked on the door.

The blaring jazz music decreased slightly in volume, and a course voice shouted. “Wada ya want?”

“It’s Baby. I’ve got a problem.”

“Don’t want to hear no triggig problems. Get your ass back on the street and make some money!”

Heather bit her lip. “That’s a problem, Frank. The last guy hurt me pretty bad, and he didn’t pay.”

“Damn! Stupid shit!” yelled Frank. “You’re as worthless as flies!”

The click of a dead-bolt lock being turned could be heard. “Dumb shithead!” he added.

John moved away to the side of the door. The door flew open and a hairy arm reached out and grabbed Heather. With a squeal, she hastily vanished into the room.

John quickly stepped inside the room behind Frank before the door could close.

“What the ...” started Frank. He stepped back a few paces as John closed the door behind him.

John cast a quick glance across the room to Heather, who was in the process of standing from where she fell. “That’s not a very tender way to treat a lady, Frank.” He returned his attention to the pimp.

“What the fuck’s it to you?” He swung a wild blow at John.

John grabbed the fist with both hands and stepped aside. His left foot came up and caught Frank solidly in the ribs. He twisted the arm and Frank turned around with his back to him. He shoved hard and let go.

Frank stumbled across the room and collided with the wall. He dropped to his knees, dazed momentarily, then turned. "You're fast! Grant you that much!"

He started to rise with a knife in his hand and stopped and sat back on his heels, staring at the revolver in John's right hand.

"John, don't!" Heather cried.

Without turning his eyes from Frank, John replied, "I have no intention. Whether he gets wasted or lives, is entirely up to him. Now, Frank, we have some things to discuss. Throw the knife gently across the floor. Then, I want Heather."

An exasperated moan came from Heather. "John, please don't do this. I can't be bought!"

Frank sneered at her. "Heather really is your name? Cute name. Very saintly for a slut."

"How much do you want for her?"

Frank eyed John and estimated his determination. "What's she worth? I'll play the game while you're holding the aces."

"John, I'm begging you, please give it up. I can't go with you."

"Will you shut up? I just asked you to bring me here. I didn't ask you to get involved further."

"Well, I'm not for sale. I won't be..."

"Shut up!"

"Bargained for," whispered Heather. She folded her arms obstinately but remained silent.

John removed his wallet with his left hand and tossed it in Heather's direction. "Take \$20 thousand and toss it to Frank."

Heather picked up the wallet, eyeing him stonily. She withdrew forty \$500 bills, folded them twice and threw them at Frank.

When Frank saw the money, his eyes widened with pleasure. Very slowly he collected the bills to him, and counted it twice.

He offered John a broad smile. "This is a satisfactory sum, my friend. Good luck with her. She isn't worth all this. It'll be rough getting your money back."

"Now for the rest of my transactions with you, Frank," said John. "This will be a bonus for what you're about to do."

"Heather, take out \$10,000 more dollars and give it to him."

Across the continent, Bascombe lay in bed, feverish and coughing. He slowly and painfully sat up. “George, things are afoot tonight. I can feel it.”

Joshua’s ears pricked up and feebly turned his head toward the door.

“Don’t you be getting out of bed, David!”

David smiled patiently. “Can’t you feel it, George? Joshua does. I think the end that I’ve waited for has arrived.”

Joshua’s tail swished as he lay his head down. His tail stopped moving and he expired.

“Joshua? That’s okay, my friend. Go in peace. You lasted many more years than I thought you would. I’ll join you soon.”

John and Heather left Philadelphia and drove south toward Delmar. In the trunk of the car rested a precious cargo, more so than the amount of money he paid for it.

Heather remained silent for a long while, watching the roadside without seeing anything. “We’ve got to talk, John,” said she, turning to stare out the windshield.

John smiled, knowing she would not see. “What about?” he asked; he already knew.

“I don’t know what to make of this. I’m happy to see you again, but this money thing bothers me. I don’t like being bought and sold. I’m not a piece of merchandise on display at K-Mart. Above all, I don’t like feeling obligated.”

He listened to her patiently then chose his words carefully. “Heather, you’re not obligated to stay with me. There’s nothing to hold you. As for the buying you, I didn’t. I bought some freedom for you, so you can have another chance to get the real Heather out of Baby, and get your life rearranged and back in proper order. If it’s the money that worries you, don’t let it. I expect to be repaid, every penny in cash. Consider it a loan.”

Heather sighed once more. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yes I am. I wouldn’t do something like that for a grin, or to indenture you. Trust me.”

Heather’s hand reached across the car and rested on John’s hand on the steering wheel. “Thanks. That means a lot from a friend.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Over George’s objections, David had risen and dressed. The two brothers stood near the garden behind the house. A small grave was made and filled with Joshua’s body.

George smiled obscurely as he watched his brother make a rough cross of two twigs and shove it into the ground near the head of the grave.

David straightened and said, "Good bye, my friend."

George said nothing but David turned and looked at him.

"Is the cross too ironic?" he asked.

George shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I do know it will not hurt anything. No one knows if dogs or any other animals have souls. Only they and God know that."

"Life was so simple in Haiti, wasn't it, George?"

"Yes, until you changed."

"I've been praying, you know."

George's eyes widened. "To whom, your Satan?"

"No, to your God. I think that my prayers have been successful. I feel a deep peace and also that this mess I created will soon meet an end."

"Praise God!"

George placed an arm around David, and the two men walked back to the house together.

John and Heather arrived in Delmar, late in the evening. They found Jerry and Binti ready for bed, but willing to accommodate a visit.

"Welcome, John," said Binti. "It is pleasurable to see you again. I have some good news for you about the planter."

"Thanks, Binti." He introduced Heather and they sat down in the living room.

"What do you have for me?"

"I called one of my friends and asked for a voodoo doctor. It was more difficult than I imagined it to be. I was given two names and both of them were dead. However, the wife of one, put me in touch with a Sister Grace in Oregon. She listened to me and said she could not help me, but she knew who had started the mess."

John's eyebrows raised. "Did that happen to be in Portland, Oregon?"

"Yes. She said it was created and filled by a man named Bascombe. I could not telephone him but I wired him and he called me from a friend's house. He hates phones.

"John, the planter was just a medium chosen by the demon evoked by Bascombe. He did it for a man named Jonas, wanting to rid himself of a rich and sick wife. It was created the day after you left Portland."

John sat staring at the floor, stunned. "It's followed me across the country?"

"Yes, but not really followed you, though. Bascombe said it was programmed for a female death at 114 Mimosa Drive. That was Jonas's house number. It has been through at least twenty 114 Mimosa's, and left many people and animals dead."

“It moved through yard sales and auctions! That’s the easiest way to be passed along. Damn it all! Well, I will guarantee that it has killed its last. It can die, can’t it?”

“Yes, John. I said you were foolish but David told me it can only be destroyed by its owner, who is you now. Jonas was to burn the crystal star catalyst, the summoning device. He was killed first. You can burn it, however, it may have multiplied in strength and cunning for the twenty years of its killing spree.”

He smiled wryly. “That’s comforting to hear. Burning is what I had in mind. It was a spark of intuition that I was compelled to follow.”

Silence ruled for a few moments. John turned to Jerry. “Do you know a man named Willy Fox?”

“Sure do. He’s an ex-marine and a little loony. He was in the heavy fighting in Viet Nam. Why?”

“Just thought it would help if you knew him. I’ve heard that he collects things that will be useful for us when we go fight the demon. Can we go visit him, soon?”

“Sure thing, John. We’ll go in the morning.”

“We have only one bed, John,” said Binti.

“I’ll sleep here on the sofa,” said John.

Heather shook her head. “No, we’ll both sleep in the bed.”

Jerry looked harshly at John. “It’s not been a month since Tina died. Have you no respect?”

John ignored the remark and studied Heather. “This is a little sudden. Why the change? I thought the money bothered you.”

Heather looked blank. “I don’t know what possessed me to say that, John. This has been a weird night,” she blushed.

“You didn’t answer my question,” reiterated Jerry.

Still John did not respond directly to Jerry. Instead, he removed his wallet and located a picture of Tina. He slipped it from the plastic holder and handed it to Jerry.

“Read the back; it’s Tina’s handwriting.”

Jerry turned the picture around and read the faded words:

“John, if ever I should die first, please promise you will love another. My place is with you in life, not if I am dead. Find another, John. Continue loving the living, not the dead. Tina.”

Jerry shook his head and handed the photo back to John. “I’m not sure that I ever really knew my sister, but, maybe I’ll understand you someday. Disregard what I said before, John. I can disagree with it, but I’ll accept it.”

John awoke late the next morning. It startled him to discover Heather's head was on his shoulder.

She opened her eyes and smiled when he kissed her nose.

"How do you feel, John?"

"I feel great. I guess I was responsive after all."

"Umm, yeah, I'd say so. I feel strange, sort of like returning home after twenty years. It was better this time than on the train."

He pulled her on top of him. "I think I should thank you."

"You already have, in more ways than one. Come on, honey, I have to go and take care of some matters."

John and Jerry went to visit Willy Fox after lunch. He lived ten miles from Delmar in the suburbs of Salisbury, Maryland. He owned a small five room house and a garage and had no neighbors within a block in any direction.

Willy greeted them cordially, but with reserve, for he was unaccustomed to visitors. He did not offer them a beer. He simply handed them one.

"What can I do for you, Jerry?" Willy asked. "I take it this isn't a social call."

"This is John Everly, my brother-in-law. He wants to talk to you about your collection."

Willy raised his eyebrows. "How did you know about that?"

"Frank Miller is as close as I can come to the answer. He said you were the only one who could help me get some machetes and a few odds and ends. I don't need them for long, just a few hours. There's something I wish to hack up a little."

Willy smiled with crooked lips. "Sure thing, mon! My machetes are the best. Additionally, they're the only ones around. I hacked up the neighbor's dog once. Cut the head clean off with only one stroke. He never came back to bother me."

John stared evenly and did not comment.

"When you want them?" asked Willy, not downcast at the lack of response.

"Right now if you can arrange it. We have a demon who's waiting for some action from us tonight."

Willy took them to his basement, and John was amazed at the collection of knives, guns, and other war relics. On a shelf in one corner he saw a flare gun, and his mind raced with the thoughts of the safety in that. He asked if the gun worked and if there were any flares available.

Willy said, "Sure. That little baby works very well. I took it from the hand of a Viet Cong soldier, after I put a knife in his heart. I have the flares too. I have four of them. But I think that you'll need only one. They're phosphorous, and they burn hot and long."

"Great! You're most helpful, Willy."

“Well, I try. Most people think I’m crazy, but they’re the ones that never went to Nam. By the way, would you like some company? I sort of miss the action and danger, you know.”

John glanced at Jerry. He received a shrug in answer. “Sure, Willy. Be at Jerry’s house at eight tonight. We leave shortly after.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Willy met John and Jerry at Delmar at 10 PM. The late hour was chosen for the security of darkness. Willy wore dark camouflage fatigues and black face markings.

John looked at him curiously when he handed him the small jar of face black. “What’s this for?”

“It’s to help you become less visible to the enemy. By the way, who are we fighting’?”

John looked to Jerry and back to Willy. “We aren’t fighting people, Willy. If it were people, it might be easier. I really don’t know how to describe it. The closest I can come is that it’s a demon from hell.”

Willy’s face showed his disappointment, but it was only a temporary condition. “Demon,” he echoed. “I’ve known friends on heroin, and they told me they met Satan. They didn’t live long. Either the drugs or Satan snuffed them. If it’s demons were fighting’, then it’s maybe better. It’ll give me the chance to even a few scores for my dead friends.”

“I’m glad to have you along, Willy.”

John closed the trunk, already loaded with the weapons and the cargo brought from Philadelphia. John, Jerry, Willy and Heather drove north toward Dover; Binti decided to remain at home. During the drive, John told his story.

“It’s that wicked?”

“That’s my opinion, and that’s probably an underestimate.”

Willy was silent for a while. When he spoke, he was decisive and his somber voice startled the riders.

“John, Jerry, I think we need to agree on one subject. Any one of us may be hurt or killed in the house tonight. If that happens, the other two, or one, leaves and completes the operation with reinforcements.”

Heavy silence filled the confines of the car.

“Do you agree?” Willy asked shortly.

“I agree,” said John.

“I agree,” said Jerry. “I never thought I would.”

The car passed along Governors Avenue and turned into the Crossgates housing development. At Willy’s instance, John circled the blocks on either side of his house twice. John was anxious, but did as Willy requested.

“It’s okay, John,” said Willy on the last circle. “There is only one house on the block with a light on. It’s fifteen houses away from yours, traveling west. If there was one across the street or closer, I would insist on waiting until later.”

John turned to Willy to ask a question but stopped before he did. “Oh, I see. That will probably slow down the arrival of the cops and let the living get away.”

Willy’s teeth shone white in his smile. “You learn quick, John.”

They exited the car and gathered at the trunk. They withdrew the machetes and the small briefcase. The flare gun remained in the trunk. Each man had a machete a can of gasoline, Jerry, the briefcase, and John, a backpack.

Willy was curious but did not question the backpack. “Are we ready troops?” he asked.

John paused to look at Heather. Her worried face looked old and tired.

He went to her and kissed her. “Don’t worry so. I have something to come back for.”

With that, the three men crossed the street and entered the living room door.

Probably more powerful and cunning, Binti told them. The three men found it true.

Small spider-like creatures, with many more legs, were hanging everywhere. They did not wait for an invitation. They rushed at the three men with obvious excitement, like hungry dogs.

All three men returned the attack and slashed several. The events left a large quantity of black liquid on the floor of the living room.

“Why didn’t they bother me?” asked Jerry, breathing hard.

“Because you have something that it fears,” said John.

“Where do we start?” asked Willy.

“In the bedroom, upstairs,” said John.

All three men looked up and moved toward the kitchen. They had not reached the hallway before the creatures launched a second attack. After the second victory, the men had to take a rest.

“John! Please help me!” Tina screamed.

Jerry grew excited. “Tina! She’s alive, John. Let’s go and get her out of here.” He set the briefcase down and moved toward the hallway.

John lunged after him and caught him by the back of his pants.

Jerry swung around and tried his best to punch John.

“What’s wrong with you?” Jerry screamed. “I want to help Tina!”

John looked at him sadly. “You can’t save someone who’s dead, Jerry. Pick up the briefcase and don’t let it go again.”

Shaking, Jerry placed his hand on the handle.

“Jerry, this thing is raping me!” Tina’s voice screamed again. “Please! If you love me, help me!”

“Don’t, Jerry,” cautioned John. “That’s what it wants. It would love for you to rush right into it. It would destroy you before you opened the door.”

Jerry stared crazy at John. “But the voice. How could something inhuman come so close?”

“It thrives on fear and anxiety. Get angry with it. Hate it! Kill it, Jerry!”

Jerry gripped the handle and slowly stood.

“This is some trip,” commented Willy. “You mean that no one’s up there?”

“No. Tina is dead and buried. It just wants to needle us into fear and abandoning caution.”

“Yes there is some one here,” came a different voice. “It’s pulling off my legs.”

“Binti,” cried Jerry.

John turned, prepared to stop him, but Jerry remained immobile.

“We go slowly,” said John, stepping past Jerry.

In the bedroom on the second floor, the planter whirled and danced, now engulfed with a dark foggy form, with eyes and a mouth. Willy was the first target. A dark tendril grabbed him around the waist and pulled him close to the planter.

John went to give assistance and told Jerry to lay the briefcase on the bed.

“You’re a fool, John,” said the planter, using John’s mother’s voice. “I have consumed the rest of your family, and now you come to me. Fools are so convenient. You should have listened to your parents. You would have been dead long ago and escaped me.”

John steeled his nerves and hacked at the creature. He found the process of severing the arm more difficult this time, but he finally managed.

Then the three men wasted no time to start spreading the gasoline around the room, and across the bed as they backed toward the door. It slammed shut.

Gruff laughter filled the air. “Attention, you bucket of slimy shit!” shouted a male voice.

Willy turned to look, and in the door stood a man in Marine uniform, his brass decorations gleaming.

“What are you doing here? You’ve got no sense at all. You’re dumber than a spittoon.”

“Captain Marchini, I’ve had enough of your shit in the Marines in Nam!”

“Don’t!” John moved to intercept Willy but was not swift enough.

With the machete raised, Willy ran toward the figure screaming. When he was two feet from the door, the figure faded and a brick wall appeared. Willy hit it with a dull thud and fell backward.

“Ouch,” said Jerry, looking at Willy’s bloody face. An arm grabbed him by the ankles and pulled him toward the bed.

John grimaced and looked at Willy.

“That’s right, John. It should be you,” said his mother’s voice. “We died when you left us.”

“NO!” screamed John, anger flooding his mind and body. “YOU! You should be dead, you son-of-a-bitch!”

He gripped his machete and jumped on the bed. He swung strong and straight at the major arm which held Jerry’s ankles. The scream of the planter vibrated the room. John swung again and severed two of the supporting columns. The foggy form jumped from its holder and hit John squarely.

Jerry scrambled from under the bed and nearly fell over John. “Willy,” he shouted.

Willy’s voice answered from the door. “I’m here, Jerry. What you guys doing? Playing yoyo?”

Jerry shook his head. “Which one is real?” He looked at Willy’s body on the floor.

Willy stepped inside the room and looked at himself. “That thing is something awesome,” he said. “I chased my old DI all the way downstairs.”

“Where’s John?” asked Jerry. “John?”

John heard his name being called, but could not understand why anyone would call him. He was okay for the moment. He looked around the room through a fog of blackish haze. It appeared in weird shapes. He could feel the concern and anxiety for him, coming from Jerry and Willy.

“*Jerry and Willy*,” he thought. He looked at the fuzzy Jerry and the briefcase he held. A wave of nausea and deep fear hit him unexpectedly.

Another vision appeared, Tina with her head in the planter, her body mutilated.

“*I’m inside the damned thing! NO!*”

John’s body flew through the air and hit the closet door. Jerry and Willy jumped and rushed to pick him up.

He regained control swiftly. “Put the briefcase on the bed and let’s get the hell out of here. We don’t stop for anything until we’re downstairs!”

Jerry placed the case on the bed and stepped back. He and Willy spread more gasoline around the room and across the bed. They backed out of the room and locked

the door behind them before turning and walking downstairs. Jerry dribbled a trail of gas behind them.

On the bottom floor, John went through each room while Willy and Jerry watched silently. He collected as many pictures of Tina as he could get into the back pack. In the living room they poured out the rest of the gas on the carpet and paused a moment before walking out. The pause proved serious.

One of the larger shadows dropped from the ceiling and wrapped around Willy's head. Willy screamed and dropped to his knees, clawing at his head. With Jerry standing guard, John began to work at removing the creature. All three moved toward the door. With a final tug, several arms snapped and the body fell to the floor. Even in the darkness, John could see the deep gashes and the empty eye sockets in Willy's face. He cringed inwardly, for he knew that this was not a vision created by the creature.

John and Jerry exited the door, dragging Willy's limp form between them. They helped him across the street and got him inside the back seat of the car. Heather tended the wounds while the two men put everything in the trunk.

John instructed Jerry to get into the car and drive around the block slowly. In his hand he held the flare gun, looking at the house that had been home and love for himself and Tina.

"Good-bye, Tina, my love." A sinister smile worked across his face. "Good-bye, Demon. You've killed your last."

Sorrow masked his face as he raised the gun and pulled the trigger. The flare shattered the picture window and ignited in a brilliant flash. Quickly, the dark house was alight with bright-red flames as the gasoline burned. Long moments later, Jerry pulled up in front of the house. John stood where he was and watched with a sad smile on his face.

"Come on John!" Jerry pleaded. "Get in and let's get out of here!"

John stood immobile. "It hasn't worked yet. What's taking so long?"

"What are you talking about?"

Still John was silent. Then the ground shook and the top of the house rose into the air several feet. Through the smoke and flames rose a figure. Its arms spread and it looked like a giant cartwheel, spinning into space. It howled and screamed nearly as loud as the explosion. It stopped when it exploded into a shower of sparks.

John clapped his hands and shouted. He turned and got into the back seat of the car with Heather. "Let's go, Jerry. What are we waiting for? Hit it!"

Jerry shook his head. "That was some finish, John. What was in that briefcase?"

John grinned broadly. "Oh, just a few small odds and ends. It had two pounds of plastic explosives and two quart bottles of Holy Water."

Jerry whistled and nodded.

As they drove toward the hospital, the fire siren sounded.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Heather sat on the patio of the apartment she shared with John Everly. The sun warmed her, and she read a novel while waiting for John's return.

She had a job as a legal secretary, and she had repaid the sum of money to John, every penny. The last six months were full of turmoil and trouble with the police and the courts. Now all settled down. John still had his job as assistant manager at the drug store, and he seemed to be recovered from the loss of Tina.

Heather was another story. For her, she could not deny her love for John, but her background bothered her. She needed and craved a commitment, which John steadfastly refused to discuss or consider. She sat there during one of her breaks from the book and decided she must leave. To where she did not know, but leave she must. Her reverie was interrupted by the slamming of the apartment door.

"Heather, I'm home! Boy, you wouldn't believe how many yard sales and flea markets, there are today. Why, every house in Dover must be holding one."

Heather pushed the sunglasses up into her curled hair and sighed. *After all the promises not to do that again, why did he slip up now? Some people never learn.* She closed her book and stood. She found John standing in front of the stereo cabinet.

"I thought you were over those sales."

"Oh, I am, my darling. I passed nearly a hundred and never stopped at one. You look depressed, Heather," he changed the subject. "What's wrong?"

Heather studied her feet instead of his face. "John, I love you, and I always will, but I can't continue this way. I have to leave."

"I thought you enjoyed being around me."

Heather spread her arms. "I do love you. Still, I don't think I can live here another day. I simply must go."

"Okay," he said, "but first, will you come over here and give me a hug?"

She smiled and closed the distance between them. His arms went around her and held her tightly. Heather caught her breath and stared over John's shoulder.

Over the past weeks, Tina's pictures had been disappearing, one-by-one. The only one left to her knowledge was the wedding photo, on top of the stereo. Now it was gone

also. In its place sat an empty frame with white paper. On the white paper was printed in red, “Reserved for wedding photo of John and Heather Everly.”

Heather sniffed. “John, you didn’t have to take away her last picture.”

“I know, but I wanted to. We’ll need something to hold our wedding picture. That is, if you’ll marry me.”

Heather returned the tight squeeze. “Yes, John, I will.”

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