

DARK MATTER™



BY DUST CONSUMED

Don Bassingthwaite



Screaming with Madness.

Wandering the City.

Searching for Protection.

Something is out there,
getting closer,
moving in the darkness,
listening . . .

DARK MATTER™

By Dust Consumed

An escaped mental patient stalks Chicago, claiming one victim after another, leaving behind only a fine gray dust. The Hoffmann Institute is baffled, and it doesn't help that two of their key people have gone off on a very secret, very personal mission of their own.

DARK MATTER™

(One)

In Hollow Houses

Gary A. Braunbeck

(Two)

If Whispers Call

Don Basingthwaite

(Three)

In Fluid Silence

G.W. Tirpa

(Four)

Of Aged Angels

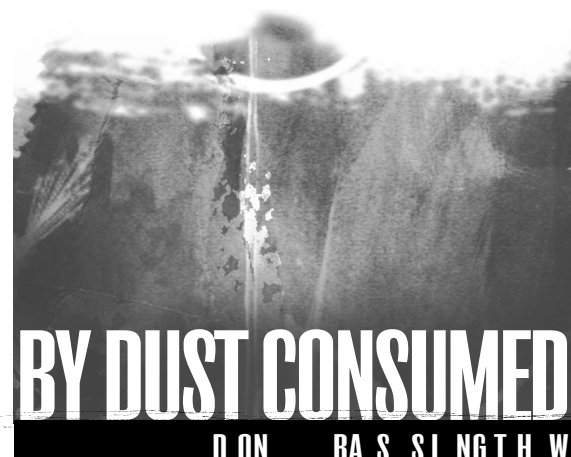
Monte Cook

(Five)

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Dark•Matter™

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Dark•Matter

Michael McCain retrieves a jar containing fragments of the brain of John F. Kennedy from a secret vault under the National Archives in Washington, D.C., moments before the building explodes.

Jeane Meara, an arson investigator for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, is sent to determine the cause of the explosion, but finds her theories as unwelcome as they are impossible to believe.

Watching all this is the quiet form of Ngan Song Kun'dren, an experienced agent of the shadowy Hoffmann Institute, a private organization founded to investigate and stop the rise of the Dark Tide.

McCain, Jeane, and Ngan are brought together when a bizarre creature begins to prey on the homeless population of the nation's capital. Now the Hoffmann Institute's newest team of investigators, the three are sent to Chicago where they encounter the dangerous spirits of the city's restless dead, break the back of a racist conspiracy that reaches to the highest offices of corporate and government power, and travel to Europe in search of an artifact that doesn't want to be found.

Back in Chicago, even Ngan begins to worry that the Hoffmann Institute itself may not be exactly what it seems to be.

For Ole



May 1, 1985. The last harsh words of the ritual faded slowly, as though the air dragged at their fleeting passage. Broken syllables hung like distant echoes. The effect was disconcerting in the spacious living room of a Chicago townhouse, but no one stirred.

Lisa Renfield lowered her arms and shrouded them within the voluminous folds of her robe. "I seek guidance," she said. "I seek wisdom. I seek the knowledge of Those Beyond."

The rest of the circle echoed the words in a slow litany. Lisa almost bit her tongue. It was always this way, like trying to sing carols at the office Christmas party—everything came out with the weight and grace of a dirge. She ground her teeth and mustered on.

"Answer me now, watching stranger! *Responsum mihi da!*"

In the center of the room, in the center of a circle drawn in blood and powdered iron, the air twisted as the membrane between worlds stretched thin. Something was there, a dark shape responding to the lure of the ritual. Lisa allowed herself the narrow smile of triumph that had already become familiar around the law firm. Oh, if the partners knew how she got some of her best leads! She drew a new breath, readying the first of three questions the circle would ask that night.

Before she could speak, though, the air twisted further. The membrane tore like raw meat, and the slowly fading words of power vanished, pulled through the tear in an instant. The thing on the other side ate them.

Someone screamed, and the thing ate the scream, too.

Lisa couldn't move. The thing—the creature, the being, the *demon*—on the other side of the tear shifted and looked at her. A vast, dark intelligence brushed against her mind. Its merest touch sucked the air from her lungs.

No! This isn't right! This isn't what was supposed to happen!

More than was wanted, yes? Small servants were wanted.

The words came to her like her own thoughts, but they weren't words at all, just horrid images that squirmed around in her mind. *Small servants*—Lisa understood and saw undulating creatures in impossible combinations of limbs and orifices—for *small answers*. Amusement like torture buffeted her.

Lisa tried to remember what she had learned. Stand up! Fight back! Use the words! Show strength! These beings respected strength.

She struggled for breath and choked out again, "I seek the knowledge of Those Beyond—"

The demon's amusement redoubled, and Lisa recognized her mistake just before it granted her request. Just for a moment, it entered her completely. It gave her its knowledge. She knew what it knew.

Time stretched away forever and farther. She was a part of that rushing, infinite river. The demon rode her like a surfboard. It twisted her head up out of the current, letting her see what was ahead. Age. Death. Decay. Always and forever. Time was eating her alive, grinding dull teeth into her body and tearing off chunks of flesh. It left behind maggots that itched as they burrowed through her and mold that slid black threads into her and left her in an agony of numbness.

The men and women of the circle were in the river with her, drowning in their own decay. The demon laughed, and they were swept away. Her clothes fell to shreds, her living room to ruins and to dust. Her house, the city, the world crumbled. The sun went out. The universe stopped.

The demon let the last strands of her hair slip from its grasp, and she fell back into the rushing water. The horrid vision vanished. The tear closed. The demon retreated. Everything was silent except for her own screaming. She knew now. She knew what it felt like to rot.

It would happen. It was happening now.

It had been happening to her for every moment of her life since that terrible night so many years ago.

It didn't have to happen anymore, though. She knew the way to make it stop. The demon had ridden above the river. All she had to do was find someone else who could do that, too. They would be able to lift her out of the river as well. They would be able to stop the decay. They would protect her.

Keeping her eyes shut while she waited was the hardest part. Keeping still as the rot consumed her was almost as hard.

"Patience," she murmured and hope shifted between her breasts.

When the orderly named Danny flipped open the little window in the door of Lisa Renfield's room with a fast, frightened motion, Alec Wells was reminded of his own childhood encounter with a garter snake. Though his father had tried to convince him that the little serpent was harmless, Alec had insisted on grabbing the longest stick he could find and flicking the snake away into nearby bushes. He had been teased about it unmercifully, of course, and Alec doubted if Danny's nervous ways earned him any greater respect from his fellow orderlies.

Clearly he wasn't the only one who thought that way. Homer elbowed Danny aside with a muttered "Wuss," and peered through the window. He nodded and said, "I'd say she's out, Dr. Wells."

Separated from the door by the length of a gurney, Alec nodded in turn. "Open it."

Danny fumbled with the keys. After a moment, the locked door swung open. The two orderlies stepped into the room—Homer first, of course. Alec followed behind with the gurney.

The best feature of the room on the other side of the door was the window. The wire-laced security glass was dark with night, but during the day it offered a view of the Elgin Mental Health Center's old gardens, very pleasant even with the leaves now blown from the trees and the first fitful snows of late November speckling the brown flowerbeds. The furnishings of the room were far less luxurious: bed, table, chair all bolted to the floor, small and sturdy sink, exposed toilet. The only decorations were the pages of soft paper taped to the wall, disturbing crayon scenes of Renfield's obsession with death and decay. On the table was the scatter of notebooks she kept as a journal, filling page after page with her bizarre descriptions of some magic ritual gone horribly wrong. Poor woman still clinging to the same delusion even after more than fifteen years of therapy.

Lisa herself was sprawled on the narrow bed, lying face up on the stiff sheets and rough blankets. She looked, Alec thought, surprisingly peaceful, maybe even beatific. Her pale face was relaxed for a change. With her close-cropped chestnut hair, she might have been some modern day Joan of Arc—if Joan of Arc had lived into her mid-thirties, found her way into a psychiatric hospital, and let her navel peek through between the buttons of her shirt. The woman who lay across Lisa Renfield's bed looked almost saintly.

Alec forced himself to remember who he was dealing with. Lisa Renfield might look peaceful and saintly, but she was far from either. They all had hopes for the eventual success of her therapy, but until that day, the Elgin Mental Health Center had a psychopath in its care.

"Move her," he said.

Homer shoved the gurney up beside the bed and seized Lisa's legs at the knees. That left Danny with her head and shoulders. Alec watched the orderly squeeze in by the head of the bed, squirming and turning as he tried to find a good position from which to pick up Lisa's body. At least it looked that way for a moment before Alec realized what Danny was really doing. He cleared his throat sharply.

"Danny?"

The orderly started, then flushed. "Sorry, Dr. Wells. I was just . . ."

Alec raised his eyebrows. "Looking to see if there was anything under the bed?"

Danny flushed a deeper red and nodded. Homer sneered at him.

Alec just sighed and asked, "Has everyone heard then?"

"Someone spots a rat in a patient's cell," Homer said, "it's going to be all over pretty fast."

Alec groaned. He should have expected this—news did travel fast in the hospital. It had only been a matter of hours since an orderly, changing the sheets on Lisa's bed while she

was out of her room at a therapy session, had seen a big white rat scurrying along the wall. It was gone before he could do anything more than catch the briefest glimpse, and by the time he had reported it, Lisa was back in her room. Alec had his doubts as to whether the orderly had actually seen anything at all, but either way, it had to be looked into. There were issues of sanitation, of patient comfort, of public relations—not to mention of what might happen if Lisa caught the thing before they did. Alec had quickly authorized the addition of sedatives to her evening medication. Unconscious, she could be safely moved elsewhere while Maintenance hunted down the intruder and sealed up whatever hole it had used to get in.

“Just get her onto the gurney,” he told the orderlies. “The sooner we’re out of here, the sooner Maintenance can get started. Maybe this will all be over before she even wakes up. Danny, if there is something under the bed, it’s not going to jump out and bite you.”

Homer snickered nastily at that and Danny, flushing ever more red, finally stepped up and slid his hands under Lisa’s arms. At a nod from Homer, both of them lifted together, transferring her unconscious body smoothly from bed to gurney. The motion shifted Lisa’s shirt and exposed more of her belly—the T-shirt underneath was bunched up high on her body. Alec tugged her outer shirt back into a more modest position as Homer and Danny fastened the heavy leather straps of the gurney in place.

The maintenance crew was waiting for them outside. “Want us to let you know when we’re finished?” one of them asked.

Alec nodded. “We’ll be down in one of the observation rooms on the second floor, Terry.”

Finding a place to hold Renfield had been a problem. Elgin was big, but the old hospital was also crowded. In the end, the observation rooms had seemed the best solution.

Though busy during the day, they were empty at night and sufficiently secure to hold a restrained, sedated patient, and they offered reasonably comfortable chairs where he and the orderlies could wait while the maintenance crew did its work.

The elevator ride was short. At that time of night, almost no one else was using the elevators, so there was nothing to stop them on the way down—though a little company wouldn’t have been amiss as they rolled the gurney out into the gloom of the second floor. Largely consultation and treatment rooms, it became a shadowed and lonely place after hours, all empty halls and firmly closed doors. The only illumination came drifting down the long halls from the safety lights left on near the stairwells. The sounds of their footsteps and the quiet rattle of the gurney’s wheels echoed weirdly, making the empty space seem even bigger and more empty. Walking along beside the gurney, Alec began to wonder if maybe he should have tried a little harder to find somewhere else to keep Lisa while her room was inspected. Somewhere a little livelier. The doctor held his tongue though. The thought was just plain ridiculous. What was there to be nervous about anyway?

Still, he stifled a sigh of relief as Danny walked ahead to the first observation room, unlocked it, and reached inside to flick a light switch. Light flooded the small room and spilled out into the hallway. Alec let Homer and the gurney enter the room first, then followed, shutting the door after himself. Echoes vanished just as the shadows had—the small room was carefully soundproofed. Alec gritted his teeth in frustration. Bad choice. In time, he was sure, the silence would make him as nervous as the echoes had.

“Find a seat and make yourselves comfortable,” he told the orderlies, more to break the quiet than anything else. “We’ll likely be here for a while.”

Homer parked the gurney and produced a deck of cards. "Game?" he asked.

There was a table in one corner of the room. Danny was already pulling up a chair.

"Sure." Alec walked over to join them.

The large, reflective expanse of a two-way mirror dominated the wall against which the gurney had been parked. Alec glanced into it reflexively as he passed. Lisa's eyes were open, quite lucid, and staring straight at him. He froze.

"You . . . you're . . ." he stuttered.

"I need to stop the decay, Doctor Alec," Lisa said. "I need someone to protect me from it, and I'm not going to find anyone here. I'm leaving Elgin now."

Homer and Danny were scrambling up from the table, but they were too slow. Something was heaving between Lisa's breasts, thrusting against the restraint of her shirt. The fabric was dark and damp. So was the leather strap across her upper body. Both appeared to be smoldering slightly. Alec stared.

"You won't feel the decay when you're dead," Lisa added.

She strained against the strap and it tore apart like wet cardboard. Something came crawling up out of the collar of her shirt, launching itself at the orderlies as Lisa reached for the remaining straps.

Surprisingly, Homer was the first of them to scream.

Terry Baker stepped off the elevator and onto the second floor, whistling and spinning a ring of keys around his finger. He was pretty sure that after two hours of playing babysitter, Dr. Wells and the orderlies would be glad to hear that the maintenance crew had finished going over the cell. The doctor would probably be even happier to find out that there was

no sign of a rat. Someone had been seeing things—like that was unusual around here.

He turned a corner into the hall where the observation rooms were located. Only one room had lights on. He stepped up to the door and rapped on it.

It swung open under his knock. The room beyond was empty, its chairs and table scattered. There were big dents in the walls. The gurney lay against one wall, overturned.

There was no sign of Dr. Wells, the orderlies, or their charge.

Terry swallowed hard and fumbled for the walkie-talkie at his belt. "Central," he said into it urgently, "we have trouble."

We therefore commit *his* body to the ground;
earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust;
in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life.

—from *The Book of Common Prayer,*
Burial of the Dead, First Anthem

Don't you ever laugh as the hearse goes by,
For you may be the next to die.
They wrap you up in a big white sheet
From your head down to your feet.
They put you in a big black box
And cover you up with dirt and rocks.
All goes well for about a week,
Then your coffin begins to leak.
The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out,
The worms play pinochle on your snout . . .

—from *The Hearse Song*

chapter

1 N E

The steps that led down from the street were worn, crumbling from the combined effects of time, traffic, and weather. In most parts of Chicago, the light dusting of snow that had fallen overnight had already melted away. On the steps, though, it lingered, protected by the shadow of the building overhead. Combined with the worn steps, it made for slick passage down to the entrance to Devromme's Used Books.

Michael McCain took a final deep breath of the morning's fresh air before adding his footprints to those already on the short flight of stairs. "I never get used to the smell of this place," he commented. "I wonder if Ned would take it badly if I gave him an air freshener."

Behind him, Jeane Meara snorted as she made her own way down, burdened by a large box. "Fitz, an air freshener here would be a fart in a windstorm."

McCain opened the door at the bottom of the stairs and, with another deep breath, bared himself to the unique ambiance of Devromme's. The store smelled stale, of lingering incense, crumbling books, and musty, damp concrete. A worn gray carpet covered the floor, running in narrow aisles between dangerously tall and fragile-looking bookshelves. Perched on a high stool behind the front counter and staring at a cheap portable television with unblinking intensity was the only clerk McCain had ever seen in the place. He didn't look up as McCain and Jeane entered and barely even moved as McCain gave him a friendly "Morning, Kaz." One hand moved in a gesture that might have been a wave. McCain caught a glimpse of an old movie with two men in drag and one very famous blond bombshell on the tiny TV screen.

Jeane didn't even break her stride, walking straight back through the store's narrow aisles. His attempt at social interaction rebuffed, McCain followed her.

"Have you ever wondered if Kaz has some kind of problem?"

"Kaz," Jeane replied, squeezing between shelves, "has an obsession. You saw what he was watching?" McCain shrugged. "*Some Like It Hot*," she supplied. "Every time I'm in here, he's got something about or starring Marilyn Monroe going on that TV."

"Not everyone shares your dislike for Marilyn, Jeane."

"Not everyone works for Ned Devromme, either."

The shelves toward the back of the store were laden with occult books. McCain glanced at them as they went past. Some were old and worn, some were so new their spines were hardly cracked. Hermeticism, voodoo, spiritualism, Atlantis, Stonehenge, Cahokia, astral travel, reincarnation . . . and that was just this aisle. McCain let his eyes slide past a book on the mystical substance called *vril* and a whole shelf filled with books on the holy grail. He already knew more about those subjects than he cared to consider. A lot of people would be surprised to learn that Ned Devromme's foul

little shop was probably the best source in Chicago for information on the occult. The shop was quite a bit more than it seemed—much like Ned himself.

At the back of the store, Jeane juggled her box into one hand so she could pound on a door set into the back wall with the other.

"Hey Ned," she yelled, then pulled the door open and shouted up the stairs on the other side. "You've got visitors. Put some pants on."

A reply drifted down from above. "And good morning to you, too, Jeane. Does the farm know you're missing?"

McCain held his tongue as he followed Jeane through the door and up the stairs. No sane person got in the way of the verbal sparring between Ned and Jeane. Fortunately, what had started out as an acidic duel of insults had acquired a nature more akin to a friendly bar brawl. He might even have ventured a guess that it masked a deep respect between two very sharp intellects—might have, that is, if he hadn't thought Jeane would deck him for the very suggestion.

It had been just a little more than a year since the two agents of the Hoffmann Institute had first met Ned Devromme in the course of their investigation into a series of events centered around Bachelor's Grove Cemetery in the Chicago suburb of Midlothian. At the time, he had been an intruder, a specialist brought in on their investigation. In spite of that, McCain had found himself liking the man. Ned had, it turned out, exactly the skills that the investigation needed: a prodigious knowledge of the occult, combined with certain other . . . abilities.

As Ngan Song Kun'dren, the third member of their team, had put it at the time, Ned was "the best psychic working for the Hoffmann Institute in Chicago."

Ned was waiting for them at the top of the stairs. The psychic was a big man with a scruffy beard and bright, sharp eyes. He was of an age with Jeane, almost ten years older than McCain's own thirty-one years. Where Jeane's body,

however, was so toned that the fortieth birthday she would celebrate next year seemed like an impossibility, Ned had the ample belly of someone who wasn't afraid to indulge himself. He was also, contrary to Jeane's suggestion, fully dressed. He glanced at the box in Jeane's hands and raised his eyebrows.

"Don't you people ever just drop by for a cup of coffee?"

"I wouldn't say no to a cup if you're offering," McCain said, "but this is business."

McCain stepped up out of the stairwell. The apartment that Ned occupied above and behind his shop was only slightly less disreputable than the shop itself. Books, newspapers, dirty dishes, and bizarre knick-knacks covered virtually every flat surface. Thankfully the stale reek of the shop downstairs didn't penetrate up here.

McCain gestured to Jeane's box and added, "Another charming piece for your evaluation."

"Welcome to *Antiques Roadshow*," grumbled Ned. "Today we'll be looking at an absolutely fascinating artifact of primal evil from before the dawn of time."

"Actually, it's from a hunting camp in Wisconsin."

"Even better."

Ned led them through into the big main room of the apartment. The odor of beeswax candles hung in the air, and a young man with short blond hair and a matching patch of whiskers on his chin was just shrugging on his jacket. He smiled and dipped his head in greeting. "Hey, Fitz. Hey, Jeane."

"Hey, Van."

McCain hooked fingers and bumped fists with the young man in a complex handshake. Vanko Dimitriat was another friend from the Bachelor's Grove investigation. A high school senior at the time, Van was now three months into his freshman year at the University of Chicago. One of the number of surprises that had come out of the Bachelor's Grove case

was that Van had the potential to develop psychic powers, and what spare time he had left over from his studies was spent under Ned's tutelage.

"Are we breaking up a training session?" McCain asked.

"Naw. Just finishing." Van picked up a heavy backpack. "I've got to head back to campus for class."

Jeane hefted her box, catching Van's eye. "Don't you want to see what we've brought Ned?"

Van grimaced and shook his head. "I'd love to, but I can't. Really." He slung the backpack over his shoulder and headed for the stairs. "You'll have to tell me about it later."

He was gone before Jeane could even respond, down the stairs and through the door with a slam and a swirl of noise from Kaz's TV. Jeane blinked.

"If he ever slows down, he'll make the Hoffmann Institute a fine agent someday." She moved over to a battered dining table and set the box down. "How's his training going?"

Ned rocked his hand back forth. "So-so. He works hard, but we're having trouble breaking through. None of the exercises I know have been able to tease out his gift enough to identify it."

"Can't you just show him what to do?" McCain asked. He took a seat at the table and idly picked up a prism bound in brass filigree. Ned slapped it out of his hand without looking.

"You don't demonstrate ice-skating when you're trying to teach someone basketball, Fitz," the psychic pointed out. "Until we know the exact nature of Van's gift, all I can do is teach him the most basic of skills: centering, focus, concentration, that sort of thing. We'll get there eventually." He sat down at the head of the table. "But enough about Van. What did you bring me?"

McCain shoved the box over to him. Ned split the seal of packing tape and plunged his hands into the sea of foam chips inside. His eyes widened, then narrowed. His prize, carefully cradled in both hands, came out of the box in a

shower of foam. It was an animal skull, and Ned turned it this way and that, studying it. McCain suppressed a shudder.

On its own, the skull was hardly any different from the skulls of cows and sheep he had handled in high school biology. Small, bony eye sockets faced forward over a long muzzle and jaw that still retained the varied teeth of an omnivore. The jaw itself articulated under heavy cheekbones. A crest of bone flared at the back of the skull, support for a powerful neck.

What made this skull disturbing however, were the words and symbols that had been drawn on it. They crowded in on each other with an obsessive precision, never overlapping, never touching, but never leaving more than hair's breadth between them. Someone had spent a long, long time writing on the skull. Some of the symbols were easy to recognize. An inverted pentagram on the beast's brow. Ankh's. The astrological symbols for the planets. Some of the words were familiar, too, written in English or Italian or German or Latin. Other words were written in different scripts, still recognizable, but foreign. There were a few words and symbols, however, that McCain hadn't recognized at all. Jeane hadn't known them either, nor had Ngan.

All of the characters were written in a liquid that had dried rust brown. Ned traced one of the symbols with his finger. "Blood," he observed, then hefted the skull once more before setting it on the table and asked, "Bear?" Jeane nodded in response. Ned's eyes narrowed even further. "You said it was found in a hunting camp in Wisconsin."

Jeane pulled out her notebook and flipped it open to read the details. "Northern Wisconsin, well out in the woods. Found at the beginning of the hunting season. The skull had been mounted on a pole to one side of a fire pit. A body was found on the opposite side of the fire pit. Male, white, seventeen years of age. Local, missing for several weeks prior. Cause of death was a gunshot wound from under the jaw

through the skull, apparently self-inflicted and consistent with the rifle that was also found by the fire pit. The blood on the skull belonged to the victim."

"The local police ruled it a suicide," McCain said, leaning forward. He avoided looking at the skull. Ned had set it down so that the eye sockets were staring straight at him. "The skull, however, made its way into Ngan's hands. He wants to be sure there were no . . . other influences involved."

"So how come the wrinkly old monk didn't come himself?"

"The Powers That Be in the Institute still consider him their liaison with the team." Jeane folded her notebook and put it away. "Ngan's liaising with the Powers of Paperwork this morning. So what do you think?"

Ned reached out and brushed the skull. "Did you know," he said absently, "that bears are or have been venerated as powerful spirits by virtually every culture that shares territory with them? Van told me something about it that he heard in one of his classes recently. Linguists think early northern Indo-European tribes may have considered the animal so sacred that they had taboos against naming it directly. Words like 'bear' and 'bruin' describe the animal's color: brown. One I already knew was Russian, where the word is *medved*: honey-eater." His hand paused over the inverted pentagram. "This is a nasty thing to do to a venerated animal. I haven't seen anything like it since . . . well, for a long time."

For a moment, Ned fell silent. Jeane raised one eyebrow and glanced at McCain. He returned the glance evenly and shrugged in a silent lie. Actually, he had a pretty good idea why Ned seemed uncomfortable with the violated skull.

During the Bachelor's Grove investigation, the big man had shared a piece of his history with McCain. Before Ned had discovered his psychic gifts, he'd been a diabolist, a practitioner of black magic. He hadn't elaborated on it much beyond saying he'd walked away from it, and McCain had the

distinct impression it wasn't a period of his life Ned liked to talk about. It wasn't something McCain liked knowing about either, and if Ned could put it behind him, the least McCain could do was let him.

McCain gave Ned his moment of reverie, then cleared his throat and asked, "So is Ngan right? Is there something more going on here?"

The psychic blinked and chuckled. "Let's put it this way, Fitz: Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." He passed the skull over to Jeane. "This thing looks nasty, but it has no more occult significance than a heavy metal album."

Jeane frowned. "But the skull of a bear, and all these symbols . . ."

"Meaningless." Ned spread his hands. "Magic is like a story. Everything fits together—the symbols involved should tell you what's happening. This thing is the magical equivalent of a cat walking across a keyboard."

"Well, damn." Jeane stared down at the skull. "What are we supposed to do with this then?"

Ned pushed the box over to her. "Wash the blood off and bury the skull somewhere pretty. It never hurts to be nice." He smiled nastily. "Well, except maybe in your case."

Jeane made a sour face and dug the skull back down into the foam chips in the box. "How about the body by the fire pit?"

"I hate to say it, Jeane, but this time I think the local police are right. No mystery." Ned quirked his lips and shrugged. "Anyone who would spend the time it took to decorate that skull—with his own blood—needed a shrink more than he needed the Hoffmann Institute." He smiled at Jeane. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Ned," Jeane said, "my only disappointment was seeing you before lunch."

Ned grinned happily. "There you go—that's the spirit!" He stood and swept his arm grandly toward the stairs. "Let

me walk you out. I know how easy it is for you to get lost."

Jeane and Ned traded insults all the way back down the stairs and most of the way through the shop below. McCain trailed in their wake, shaking his head. Even Kaz glanced up at the bickering pair. His movie must have been over—the television was tuned to the local news. The TV caught Jeane's eye, and McCain couldn't help but think that she had been proved wrong. Marilyn Monroe movies weren't the only thing Kaz watched on the little television.

Before he could make the observation out loud though, the cell phone in his jacket pocket rang quietly. McCain flipped it out.

"Hello?"

The voice on the other end was soft, but strong, touched with the lightest of accents. "Michael? It's Ngan."

"Hi, Ngan."

McCain stopped walking and waved for Jeane, trying to get her stop for a moment. Somewhat to his surprise, she had already stopped and was staring at Kaz's television as intently as the clerk himself and listening closely to something on the news. McCain caught a brief glimpse of firefighters and a lot of smoke before he turned away and stepped into the relative cover of the bookshelves.

"How's the paperwork?" he asked Ngan. "Good news on the bear skull. Ned says there's nothing—"

"Michael," interrupted Ngan, "Field Director Adler has called us in for a meeting."

The news of Ned's findings died on McCain's lips. "Lily wants us? Do you know why?"

"All I know is that something has come up, and I imagine we're being tapped to handle the case. She's scheduled the meeting for one o'clock."

McCain glanced at his watch. The Chicago branch office of the Hoffmann Institute was located in the heart of the industrial suburb of Schiller Park, way out by O'Hare

Airport. There was time, though. "One o'clock at the office is no problem."

"Good," said Ngan. "Is Jeane with you?"

"Jeane—"

Before he could say any more, a hand clamped down hard on his shoulder. Jeane stood almost right in his face. Her expression was hard and easily as urgent as Ngan's voice. She shook her head sharply.

"Jeane's gone," McCain said into the cell phone. "She was here, but she left."

"Do you know where she went?"

He looked up for more instruction from Jeane, but she had already turned away, back to the television.

"No," McCain replied simply, and heard Ngan sigh.

"I'll try her cell phone then," Ngan said. "You'll be here for one o'clock?"

"Absolutely. See you then." He broke the connection and walked up to Jeane. "He's going to call you on your phone."

Jeane reached to her hip as smoothly as if she were drawing a gun and clicked off the power on the cell phone that hung there.

"Thanks, Fitz."

She had a phonebook out and was flipping rapidly through the pages. Ned was stooped behind the counter, pulling up a telephone from somewhere. Kaz was huddled as far from either of them as possible, looking longingly toward his television. McCain gave them all a puzzled look.

"Ngan," he said, fishing for information, "called to say that Lily Adler wants to meet with us."

"I guessed that," Jeane said without looking up from the phonebook.

He waited but no one said anything else. Jeane found the page she was looking for. Putting one finger on the book to mark her place, she reached for Ned's telephone with the other. McCain peered over her shoulder. Her finger rested

just under the listing for WCGO-TV, the same station Kaz's television was tuned to.

"Jeane," he asked finally, "do you want to tell me why I just lied to Ngan for you?"

Telephone receiver in one hand, she finally turned to look at him. Her face was as pale and concerned as McCain had ever seen it.

"I just saw my mother on the news," she said tightly.

"Your mother?" The question came out as something of a startled gasp. "I thought she was dead."

"It wasn't my mom," Jeane corrected him, "it was my mother." She looked at him as if that should have been significant. He shook his head. She gave him a little frown as she turned back to the telephone. "My *birth* mother, Fitz. Remember?"

It came back to him, filtering up through all of the things that had happened to them in the past year. Relations within the team hadn't been so good a year ago. Ngan had been adjusting poorly to a promotion that had put him in charge of the team, while McCain had been adjusting poorly to Ngan's style of leadership—and going through some more personal adjustments as well thanks to a surprising revelation regarding the nature of his birth. After a nasty confrontation with Ngan, the only other person aware of that nature, McCain had found himself trying to explain his behavior to Jeane and hinting at his secret in the process. Maybe it had been a subconscious desire to bring it all out into the open. Maybe not. Either way, Jeane had somehow guessed at half of the truth, that his parentage was not entirely typical. The other half, however, she had missed, assuming instead something far more innocent: that he was adopted. As she was herself.

"Oh," said McCain, and he remembered exactly what Jeane had told him about her one meeting with the woman. "Oh!"

Ned had a surprised and intrigued look on his face. “You’re adopted?” he asked Jeane.

“Say anything,” Jeane snapped, “and you eat this phone.”

Ngan Song Kun’dren let loose a ferocious yawn that would, he thought, have done justice to one of the snow leopards of his native Tibet and rubbed his eyes. He opened them just in time to see a mug of tea placed on top of the paperwork on the desk in front of him. He looked up and smiled at the team’s secretary.

“Thank you, Emma,” he said as he picked up the mug and inhaled the thick, slightly astringent aroma. “Assam?” She nodded and he sipped. The tea was, of course, perfectly brewed. “Emma, you never cease to amaze me.”

“Hopefully I never will. A girl needs her secrets.” She winked at him and turned back to the door to the outer office, stepping lithely to the side as McCain came through from the other direction. “Hello, Fitz.”

“Emma.” McCain shifted a box that Ngan knew contained the Wisconsin bear skull into his right hand and twisted his left around so that his partner could see the face of his wristwatch. “Told you. 12:52. Plenty of time.”

“Indeed.” Ngan sipped at more of Emma’s excellent tea. “Unfortunately, the same can’t be said for Jeane. Have you heard from her since my call?”

McCain set the box down on his own desk. “You couldn’t get in touch with her?”

Ngan regarded McCain over the edge of the mug. The younger man had many talents, chief among them a preternatural ability to inspire trust and confidence—a silver tongue that never tarnished. While Ngan did genuinely trust McCain, he liked to think that he knew enough to listen as well to what McCain did *not* say.

“No,” Ngan said, letting the single word convey his understanding that McCain was lying.

McCain was too practiced a liar to blush at being caught, but Ngan saw in his eyes that he understood. Ngan tempered his gaze with a smile, however. If Jeane thought something sufficiently important to deliberately skip a meeting, he would trust her judgment.

McCain nodded and touched the box, changing the subject. “I started to say on the phone that we have a resolution on the bear skull. Ned’s opinion is that there’s nothing paranormal involved. The decorations on the skull have no power and are likely the products of the victim’s own disturbed mind.”

“Perhaps not an exciting conclusion, but a satisfactory one.” When McCain gave him a curious look, Ngan smiled. “There is no Institute regulation that requires every case to end in a potentially deadly encounter with the paranormal, Michael.”

“But you have to admit, it is something of a first for us.”

“Regrettably true.” Ngan rose, considered briefly whether it was appropriate to bring the tea with him to the meeting, and decided that it would be a worse crime to leave it behind. He gestured to the door. “Lily awaits.”

Chicago Field Director of Observation Lily Adler’s office was upstairs from the office that Ngan shared with Jeane and McCain. It was about the same size as theirs, in spite of the fact that it was occupied by only one person. Then again, everything Lily did was calculated to impress. She was one of Ngan’s oldest friends in the Hoffmann Institute. He knew things about her that no one else did, like her fondness for cold pizza and professional wrestling. She still managed to impress him. He knocked on her door at precisely 1:00.

“Come in,” Lily called. Her voice was flawless in its clipped, aristocratic tones, a perfect match for the persona she chose to project. She looked up as Ngan and McCain entered. “Only two of you?”

There were, of course, three chairs set out before her desk. Ngan seated himself in the farthest one. "I was unable to get in touch with Jeane on short notice."

Lily's lips tightened slightly. "Unfortunate. You'll have to fill her in later, though. We can't wait." She pushed a slim file folder across her desk. McCain took it as Lily steepled her fingers and said, "Last night, a patient named Lisa Renfield escaped from the Elgin County Mental Health Center."

"I've heard of it." Ngan frowned. "Nothing especially good, I'm afraid."

"You won't hear much good about Lisa Renfield either," McCain added, glancing through the file folder. He removed a photograph and passed it over Ngan. The woman in the picture had a pointed chin, light chestnut hair, and dark, haunted eyes. "It doesn't look like she'll be on Santa's list of good little girls this year."

Ngan looked back to Lily. He would be able to read the file any time, but they would only get one briefing from Lily. "What has she done?"

His old friend caught his look and nodded in response. "In 1985, Lisa Renfield was a rising young lawyer with a prestigious law firm here in Chicago. One night, however, her neighbors called the police to say there were screams coming from her house. They found Renfield lying in the middle of her living room, surrounded by smashed furniture, a litter of ritual paraphernalia, and a circle of iron and pig's blood. She was the one screaming. The police took her into custody, of course. She was transported to the nearest hospital." Lily sat back. "She got loose in the hospital. She left one orderly needing extensive oral surgery, another with brain damage, and three patients with internal injuries after she got into their room and started beating them in their beds."

"I see," said Ngan. "Was there a reason for this?"

Lily folded her hands again and said, as calmly as if she had been discussing stock market prices, "Renfield claims

that she and a circle of eight friends were summoning a demon when the ritual went wrong. The demon took its revenge by showing her the true nature of time. Apparently it was too much for her. When Renfield attempted to kill the patients in the hospital, she felt she was doing them a favor by saving them from a living hell of slow decay."

McCain looked up. "A demon?" he asked in disbelief.

"Call it an 'ultraterrestrial entity' if you wish, Agent McCain. Your opinion is a moot point—the case was thoroughly investigated at the time."

"If it was investigated," McCain said pointedly, "what happened to Renfield's circle of friends?"

"There was no sign of them when the police arrived. Renfield claimed the demon swept them away in the river of time."

"Pull the other one," the young man snorted. "Eight people vanish and a woman goes psycho? That's a recipe for front page news, and I don't remember hearing anything about it."

Lily looked down her nose at him disdainfully. "No one vanished, Agent McCain. The police determined that Lisa's friends were entirely fictitious. Renfield was simply an overworked, sadly disturbed young woman."

McCain blinked. "Really? But you just said the case was investigated."

"I suspect it was, Michael," Ngan said. He turned to look at Lily. "Investigated and suppressed. Certain headlines were never meant to make it to the front page."

"Indeed," confirmed Lily, sitting forward once more. "And therein lies the rub. Lisa's condition has improved somewhat over time, but she still possesses occult knowledge and motivations that the Institute considers dangerous. The police see her as dangerous too, of course—her history at the hospital and in Elgin is quite clear. Only the Hoffmann Institute knows anything different."

“But if this whole demon summoning thing was an accident,” protested McCain, “how dangerous can she be by herself?”

Lily gave McCain a cool look. “At the time of Renfield’s escape last night, she was supposed to have been under the supervision of a doctor and two orderlies. All three are missing, gone without a trace. The doctor’s car was missing. It was found a short time ago in a parking garage in downtown Chicago, but again with no trace of the men. The police believe Renfield has either killed them and hidden the bodies or is holding them hostage.” Lily tapped her fingers together. “The Hoffmann Institute, on the other hand . . .”

Ngan finished for her. “The Hoffmann Institute sees a disconcerting similarity between three men missing now and eight people vanishing in 1985.” He frowned. “What’s our assignment?”

“Find Renfield,” said Lily, “but also find out what’s going on—why people are missing and why Renfield escaped.” She stood up. “If there are no more questions, that will be everything. Keep me informed of your progress.”

“Yes, ma’am.” McCain gave Lily a cocky little salute. Ngan’s own acknowledgement was more sober, a simple nod as he rose and turned for the doorway.

Both agents were almost out of the room before Lily called after them. “One moment!”

Ngan turned back. Lily was still standing behind her desk. She was holding out a piece of paper. “This may not be the best timing, but word has come down. You’re to take Van Dimitriat on your next investigation as a trial run.”

“On *this* investigation?” Ngan asked. The idea was disturbing. “Lily, don’t you think this might be a bit dangerous?”

“Yes,” Lily said, “but I also know you’ll look after him.” She smiled thinly. “Just like you did me.”

Ngan couldn’t help smiling in return. “I’ll look after him,”

he assured her. He stepped back and took the paper from her hand, glancing into her eyes as he drew it away.

For the briefest of moments, there was fear and concern in Lily’s eyes. “Look after yourself, too, Ngan,” she breathed before she turned away.

chapter

2 w o

October 12, 1980. The diner in Cleveland smelled of fried food and coffee. At this time in the afternoon, it was mostly empty. A couple of truckers, one thin and the other fat, sat at the counter and talked with the waitress. A family occupied one of the booths, weary parents struggling with three arguing children. An old couple sat in another, eating chicken salad sandwiches in silence. Jeane walked past all of them and headed straight for the booth at the end. The woman sitting there was alone. She looked up as soon as Jeane started down the long row of booths, watching her approach. Jeane couldn't help staring back.

The woman was probably a couple of years shy of forty. She was thin in a way that made Jeane think of coffee and cigarettes. Too much make-up emphasized the lines that a hard life had started to leave on her face. Her hair had been streaked with blond, but

in between the highlights it was the same red-brown as Jeane's own.

Jeane stopped beside the booth, started to speak, changed her mind, and sat, sliding into the booth to sit precisely across from the other woman. Her mouth was unexpectedly dry. She swallowed before she asked "Dale Churchill?"

The woman nodded. "Jeane?" she asked in turn.

The name seemed rusty, as if it was unfamiliar. Then again, it was. Stan and Rose Meara had named her. Jeane nodded back and silence stretched out before Dale said tentatively, "You're bigger than last time I saw you."

"I turned eighteen last month."

"I know." Dale looked away for a moment. "I figured it out the other week when the adoption agency called to set this up."

She hadn't known how old Jeane was. Something slid inside Jeane's stomach even as her logical side pointed out that there was no real reason to have expected anything more. Dale had given her up at birth. Why should she remember the age of a daughter she never known? Jeane's hands started to tremble. She laid them flat on the tabletop to keep them still.

There was a coffee cup there. Empty. Jeane nodded at it. "Can I buy you another, Dale?" she asked.

Dale shook her head. "No. No, I don't think so." She took a deep breath and very lightly covered Jeane's hands with her own. "Jeane, this is a mistake. I'm a stranger to you and you're a stranger to me. We've got nothing in common. The people who raised you are your parents, better ones than I could ever be. Stay with them." Dale's mouth twitched into a crooked smile. "I was your age when I got pregnant."

She took her hands away, gathered up a cheap fake leather purse, and stood. She left two crumpled dollar bills on the table beside the coffee cup.

“It was nice to meet you, Jeane.”

When Dale walked away, Jeane couldn't even turn around to look after her. She sat in the booth for five of the longest minutes of her life, just staring at the empty seat on the other side of the booth. When the waitress came over to take her order, Jeane just shook her head mutely and rose.

She made it all the way over to the fast food joint next door and the table where Stan and Rose sat waiting for her before she started to cry. After a moment, her mom and dad started to cry, too.

She probably shouldn't have expected that McCain would immediately know what she was talking about. They'd only discussed the fact that she was adopted once. A lot had happened since then. Still, Jeane would have thought that of everything they had learned about each other over that time, the fact that she was adopted would have been one of the easiest things for McCain to remember.

Jeane leaned on the horn of her car as a shiny SUV cut her off, then she rather belatedly took a deep breath to try to calm herself. The drive from Ned's shop to Cook County Hospital should have taken no time at all. Instead the traffic was heavy enough that walking seemed like it would have been a better alternative.

There's no hurry, Jeane told herself, Dale will still be at the hospital when I get there.

She couldn't quite make it sound convincing. She couldn't shake the feeling that she would be too late.

The timing of events at Ned's had already been beyond belief. They had walked downstairs at exactly the right time to catch the news on Kaz's television. Jeane, amazed that Kaz was watching something that did not involve Marilyn Monroe, had turned to the television at just the right moment

to catch the beginning of a story on an early morning fire in a small apartment building in the city's west side. McCain's cell phone had started ringing at precisely the right instant for Jeane to pause and pay attention to the story—and to see a woman, whose face she would never forget, being taken to the hospital for smoke inhalation.

Cutting out on a meeting called by the field director of observation was probably not the fastest way to advance in the Hoffmann Institute. Fortunately, career advancement was not high on her list of priorities. She did feel bad about lying—through McCain—to Ngan, but she was also fairly certain that the old man would understand—really understand in a way that neither McCain nor Ned had. As she had waited on hold with WCGO, trying to find out where the victims of the fire had been taken, both men had given her odd looks. Ned hadn't really said anything, just looked at her strangely, but she had known what he was thinking. McCain, on the other hand, had been more vocal.

“Jeane, you only met her once, and she told you that she didn't belong in your life. What are you doing?”

His birth parents, she knew, were long dead, but she had looked at him point blank and asked what he would do if they weren't and he suddenly discovered that they were in trouble. The question had been cruel and she had regretted it almost instantly. It got the point across, though. McCain had given her a lonely, frustrated look but ultimately nodded and left for the meeting with Ngan and Lily. Jeane knew that Ngan wouldn't have needed any additional explanation at all. Whatever else had passed between Jeane Meara and Dale Churchill—or rather, hadn't passed—in the last thirty-nine years, they were still blood.

Trying to find a spot in the hospital parking lot took almost as long as the drive from Ned's shop had. Waiting in line at the overworked information desk inside the hospital took longer. Finally, though, she was the one standing beside

the desk. She smiled at the tired woman in half-glasses on the other side.

"I'm trying to find one of your patients—Dale Churchill. She would have been admitted this morning."

The woman checked something on a computer. "No one by that name," she said wearily. "Are you sure she's here?"

"Yes." Jeane frowned a little bit. It had been more than twenty years. Maybe Dale had gotten married. "Can you search by first name?" The woman's eyebrows rose like incriminating testimony, and Jeane actually felt a flush of color her cheeks. "I'm . . . she's an old friend. I saw her on the news—there was a fire at her apartment building this morning. She was brought here for treatment for smoke inhalation. I . . ."

She was terrible at this and she knew it. She had never really been a people person. Certainly not the way McCain was. He had a style that made people trust him almost instantly. All he had to do was smile, and people would dance for him. Jeane didn't have that style. She could bully, yes, but she didn't think that was likely to get her very far. All she really had was her honesty.

She looked directly at the woman behind the counter and said, "I need to see her. I need to make sure she's all right."

The woman looked back at her for a heartbeat, then smiled. "I'll see what I can do, sweetheart." Her fingers flew across the computer keyboard. She frowned once. "Two Dales on record, but both men." Her fingers moved again. "You said this morning? Smoke inhalation?"

Jeane's heart skipped a beat. "Yes."

"How old was she?"

"Fifty-seven," Jeane said without hesitation. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she always remembered Dale's age.

"Hmm . . ." The woman behind the counter looked at the computer screen through her half-glasses. "Brought into emergency this morning, admitted into the hospital for observation. Age . . . fifty-eight?"

She glanced up. Jeane nodded.

"That must be her." Her heart was thundering now. "Please don't tell me she's been discharged already."

"No," said the woman behind the counter. Jeane almost gasped with relief. The woman wrote something on a slip of paper. "You can go in and see her, but you might want to make sure she's the right person before you do. The name I have down is not Dale Churchill."

Jeane glanced at the paper. *W-23C. Shelley Brooks.*

"Thank you," she told the woman. "Thank you very much."

Could she have seen the wrong face on Kaz's little television? Was it possible that she had seen some other woman and mistaken her for Dale? It was, Jeane reflected, conceivable. It had been a long time, and their meeting had been very brief and extremely emotional, not the best of conditions for committing a face to memory. The urgency that had driven her to rush out of Ned's shop faded, replaced by misgivings. Maybe she had been wrong. Maybe she had misremembered. Maybe she was about to burst in on a total stranger.

As soon as she stepped through the doorway of W-23, the misgivings vanished.

It was a large room with four beds separated by off-white curtains. All of the beds were full. At one, two burly men chatted with a haggard woman. At another, a father and three children surrounded a weary-looking mother. An old couple sat together on the edge of a third, talking quietly. Jeane walked past all of them to the bed in the far left corner.

Dale was reading a magazine. Time had not been particularly kind to her. The hair that had been streaked blond before was entirely blond now, a nasty, brassy color. The lines of her face were deep, and the leanness of coffee and cigarettes had given way to the heavy thickness of advanced middle-age.

At least she wasn't wearing too much make-up this time. Jeane stopped by the foot of the bed.

"Shelley Brooks?" she asked.

If there was one thing her line of work had prepared her for, it was that if people changed their names, there was usually a reason.

Dale glanced up. Her face crinkled. "Yes?"

She didn't recognize Jeane. That shouldn't have been entirely unexpected, Jeane supposed. It had been a long time, and as much as she took care of herself, she knew that wasn't the same girl she had been when she was eighteen.

"It's Jeane," she told Dale quietly. "Jeane Meara."

The older woman blinked once, then joy flooded her face, bringing it to life. "Jeane! Oh, my God. It's been—how long?"

"Twenty-two years."

Dale shook her head. "So long. But you're looking good. How are you?"

"The question should be how are you?" There was a chair standing against the wall. Jeane pulled it up closer to the bed and Dale and sat down. "I saw you on the news with the fire."

"Oh."

Dale's face looked a little bit lost. It was an expression Jeane had seen before, back when she'd been doing arson investigations. No one ever knew what to do in the aftermath of a fire. She reached out and took one of Dale's hands in hers.

Dale tensed a little, then relaxed and continued, "I'm fine, I suppose. I feel a little wheezy, and the police were by earlier. Apparently the only damage to my apartment is a lot of smoke. They said we should be able to go back in a couple of days. I'm insured, and I've already talked to my broker. The insurance will cover a hotel. Everything will be fine."

Jeane smiled. "I'm glad to hear that."

She gave Dale's hand a squeeze. It felt very odd to be meeting her again. Jeane wasn't sure what to say. The whole

way over, she had focused on what her birth mother might need from her. Now it appeared that everything had already been taken care of. What else was there? Except . . .

Jeane looked down at her hand and Dale's, squeezed together. "You know," she said, "I've never forgotten what you told me, but I'm not eighteen anymore. I'd really like to get to know you better."

"Ah. Um . . . Jeane?" Dale's voice was hesitant and she gently tugged her hand away.

Jeane glanced up. The lost expression was gone from Dale's face, replaced by one of genuine confusion. The older woman gave her an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry," Dale said. "It's always embarrassing to ask this, but I have to be honest—where exactly do I know you from?"

Jeane froze. "Excuse me?"

The woman in the bed gave her a very awkward look. "You know how it is. You run into somebody, and they know you, but you can't remember them at all and it's really, really embarrassing. I was hoping something you'd say would jog my memory, but . . ." She shrugged. "Sorry," she said again.

"Oh, God. Oh, dear God." Jeane couldn't move. Her spine, her hips, her knees—everything felt locked. Her face was burning with shame. She wanted to get out of the chair, wanted to flee the hospital room, but she just couldn't move. She should have listened to the woman at the information desk. She should have listened to McCain. She shouldn't have come to the hospital. She had never felt more deeply ashamed in her life, and she had never known less what to do next.

It *was* the wrong woman.

Shelley Brooks leaned forward and touched her arm. "Are you all right?"

The touch broke Jeane out of her shock. "Yes," she said, standing up. "I am so sorry. I thought you were someone else

and that maybe she had changed her name because I was just so certain you were her.”

There were tears flooding her eyes and snot clogging her nose, and Jeane was absolutely sure that she didn't have anything even remotely resembling a tissue. All she could think about was getting out. She managed a wet, wobbly grin as she stumbled back away from the bed.

“You've probably never even been to Cleveland.”

She spun around. The door seemed a mile away. She could hear Shelley as if in the distance, calling her name.

And shouting out “Gail Churchill!”

Jeane froze for a second time and turned around very slowly. The room was silent. All of the people in the other beds and all of their visitors were staring at her and at Shelley. Shelley knelt on the end of her bed, sheets and blankets tangled around her legs. She was staring at Jeane.

“Gail Churchill,” she said again. “Your mother's name was Gail Churchill.”

She slid back and sat again as Jeane returned to the bedside. For long moments, neither of them said anything. The volume in the room swelled up around them once more.

Finally, Jeane said, “Her name was Dale.”

Shelley blinked and nodded. “Yes. That was it.”

The silence became awkward again before Jeane took a long breath and asked, “What's going on? Are you Shelley Brooks?” The woman in the bed nodded. “What do you know about Dale Churchill?”

“I know that I did a very bad thing to a young woman twenty years ago.” She sighed and patted the bed. “Sit down, Jeane.”

She didn't want to. She didn't want to give up the power of standing over this woman. She sat anyway. Shelley took her hands, folding them tightly in her own.

“I'm an actress,” she said. “*Was* an actress. Twenty-two years ago was not the easiest time for me. I was out of the

range where I could act young parts and not old enough to get the mature parts. I was living in LA, working a restaurant job trying to make ends meet. One day, this guy comes up to me and asks me if I can do a job for him. One-time gig. The money he was offering was more than I'd get at the restaurant in six months. Nothing dirty, nothing illegal.” Shelley sighed again. “He'd even pay for the plane flight to Cleveland.”

The wall beside the bed was blank. Jeane stared at it numbly. “He hired you to play the part of Dale Churchill.”

“I only played it once, Jeane. For you. He gave me the whole role: what I needed to say, what the background was. All I had to do was make sure you stayed with your parents by turning you away from Dale Churchill.” Shelley looked down and rubbed Jeane's hands. “When I saw you come into that diner, I almost lost it. You looked so nervous and hopeful. Going through with it was probably the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. The whole way through I thought I was going to bomb.”

“I believed you.”

Shelley gave a bitter little laugh. “Best acting of my life, and the job I hated the most. I'm sorry, Jeane.”

What the hell was she supposed to say? Jeane squeezed her hand back without saying anything. This time silence seemed proper—the right thing—instead of awkward. The tears in her eyes went away slowly. This wasn't Shelley's fault. She had just been doing a job. There was, however, someone else involved.

Jeane broke the silence and asked, “Shelley, can you tell me anything about the man who hired you?”

“God damn,” said Shelley. “You're a cop.”

Jeane had to smile. “Close enough.”

She took a deep breath and reached into her pocket for her notebook. This felt good. This was familiar territory to her. The investigation. The hunt. Maybe this was the way she

should have approached the whole thing right from the beginning.

She shifted around to face Shelley and asked, "What do you remember?"

There wasn't much in Shelley's story that could help twenty years later. The name the man had given her had been fake—Shelley had sensed that immediately. The man had been old, probably in his early sixties. White. Balding badly, grey beard, great big hatchet of a nose. He had paid cash for everything. Educated, to judge from the way he talked.

"Nice clothes, though," Shelley added. "Nice car, too—Lincoln Continental Mark V, 1979 Collector's Series in navy blue. They had Tom Selleck in the ads for them. You probably wouldn't remember that."

"You'd be surprised," murmured Jeane, fighting to keep a growl of disappointed frustration out of her voice. "Shelley, if this guy gave you a fake name, why did you agree to do the gig?"

"Money," sighed Shelley. "Plus I had the license number of the car, and everybody around work had got a real good look at the guy, so I figured if there was any trouble, the police could track him down. But he sounded so sweet and desperate, I wasn't really all that worried. He needed this done so bad it was touching. You could hear it in his voice. As soon as I said I'd do it, he was bouncing off the walls. First thing he did was use the payphone in the restaurant to make a long-distance call." Her face shifted and her voice dropped in imitation of an exuberant old man. " 'I've found someone. She's going to do it, Stan!' "

The plastic of Jeane's pen bent sharply and snapped. "Stan?" she asked, struggling to keep her voice level. "You're sure he said 'Stan'?"

Shelley nodded emphatically.

No. It was a coincidence. It had to be. Jeane strained

for a moment, then added, "Did you have a contact in Cleveland?"

Shelley shook her head. "No, only you." She frowned and reached for a box of tissues. "Jeane, there's ink leaking from your pen."

"I know," Jeane said tightly.

She accepted the tissues, yanking out handfuls of them to scrub the blue blotches on her hands before wadding them up around the pen. She stuffed the puffy ball back into the empty tissue box.

"Shelley, one last question: did you ever find out anything about the real Dale Churchill?"

"Oh." Shelley blinked and looked honestly sad. "I'm sorry, Jeane, but I guess I didn't make it clear. As far as I could tell, the man who hired me made everything up. I don't think there ever was a Dale Churchill."

If there was a downside, Jeane decided, to having thrown herself into her work with the Hoffmann Institute, it was that she had very few close friends in Chicago—not that she'd had many close friends in Washington, D.C., either. She simply wasn't the type of person to make friends easily. Most of the time, that didn't bother her at all.

Except that now she needed to talk.

After a last, uncomfortable round of apologies and forgiveness, she had left Cook County Hospital in the kind of unstoppable, unrelenting fury that was more typical of natural disasters. She needed to let it all out. To complain to someone who would, even if they didn't understand, at least listen to her rants. And while she would not normally have hesitated before going to Ngan or McCain with those rants, they were more than likely still in the meeting that she had absented herself from.

That really only left one other person, and as much as she found Ned Devromme odious on any number of levels, she could at least respect him and count him as a friend.

She slammed through the door of his shop so fast that the normally laconic Kaz let out a frightened squawk and fell off his stool.

“Where’s Ned?”

Kaz pointed to the back of the store and Ned’s apartment with a trembling hand. Jeane went back. This time she didn’t even bother to knock. Ned was just getting up from a patched, overstuffed armchair.

“Jeane—”

There was a jacket lying nearby. Somewhere along the line, she realized, her plans had changed. She didn’t just need someone to talk to. She snatched up the jacket and flung it at Ned.

“Get packed,” she snapped. “You’re coming with me to Ohio.”

He caught the jacket. “Why?” he asked simply.

“Because,” Jeane seethed, “I’m going to need someone there to restrain me when I try to kill my father.”

chapter T H R E E

Van wasn’t in his University of Chicago residence room when Ngan called to tell him of Lily’s decision. He left a message with Van’s roommate with instructions for Van to call him. The young man promised to pass the message on but Ngan had his doubts: the background noise of the dormitory seemed far too loud and rowdy to ensure the safe transmission of even the simplest message. Then again, when he had been Van’s age, he had been living in the ordered tranquility of the Monastery of Inner Light, surrounded by the stark perfection of the Himalayas. Most aspects of American life struck him as too loud and rowdy.

Before he put the telephone down, he dialed Jeane’s cell phone number once more and her home phone number. In the first case, a pleasant, if artificial voice, told him politely that the subscriber was unavailable. In the second, Jeane’s own voice told him

much the same thing, only far less politely. Ngan stifled a sigh and returned the handset of his phone to its cradle before closing his eyes for a moment. He wasn't worried about Jeane. He wasn't worried about Van.

He was worried about Lily Adler.

He had known Lily for a long, long time. He had known her when they were both fresh-faced recruits, as young as Michael McCain was now. He had watched her grow into her place in the Hoffmann Institute and advance through its ranks. He was, Ngan thought, one of the very few people in the Institute or outside of it whom Lily trusted completely. He knew her inside and out.

He didn't think he'd ever seen her look quite so concerned before, not for him, not for any other agent.

While there was certainly danger in their assignment, Ngan couldn't see that it was any worse than some of the other missions they had faced. It certainly couldn't be that dangerous if Lily wasn't willing to keep Van off of it. Orders from her superiors or not, Lily didn't send her agents—even the least of them—into situations she didn't think they could handle.

Or perhaps it wasn't the assignment at all.

Something stirred dark suspicions inside him. Not so long ago he had suggested to McCain and Jeane that there might be a leak in the security with which the Hoffmann Institute surrounded itself. Information that should have been secret was too often in the hands of those agencies to which the Hoffmann Institute considered itself opposed. Or at least to which Ngan considered it opposed.

What if there was something more? What if his vague, disloyal suspicions were true? What if Lily knew something and was afraid for him because of it?

What if he was simply slipping into the mad paranoia that the Institute itself so often investigated?

A shadow loomed over his desk, bringing his wandering

imagination back, and Ngan opened his eyes. "Taking a quick meditation break?" McCain asked, looking down on him. "Penny for your thoughts."

"Van's not in," Ngan told him quickly. "Nor can I reach Jeane."

Until he knew more about what was disturbing Lily, secrecy was the best policy. There was no need to worry McCain. His partner would be on his toes with or without additional warning.

McCain's nose crinkled up in disappointment. "I hate to say it, but maybe we should get started now. Renfield doesn't sound like the kind of person I'd want running around my backyard any longer than necessary." He perched himself on the edge of Ngan's desk. "The logical place to start is the nut house she ran away from."

"I believe 'mental health center' is the preferred term, Michael," Ngan pointed out. He flipped open the slim assignment file Lily had given them. "Elgin Mental Health Center, Elgin, Illinois. It's a relatively short drive from here." He looked up at McCain. "We may have trouble getting in though: the Hoffmann Institute has no contacts inside the center."

"Piece of cake."

Ngan gave him a doubtful look. "Michael, you are very good at talking your way into places, but this is an institution that is used to keeping a secure facility, has just had an escape, and is likely to have a few police around looking into the matter. Simply walking in with a smile is not likely to be successful."

"Ah, but Ngan" replied McCain, reaching across the desk to his phone. "It's not the guys you know, it's the guys the guys you know know." He set the telephone to speaker mode and punched in a number, then sat back. "And I happen to know someone who knows a surprising number of people in the medical community."

The phone rang twice before it was picked up on the other end. “Doctor Doyle,” said a woman’s voice, professional and crisp.

“Hi, kitten,” answered McCain. “Who’s your daddy?”

“Fitz!” Shani Doyle managed to sound both scandalized and reprimanding at the same time. “I’m at work!”

McCain rolled his eyes. *No fun*, he mouthed silently to Ngan, then said aloud, “So am I, Shani. Say hello to Ngan.”

“Hello, Ngan,” said Shani. “Could you find a cold shower and throw Fitz in it for me, please?”

Ngan leaned a little toward the phone. “I’m sorry,” he said with a smile, “but I wouldn’t want to step in the way of romance.”

“Too bad. Where’s Jeane? I’m sure she’d be glad to do it.”

“She’s not here,” McCain replied hastily, and Ngan’s smile grew wider.

He was sure Jeane would have been only too glad to enact Shani’s vengeance for her. Shani Doyle was a friend to the entire team and an ally of the Hoffmann Institute—in fact, she had been the one who’d tipped the Institute off to the events centered around Bachelor’s Grove Cemetery.

“We did call for a reason, Shani,” McCain continued. “We need your help.” Shani gave a noise of sarcastic disbelief and Fitz grimaced. “I’ve told Ngan you know people. Don’t disappoint me. We need a contact in the Elgin Mental Health Center.”

“Is that all? Olivia Marquez.”

Ngan started as soon as she said the name and reached for the folder Lily had given them. “*Dr. Olivia Marquez?*”

“Yes,” Shani said with a hint of suspicion. “We went to med school together at UCLA. I went into neurology, Ollie went into psychiatry. Why?”

Ngan found the page in the folder where he had seen the name and showed it to McCain. It was a recent psychiatric assessment of Lisa Renfield—signed by Dr. Olivia Marquez.

“Well, well,” murmured McCain. “Isn’t that convenient? So, Shani, think you could talk your old friend into speaking with a couple of fine gentlemen about one of her patients?”

They were on the road to Elgin within two hours. Shani had managed to get hold of Olivia Marquez. They had spent, she had told McCain, a good while reminiscing and catching up, but Shani had eventually brought the conversation around to the reason she called. A friend of hers worked for the law firm of Bodi, Aaron, and Barry—the same law firm where Lisa Renfield had worked before her breakdown. The partners at the firm had heard of Renfield’s escape and were concerned that she might pose a danger to the company or, more importantly, to them. The police investigation, they felt, would move too slowly to protect them. Two investigators regularly employed by the firm were standing by. Could Olivia spare the time to talk to them and answer their questions?

Olivia had bought the cover. Now the rest was up to him and Ngan.

As they sped along US Route 20 toward Elgin, McCain listened while Ngan read the case file out loud once more. Much of the Institute’s information on Lisa Renfield was disappointingly thin for someone with such a checkered history. The most interesting part of the file was the report filed by the agents who had looked into the initial cause of Renfield’s insanity, classifying the event as a “class four manifestation of and communication with a xeniform of ultraterrestrial origin, uncontrolled.”

“Class four?” he asked Ngan.

The old man frowned into the folder. “The deliberate interaction with paranormal forces.” When McCain gave him a blank look, he added, “Renfield knew exactly what she was dealing with. Uncontrolled means—”

“I can guess.” McCain turned back to the road. “That would be the part where Renfield stopped knowing exactly what she was dealing with.”

Jargon-filled descriptions aside, the investigators had turned up a blank on whatever it was that had attacked Renfield and her circle. The occult paraphernalia left behind had pointed toward ritual dealings with minor beings who should not have had the power to break Renfield’s magic. The investigators’ conclusion was that Renfield had unwittingly made contact with something stronger than she could handle. Beyond the effects of the entity on Renfield and her circle, the physical signs of its manifestation—furniture tumbled about, walls and surfaces blistered by some kind of acidic spray, a burning odor in the air—had been too generic to aid in identification. In the end, it had been the investigators who had recommended keeping a watch on the institutionalized Renfield.

McCain shuddered as Ngan closed the case file. “Xenofoms, and demons, and ultraterrestrials, oh my!”

“Not precisely a professional assessment, Michael,” said Ngan with a smile.

“It’s hard enough keeping the terminology straight.”

“We’ve encountered examples of two of the three,” Ngan pointed out. “Xenofoms are any creatures outside the range of normal human experience. The creature Ylem in Washington, D.C., was a xenofom, as was the homunculus Nichts that you befriended in Camp Clarity. Ultraterrestrials are xenofoms with origins in dimensions of space-time parallel to our own—the entities we encountered while in the company of Luther Blisset being a particularly exotic variety. Demons are commonly ultraterrestrials of an arcane and malevolent nature.”

McCain made a face. “Somehow saying ‘malevolent ultraterrestrial’ doesn’t sound as silly as saying ‘demon.’ ”

“Use it if you prefer. The creature behind the label remains

the same.” Ngan reached into the backseat for McCain’s briefcase and slipped the file into it. “When you see Shani, please congratulate her for me on getting us into Elgin. She’s a resourceful woman.” He glanced over at McCain. “You two have been together for a year now, haven’t you?”

“A year last week,” McCain confirmed. He couldn’t help laughing though. “Don’t go throwing rice, Ngan. It’s not like we’re married.”

“Still, a year.” Ngan didn’t turn away. “I know there was a long period of your life where it didn’t seem like I was around, but I did hear all about you from your parents. This is the longest you’ve ever had a steady relationship, isn’t it?”

McCain turned for a moment and looked back at him. They had known each other for a long time. Ngan was friends with McCain’s parents, both former Hoffmann agents, and had been a sufficiently frequent visitor to the McCain household that he had acquired the nickname of “Uncle Again.” Knowing that Ngan and his parents had been keeping such close tabs on his romantic relationships over the years, though . . . McCain turned back to the road and commented, “I did play the field, didn’t I?”

“Putting it mildly, yes.”

“And that left you, Mom, and Dad a little worried, didn’t it?”

Ngan didn’t answer. At least not right away. After a minute of silence, he looked down at his fingers. “There are aspects of behavior,” he said, “that are the product of nature—genetics—and there are aspects that are the product of nurture—upbringing. While you were growing up, everyone tried to ensure that nurture would have the upper hand, but when you began exhibiting certain tendencies and . . . well, appetites, we started to worry that . . .”

“The clone of JFK was going to be as bad as the original?” McCain reached across the seat and punched Ngan in the shoulder. “You know, that was one of things that really

worried me when I found out the truth. Here I was with a string of affairs like Christmas lights, not really thinking much of it, and suddenly I'm the twin of a man with enough of a reputation to decorate the tree on the White House lawn. And when you look at the rumors about Bobby, too . . ."

"Michael," Ngan said, "haven't you understood when I've tried to reiterate that you are *not* John F. Kennedy?"

McCain nodded as he changed lanes at the sign for Elgin Mental Health Center and turned off Route 20 for a smaller local road. "I understood, Ngan. I also know there's no one in control of my hormones but me. You, Mom, and Dad can stop worrying now. Shani Doyle is going to be the only woman in my life from now on."

Ngan looked at him with a little surprise. "That's a very admirable and mature position, Michael. I think your parents would be proud of you."

"I hope so!" McCain grinned. "Not that . . . Woah, Nelly!"

McCain wasn't exactly sure what he had been expecting of the Elgin Mental Health Center. Maybe a plain set of security gates by the road, with a chain link fence and a wide, featureless lawn surrounding a boxy institutional building.

Instead, a lane curved away from the road and through a set of ornamental gates. More functional gates and a fence were set well back and screened by bushes so that they blended into the landscaping of what seemed more like an estate than an asylum. Over it all loomed the hospital, an imposing nineteenth-century building of yellow brick that shone in a stray beam of late afternoon sunlight. A tall clock tower dominated a massive central block of three tall stories with a fourth tucked under the peaked, grey roof. From that central block, big wings swept back on both the left and right.

The effect lasted only just long enough for McCain to take it all in. Somewhere in the west, the clouds shifted and

the light faded. The glow vanished from the hospital and while it was still a vast, imposing structure, any elegance was gone. The building wore its years heavily. The yellow brick was old, stained dark in long patches by decades of water, dirt, cold, and heat. The peaked rooflines were sagging and crumbling around the edges. Some of the highest windows were boarded up, and the proud clock tower was frozen at two-thirty. The estate-like appearance of the grounds was an illusion as well. As they drove up to the guardhouse, McCain could see that the bushes were overgrown and skeletal, their leaves plucked by the season, while the landscaping was old, the product of work undertaken many, many years ago. The ornamental gates by the road were so new that the edges on the brick support pillars were sharp; the functional gates by the guardhouse hung from tall iron posts that, like the gates themselves, were harsh and rough.

A guard emerged as they pulled up to the inner gates, and McCain stuck his head out the window. "Mark Lambe and Matthew Kwon to see Dr. Olivia Marquez. She's expecting us."

The guard made a call from a phone inside his little booth, and a moment later the gates swung inward ahead of them.

The guard stepped back out of his booth and said, "Dr. Marquez will meet you in the front lobby. Visitor parking is to the left. Make sure you lock your car."

Even the worst renovations of recent years couldn't obliterate the noble sweep of columns and arches in the hospital lobby, though clearly the attempt had been made. The original doors had been carved out to make room for a set of ugly modern security doors, and nondescript, low-maintenance carpet hid whatever original floor had been laid down. The front desk was a hideous thing of plastic panels and brushed metal strips. Its unpleasant presence, however, was alleviated by the woman standing next to it.

She was petite, no taller than Ngan, but carried herself with an assurance that lent her significantly greater height. Her face was narrow, with high cheekbones and full lips. Dark hair fell in a no-nonsense bob that echoed her clothes—simple yet professional. Her eyes were dark, too. Recognition flickered in them as she looked up and saw McCain and Ngan. McCain stepped forward before she could say anything, holding out his hand in greeting.

“Dr. Olivia Marquez?”

“Mark Lambe?” She shook his hand Ngan’s in turn. “Mr. Kwon. Welcome to Elgin Mental Health Center—or just Elgin if you get tired of wrapping your mouth around the whole thing. If you’ll sign in, we’ll get you visitor badges, then we can sit down in my office and discuss your . . . needs.” McCain smiled back at her as he signed his assumed name to the visitor’s list. Perfect.

Olivia’s office was down a long, narrow corridor on the first floor. A corner of the office was clearly set up for consultations, with a big chair for Olivia and a comfortable couch for her visitors—or her patients, McCain realized as he sat at a gesture from her. Ngan took the other end of the couch. Olivia took the chair and considered them both for a moment.

Finally she said, “You both know that I’m talking to you as a favor for a friend. I’d also like to make it clear that certain things about Lisa Renfield are protected by doctor-patient confidentiality. I can’t and won’t answer certain questions.”

McCain gave her the same smile he had before. “Naturally. Of course, you realize that we may still try to get that information out of you.”

One corner of Olivia’s mouth twitched upward. “You’re welcome to try, Mr. Lambe.”

“Call me Mark.”

“I don’t think so.”

One point for Dr. Marquez, thought McCain as the psychiatrist turned to Ngan and asked lightly, “Would you care to try, Mr. Kwon?”

Ngan shook his head. “That won’t be necessary, Dr. Marquez.” He had a notepad and pen in his hand. “I’m here to record information. Mr. Lambe will direct the questions.”

Olivia’s eyebrows rose. “I didn’t realize I was on trial,” she commented, and Ngan looked down at his notepad coyly.

“A poor choice of words. I beg your pardon.” The old man looked to McCain. “Mr. Lambe?”

The ball was back in McCain’s court. He smiled at Olivia and asked, “Dr. Marquez, tell me about Lisa Renfield.”

Olivia’s pretty smile was just as relentless. “You’ll have to be a little more specific, I’m afraid. What precisely did you want to know?”

Behind his smile, McCain clenched his teeth. Olivia Marquez was a tough one. Maybe he had become complacent with the ease to which people accepted him and shared their confidence. It was, he supposed, a possibility, but there was also something about Dr. Marquez that put him on edge. He’d have to push a little harder.

“We already know about her background,” McCain said. “I’d like to know more about her state of mind. What can you tell me about her insanity?”

“Mental health, Mr. Lambe. Her mental health.” Olivia sat back in her chair, the smile fading into a cold line across her lips. “I’m afraid I can’t.”

“Well,” he snapped, “can you at least tell us if you think she’s a danger to our clients?”

He cursed himself as soon as the words were out of his mouth. That wasn’t the way to win someone over. Damn. What was it about her that was pushing his buttons?

To his surprise, however, the question seemed to catch her as well. Dr. Marquez hesitated, her eyes blinking rapidly. After a moment, she looked away and said, “Yes. She is.”

McCain seized the opening. “Could you elaborate on that, Dr. Marquez?”

Olivia bit her lip. “She’s a danger to everyone, Mr. Lambe.”

Her shield was back up. “How?” McCain demanded, jumping to his feet in frustration. “How is she—?”

As soon as Olivia looked up at him, dark eyes startled by his sudden movement, he knew what it was that was rubbing him the wrong way—and he knew that it wasn’t her. It was him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ngan giving him a quick, quizzical look. Probably wondering why he don’t move in for the kill, McCain knew. When was the last time he had tried to work information out of a beautiful woman? Out of any woman in fact. Not since a year ago. Not since he’d met Shani.

He was holding back, plying her with nothing more than the ghost of his charm and persuasion. This was the right moment to press Dr. Marquez. He could feel it, but he also knew what getting the answers he needed would require and that felt dangerously close to betraying Shani, especially when Olivia Marquez was her friend.

Come on, Fitz, he told himself, its okay. It doesn’t mean anything, it’s not like you’re actually going to do anything. It’s purely business. Shani will understand.

He held up his hands in peace. “Sorry.” He crouched down in front of Olivia so that they were looking directly into each others’ eyes. “Dr. Marquez,” he said, “I know you can’t tell us everything about Renfield, but we need to know something.” He spoke gently, almost flirtatiously, putting everything into the persuasion. He let himself go. For a moment, Olivia was the center of his world. He needed her help. He needed *her*. The resolve in her eyes wavered. “Why is she dangerous?”

“She’s . . .” Olivia threw up her hands. “Oh, sit down, Mark. You look ridiculous like that.” McCain stifled a grin of

triumph as he returned to his seat. Olivia continued. “Lisa Renfield’s case is somewhat odd on a number of levels. You have a description of her initial arrest? Her obsession with death and decay and her delusion that eight people disappeared the night she was found?” Olivia folded her arms as if she was cold. “After fifteen years of having her in our care, we’ve built up quite a history of that delusion. The detail is remarkable.”

McCain nodded. “So the delusions make her dangerous?” He wondered what Olivia would say if she knew the truth.

Olivia shook her head and uncrossed her arms. Her hands came up again, though this time they made a thoughtful steeple in front of her. Her voice shifted, too, becoming more confident.

“To understand Renfield,” she said, “you have to go back to her initial belief that she was confronted by a demon, the one responsible for the disappearance of her eight non-existent friends. During this encounter, Renfield claims that the demon showed her the full extent of time and its effects on the world. She describes it as like a river of decay. In her mind, she is the only one who understands the truth of the world and sees its future. Inevitably, that future is death and decay.”

Ngan looked up from scribbling on his notepad. “In a sense, Dr. Marquez, she is correct. Don’t all people understand the same thing on some level?”

“Unfortunately, Mr. Kwon, Renfield is consumed by it.” Olivia shifted uncomfortably. McCain gave her a curious glance, and she nodded. “Yes, Mr. Lambe, there’s more.” She sighed. “Some time ago, Renfield developed the belief that there was hope for her. That there was someone or something who was immune to the ravages of time and could protect her from the decay that was slowly reducing her to dust. In her own vision of the world, someone who stands outside of the river of decay. Whether this being could protect the rest of the world was moot—she was the one that mattered.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” McCain observed. “It’s almost like she’s taken religion.”

“Aside from the fact that she doesn’t couch it in religious terms, yes.” Olivia grimaced again. “Unfortunately, that belief has taken a turn for the worse. Renfield has been talking about seeking out her protector. Because she doesn’t know what form that protector will take, however, she also talks about the need to test potential candidates.”

Silence dropped over the room. “*That*,” McCain said finally, “sounds bad.”

“*That*, Mr. Lambe, is why she’s dangerous.” Olivia let her hands fall. “It’s also, I think, why she escaped.”

“Has there been any sign of what form this testing might take?” McCain asked with a certain dread.

Olivia shook her head. “Renfield never talked about it directly. I’m not even sure she knows.” She crinkled her nose. “I hope that answers your questions, gentlemen. I have the feeling I’ve already told you more than I should have.”

McCain cleared his throat. They weren’t quite finished yet. “Actually, Dr. Marquez, there were a couple of other things. We were hoping that you could show us the escape scene.”

One of Olivia’s eyebrows went up. If she was surprised at that, though, he couldn’t wait to see her reaction to the second request. It was time to pour on the Michael McCain charm.

He gave Olivia his best bashful, hang-dog look and said, “And we were wondering if you could give us a copy of her file.”

Olivia Marquez went rage pale. The color even bled out of her lips, so tightly were they pressed together. She stared at McCain, and that look and her silence were more eloquent than words could ever have been. The response didn’t really surprise him at all—he might as well have asked her to take Renfield’s place in one of Elgin’s cells.

McCain leaped into the silence brazenly, trying to head off whatever verbal outrage he could. “I’m sorry I even have to ask, Dr. Marquez, but there is a very good reason.”

“I very much doubt,” she said, “if it is good enough. No one is simply given a copy of a patient’s file. Even the police had to get the proper court order. You aren’t the police.”

“I know.”

“Then why ask?”

He looked up, catching her eyes. “Because one of our clients,” he improvised with absolute sincerity, “was having an affair with Renfield at the time of her breakdown. He’s afraid she’s going to come after him now that she’s escaped.”

“Your client,” observed Olivia, “should go to the police.”

“Which would mean revealing the affair. The scandal would destroy him.” Olivia began to comment on that, but McCain cut her off quickly. “It would destroy his family, too, and it’s them he’s most concerned about. Three young children and a psychopath stalking him?” He looked at Olivia soulfully. “He needs peace of mind, Dr. Marquez. If Renfield has forgotten him, he’s safe. If she’s been thinking about him all these years, he’ll go to the police for his family’s sake, but for his family’s sake he’d rather not. It all comes down to that file.”

He paused, waiting for his words to sink in—and sink in they did. Slowly, some color came back to Olivia’s face, red flares of color high on her cheek. “Does Shani Doyle know about this?” she demanded.

“No,” said Ngan from the far side of the couch. He had put away his notepad and was sitting with the rapt attention of a hunting bird. “She couldn’t be told.”

McCain would have breathed a sigh of relief if he could. Of course, Shani didn’t know about this particular aspect of their cover, but then until moments ago, neither had he. He was glad Ngan had picked up on the improvisation so swiftly as well.

McCain turned back to Olivia and said, "It's important, Dr. Marquez. We wouldn't ask otherwise."

"I . . ." Olivia began, then stopped. The color had spread on her cheeks. She rose, turning around her chair so that it was between her and the two agents. She looked at both of them again, then said firmly. "No. No, I can't give you Renfield's file."

"Dr. Marquez, please!" McCain appealed. What other angle was there that he could play? His mind raced—but only for a moment as Olivia held up a hand.

"I can't give you the file," she said. "I simply can't." As she spoke, however, she crossed the room to a filing cabinet and unlocked a drawer, pulling it out halfway. She turned back to McCain. Her eyes were hard with the frustration of someone who knew she was doing the wrong thing for the right reason. "If you'll come with me, Mr. Lambe, I can show you the scene of Renfield's escape, though perhaps Mr. Kwon would prefer to wait for us here. I must insist, however, that he stay away from the photocopier in the office next door."

She turned sharply and walked out. McCain shot Ngan a sharp glance of triumph, then dashed after Olivia. "Thank you," he murmured as he caught up to her.

"For what, Mr. Lambe?" She didn't look at him.

"For showing me the scene of the escape," said McCain.

Olivia turned her head just enough to look at him out of the corner of her eye. He gave her a warm smile that was as much flirtation as it was gratitude. When she turned away again, she was blushing.

She led him up an old stairwell smelling of wood polish and disinfectant to a heavy wood door that opened onto Elgin's second floor. The hallway beyond was cast in the shadows of after-hours. It was dead quiet.

"What part of the hospital is this?" McCain asked.

"Consultation and observation rooms, mostly." Olivia led him down the hall toward a room where a light was still

burning bright. "Dr. Wells—one of the missing men—had Renfield brought down here while her room was inspected for vermin."

McCain looked at the doors they were passing. Nothing there seemed to have been designed with much security in mind. "Why here?"

Olivia shrugged. "There was nowhere else. We're full, Mr. Lambe. Almost overcrowded. I suppose that Dr. Wells thought this would be as good a place as any. According to the maintenance crew who saw Renfield taken out of her cell, she was fully sedated and strapped securely to a gurney."

"If she was sedated and restrained, how did she get free?"

"That's the million dollar question, Mr. Lambe." She stopped in front of the brightly lit room, its door crisscrossed with yellow police investigation tape. "This is it."

McCain peered inside. Though a police team had already swept through the room and added their own peculiar orderly chaos to the scene, it was clear that some kind of struggle had taken place. The walls were bashed and dented by the impact of something large—something the size of a human body, perhaps. Sparse furnishings had been tossed around. A gurney still lay against the wall fairly close to the door. The metal legs were crumpled and twisted.

"That's what she was strapped to?" McCain asked and Olivia nodded. He stood back and looked up and down the hallway outside. They were alone. "Tell me if anyone is coming."

Before she could protest, he slipped under the police tape and into the room, scanning it for anything the police might have missed, especially anything that might have had paranormal significance. As far as he could tell, however, there was nothing. If there had been anything, it had probably been found. There weren't even marks on the floor to tell where

people might have scuffled. McCain frowned as he considered the floor, however, then knelt down and brushed his hand along the baseboard of one wall. It came away dusted with a light grey powder.

He held his hand out to Olivia and asked, "What's this?"

"I don't know. Fingerprint dust?"

"Not in just one place like this. And you don't use pale dust on a pale surface." He sniffed his hand. It smelled . . . dusty. Big surprise. He wiped his hand against an overturned chair and stepped back over to the door, pausing to examine the gurney. The thick old leather strap that would have fastened across a patient's chest had been burst right at the midpoint—not cut or torn, but burst. The ragged edge was discolored, and he touched it gingerly. Fragments of the leather crumbled in his fingers. When he brought them close to his nose, a lingering smell of vinegar assaulted his nostrils. Acid. Someone had weakened the strap with acid.

The description of the scene of Renfield's initial arrest fifteen years before echoed back to him. A description that included walls blistered by some kind of acidic spray. He looked from his fingers to the crumbling leather strap in disbelief.

"Damn," he whispered to himself.



chapter
4 O U R

Shouldn't we call first?" asked Ned.

"No," said Jeane.

"He might not be home."

"Then we wait for him," Jeane said.

She tightened her hands on the wheel of the rental car and took the last turn on the road from Cleveland to the suburb of Parma, Ohio. Her fingers ached. They had spent so much time clenched tight over the last several hours that it hurt to spread them wide.

She had given Ned only enough time to pack a few clothes before dashing over to her apartment to do the same thing. Then it had been a fast run out to O'Hare for tickets on the first available flight to Cleveland. They'd been forced to wait for almost an hour. It had nearly killed her. It had nearly killed Ned. She hadn't so much talked as snapped and had spent all of the waiting time pacing back and forth in the

departure lounge. The short plane ride hadn't been any better. Jeane was fairly certain she'd frightened the pale young flight attendant rather badly. The clerk at the car rental booth in the Cleveland airport had survived with just a minor shaking. Thank God they'd reached Cleveland after the evening rush hour was over or there might have been burning car wrecks littering the road all the way to Parma.

Ned had heard the story now. Jeane had shot it at him in sharp bursts of anger. Wisely, he had said nothing and she was grateful for that. The last thing she wanted to hear was some tired platitude of sympathy.

The neighborhoods they drove through started to take on an old familiarity. A lot had changed in Parma since she'd left, but a lot was still the same. She recognized streets and churches, parks and houses. They drove past the house where one of her childhood friends had lived. A big extension had been tacked onto the side. Half of the big trees that had shaded another street were gone, as was an old corner store on another street, replaced by a big chain video store.

Ned was looking around with interest. "Nice place to grow up," he commented. "Was there a factory outlet for white picket fences in town?"

"Shut up, Ned."

Virtually all of the trees on her old street were still there. None of the houses seemed to have changed. It looked just the same as it always did on her infrequent visits, except that this time, somehow, it felt like driving through a movie set. Fake.

She pulled over and parked in front of her parents' house. Her father's house, she corrected herself. She was never going to get used that. In a way, though, she was glad her mother wasn't there. Confronting her father alone was going to be hard enough. Jeane looked up at the little two-story house with its creamy-beige siding. The lights were on, and she could see the flicker of a television set through

the curtains of the living room. In spite of Ned's fears, her father was home.

For a moment, her anger slipped away. Was this the right way to do this? Her parents had always been so up front with her. Maybe Shelley had been wrong. Maybe . . .

Who was she fooling?

Jaws clenched like death, Ned hurrying after her, Jeane stalked up the cracked concrete front walk. She mounted the steps of the porch, and jammed her finger sharply against the door bell, then stepped back and waited. After a few moments, she caught the sound of movement in the hallway on the other side of the door, followed by the sharp click of locks opening. Then the door itself opened a crack. An eye peered out and blinked.

"Jeane!" The door opened all the way, and Stan Meara fumbled with the latch on the storm door. "What are you doing . . ."

His voice trailed away as he got a second look at the expression on her face and at Ned on the steps behind her. He swung the storm door wide so that they could come in but didn't say anything else.

The inside of the house was also much the same as Jeane remembered, maybe a little less neat without Rose to look after things. There was a stale old man smell in the air, and a small pile of shoes pouring out of the hall closet. The sounds of a basketball game drifted in from the living room. Jeane brushed past her father and went straight into the living room. She heard Ned murmur an introduction, but he received only a mild grunt of acknowledgment from her father as Stan turned after her.

"What's wrong, angel?" he asked from behind her back.

Jeane didn't want to turn around. She didn't want to face him. Fear fought anger in the pit of her stomach. She didn't wait to see which won. She forced herself to turn around and look at Stan. Her father was seventy-two years old. His hair

had gone grey years ago. His height had turned into a slight stoop, his broad shoulders had rounded, and his trim waist had expanded. She could still picture him as he had been on that awful day in Cleveland twenty years before. She had loved him so much that day. She hated him so much right now.

"I ran into Dale Churchill today, Dad. You remember her."

If it had taken Shelley Brooks several minutes to remember the name, it took Stan Meara no time at all. He sucked in a short, sharp breath of surprise and for just a moment his eyes went very, very wide. His struggle to recover was visible. He covered it—badly—by turning and searching for the nearest chair. Jeane remained standing. Ned stood by the door, barely inside. In the background, the home team scored a basket and the crowd went wild. Stan grabbed for the remote control and switched the television off. The silence was overwhelming.

"Yes," Stan said finally. "I remember her. How could I forget?"

"That's funny. She almost did." Jeane stepped closer to her father. "I had a talk with her, Dad. Her name's not Dale Churchill. Someone hired her to play the role for a day. She's not my mother."

The room lapsed back into silence for a long minute before Stan looked up at her again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His gaze and expression were steady—too steady. His eyes were fixed on her. There was a thin line of white around his lips where tension held the muscles tight. His voice was perfectly controlled. If there had been any doubt in Jeane's mind, Stan's lie killed it.

She could hear herself breathing, hard and fast. "No," she said thickly. "You do know. You do know!" She screamed the words. "What about Mom? Did Mom know, too?" Jeane reached down and grabbed her father by his

shoulders, dragging him to his feet. "Did she?" she demanded, giving him a hard shake.

"Jeane!" Ned thrust himself between them and forced them apart. Stan fell back in his chair.

There were tears in his eyes. Jeane gulped air. "Why, Dad? Why?"

"I . . ." He shook his head and looked away. "I can't tell you, Jeane." When she looked at him speechlessly, he only shook his head again. "I can't!"

Jeane stayed frozen for just a heartbeat, then spun sharply and walked out of the living room. Out of her father's house. Down the walk. She didn't look back.

"Jeane!" called Ned. She could hear his heavy footsteps as he ran to catch up with her. "Jeane, listen—"

"Shut up, Ned." She wrenched open the car door and climbed in. Ned scrambled for the passenger door, just barely making it in before she started the engine and pulled out into the street. He started to turn toward her, and she shot him a seething glare. "Don't say anything. I mean it."

There was a big hotel on the Cleveland side of town, and she drove there. The clerk at the desk gave her a knowing glance when she asked for two rooms. He blanched at the look she gave him in return and quickly handed over the room keys. Jeane led the way to the elevators. They waited in silence and rode up to their floor in silence as well. All the while, Jeane was aware of Ned beside her, just waiting to say something.

"What is it?" she asked finally as they stepped off the elevator.

"Your dad feels like shit."

"And I just feel like a bowl of cherries," Jeane snapped back. "Tell me something I don't know."

"No," Ned insisted, "I mean he really feels terrible. He loves you, Jeane, but he *can't* tell you what he knows. That's the truth."

Jeane paused outside the door to her room. “And how would you know?” she asked. Ned tapped his forehead. Jeane ground her teeth. “You used your ‘gifts’ on him?”

“You don’t have to be a bloodhound to smell burnt toast. I couldn’t help it—the emotions in the room were running a little high.”

“So you couldn’t just read his mind and find out what I wanted to know?”

“I can’t do that. My gifts don’t work that way.” Ned looked back at her. “But I can tell you this: your father wants to tell you what he knows, but he feels honor-bound to keep quiet.”

Jeane snarled. “Good for him.” She slid the card-key into the lock and pushed the door of her hotel room open. “I’m not waiting for his honor to bend. Get some sleep. Tomorrow we’re going to start hitting every record office in Parma and Cleveland until we find out who I really am.”

She let the door fall closed before Ned could respond. For a moment she just stood, drinking in the ordered quiet of the hotel room, then tossed her bag on the bed and went around to the plain beige phone on the bedside table. There was a call she had to make, and it wasn’t one she was looking forward to.

As she expected, Ngan was still at his desk in the Hoffmann Institute branch office in spite of the hour. His voice, when he answered, was as calm and orderly as the hotel room. “Ngan Song Kun’dren.”

“Ngan, it’s Jeane. I’m sorry I missed the meeting with Lily this afternoon.”

She fought to keep her voice calm, but something must have slipped through because concern crept into Ngan’s voice. “Are you well? Is everything all right?”

“No,” she told him bluntly. “Something has come up. Something personal. I’m going to need a few days off.” She crossed her fingers, hoping she knew Ngan well enough to anticipate his response.

The old man came through for her. “Of course.” He paused. “Where are you? Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No,” Jeane said again, “I can look after it. I have my cell phone. Call if there’s an emergency.” The unspoken message was, of course, *don’t call*. Fortunately, Ngan picked up on that, too.

“All right,” he replied, then added, “I hope everything works out for you, Jeane.”

“So do I, Ngan.” Jeane hung up the phone and stared out the hotel window at the lights of her old hometown.

Early dawn. Renfield stood in the shadows of a narrow alley between two quiet houses. A garbage truck was making its way up the street toward her, jerking and pausing as the crew tossed bags and emptied trash cans into the jaws of the compactor—like the hungry jaws of decay that were waiting for her.

No. The years of torment might be over soon. After an eternity of wandering Chicago’s streets, she had finally found someone with the potential to protect her.

She hadn’t thought it would be this difficult. It would have been ridiculous to think that all she had to do was walk out of Elgin and her protector would be there, but in a city as big as Chicago . . . somehow it felt like there should have been more people with the potential, a veritable infestation of them, like maggots. After she had abandoned Doctor Alec’s car, she’d wandered the Magnificent Mile and the Loop for hours.

No one. No potential protectors. It made her want to scream, but no, she couldn’t do that. She had to be quiet and careful if she didn’t want to be found and taken back to Elgin.

She went looking for a man she had known before the institution, someone whose filthy secrets she could use to force him to hide her. He was gone, unfortunately, probably rotting in a shallow grave somewhere. Even the place where he had worked was succumbing to decay. It would do for a hiding place, though. She had slept for an hour or two, but memories forced her awake and back into the streets to continue her search. Her protector was out there somewhere, just waiting for the test.

She followed the garbage truck for almost an hour before she realized why. The driver.

A shifting inside her coat brought her attention back. “Soon,” she whispered, slipping a hand inside to stroke the creature until it purred. It could sense her need just as she could sense the garbage man’s potential. Both of them were eager.

The truck drew closer, and she caught another look at her possible protector through the windshield. Earlier glimpses had shown him to be a stocky man, slightly younger than her but looking older. Now, in spite of the morning’s chill, he pulled off his cap and wiped sweat from his greasy brow.

The man who clung to the back of the truck gave a wordless shout as the vehicle pulled up beside an especially large pile of garbage bags—more than one man could handle easily. Of course. Renfield had run ahead of the truck and pushed several smaller piles together for just that purpose. Just as she had hoped, the driver opened the door and swung down from the cab to give his partner a hand.

“Now,” she said. She pulled the length of the creature out of her jacket, holding its fat, hairless body up so that she stared into the bright black pits of its eyes. “Test him. I’ll take care of the other one.”

The creature purred again, eager.

Renfield burst from the shadows while both men were bent over the garbage, dashing across lawn and sidewalk

and street. The creature was already thrashing. She released it near the truck’s front fender, then sprinted around the front of the truck to its far side, even faster. The testing was for no eyes except hers. She had a good length of scrap wood ready. She raised it.

On the far side of the truck, the driver choked in sudden shock. His partner, to the truck’s rear, looked up just in time to present her with a perfect target. The length of wood fell, driving him down. Renfield tossed it into the back of the truck and stepped around the side.

The creature lay on the ground, wriggling obscenely on the pavement, cold and waiting for the warmth of her body. It mewled pitifully, but Renfield didn’t move.

The garbage truck driver was gone. Renfield could have cried.

He had failed the test. He hadn’t been her protector after all.

The certainty of death and the memory of rotting alive rocked through her in a wave and left her gasping. There was no time for disappointment. She scooped up the creature, tucked it into her coat once more, and put the truck behind her. She had to find her protector.

chapter

5 I V E

M

McCain lay still, watching Shani sleep in the morning sun that filtered through her bedroom window. Her face was at ease, surrounded by a few stray wisps of the long, thick hair she pulled back every night. She had, as usual, stolen the majority of the deep purple sheets during the night. They were bundled tightly around her, one corner clutched in the hand she held close to her mouth and nose. It was the sweetest, most innocent of poses, and he felt sometimes that he could just watch her sleep for hours.

Not today.

He slid out of the bed without waking her and crossed into the bathroom. He showered with the soft, silky soap that she preferred and the special shampoo that smelled vaguely of apples. The same soap and shampoo resided in his shower as well. He had a comb and a razor in her medicine cabinet, and when he dried off, he used the towel from the rack

that he'd come to consider "his." Back out in the bedroom, he dressed from the drawer that held a selection of his clothes, pulling a suit from the corner of the closet that Shani had allotted to him.

When he turned back to the bed, she had her eyes open. McCain knelt down beside the bed and kissed her forehead. She slipped an arm out from under the sheets and around his neck, drawing him down for a longer kiss.

"Can't you stay for a while longer?" she murmured.

"Duty calls, ma'am." He stood. "Of course, I don't have a late shift to work at a hospital tonight."

She groaned and pulled the sheets over her head. "Get out!"

He laughed, blew her a kiss, and got.

Inside the elevator on the way to the ground floor he finally allowed himself to relax. For the first time in his life, McCain blessed an early morning meeting—he didn't think he could have stayed around Shani for even ten minutes more, not without suffering from massive attacks of guilt.

He couldn't get Olivia out of his head.

McCain slumped back against the mirrored wall of the elevator. It was as though forcing himself to really work at charming Dr. Marquez yesterday had opened a floodgate. Ever since he and Ngan had left Elgin—the old man with a bundle of papers still warm from the photocopier under his arm—Olivia had been with him. His mind kept drifting back to her, to the flirtations that had teased information out of her.

It hadn't helped that when he arrived at Shani's, he had found her in the mood for nostalgia. Her conversation with Olivia had roused a desire for the good old days and she had pulled out yearbooks, pointing out photographs of old friends from high school, college, and medical school. Unfortunately, Olivia seemed to feature heavily in that nostalgia. Even worse, the yearbooks had reminded him too much of

his own school days—and the girls he had known then and after. To his deep shame, *they* had come back, too, and if he couldn't recall all of their names, their faces and bodies haunted him. Even with Shani cuddled up against him in the dark, he found himself remembering one of the cheerleaders from when he had been on the high school football team. And a girl from his freshman year at Harvard. And a long, exhausting weekend in upstate New York after he'd passed the bar.

The elevator jerked and slowed to a stop. The doors opened on the ground floor, and McCain took a deep breath, nodding nonchalantly to the security guard in the lobby as he strolled out toward the visitor parking and his car. Nothing is wrong, he told himself. Shani is still the one. Everything is perfectly normal. Remembering old flings is natural. This happens to lots of guys . . .

Lots of guys who weren't cloned from genetic stock notorious for its sexual appetites.

McCain clenched his teeth. Enough! He took another deep breath, forced all possible thoughts of women and sex out of his head, and got into his car.

The drive from Shani's apartment to the multicultural neighborhood of Devon Avenue where Ngan lived was a short one. The old man was waiting in the usual spot on a street corner. McCain had never actually seen Ngan's home, and he had a sneaking suspicion that his partner preferred it that way. That was good enough for McCain—especially when Ngan's waiting place was just outside an incredible little coffee shop, and Ngan was always waiting with two steaming cups in his hands. McCain reached across the seat and popped the passenger door open for him.

"Gooooo morning," he said with the first real cheer he had felt since waking up.

"I'd find that more sincere, Michael," Ngan observed as he passed one cup to McCain and climbed in himself, "if I

knew it were being directed at me and not the coffee."

"It is," McCain assured him before drinking deep. "Ahhhh . . ." He pulled back out into traffic, angling for Lake Michigan and southbound Lake Shore Drive.

Ngan gave him a warm smile as he sipped at his own cup. "Are you ready for an exciting day of reading over medical records?" he asked, tapping his free hand against the heavy bag he carried slung over one shoulder.

"I think the question should be 'is Van ready,'" McCain laughed. They had gotten in touch with him the night before. As McCain had expected, Van had been overwhelmingly excited by the prospect of doing actual work for the Hoffmann Institute, even if it was something as unglamorous as sifting through Renfield's long medical file. Better three of them reading the long reports than just two, though.

The young man, dressed in a suit and tie almost as sharp as McCain's own, was waiting for them when they pulled up outside his dorm on the University of Chicago campus.

"Good taste in clothes," McCain complimented him as he climbed into the back seat.

"Everybody kept asking if I was going to a funeral. I told them it was an interview for a part-time job." Van leaned forward, resting his arms on the front seats and poking his head between them. "Hey, have you guys seen the news this morning?"

Ngan shook his head, as did McCain. Between rushing out of Shani's apartment and talking with Ngan on the drive, he hadn't so much as turned on the radio or glanced at a newspaper box. "What happened?" he asked, almost dreading the answer.

"Big weirdness on the west side. Some kind of attack on a garbage truck around dawn this morning. Police are investigating. There's not much information, but it looks like there's something getting covered up." Ngan raised his eyebrows questioningly and Van grinned as he settled back

into the seat. “Hey, I’ve spent enough time around you people now to know when there’s more going on than meets the eye.”

“Jeane always did say you were perceptive,” McCain grumbled, heading back out onto the road. “Unfortunately, we’ve got an active assignment—we can’t go chasing every bit of weirdness.”

“Even if the weirdness is related?”

Ngan twisted around in his seat to look at the young man, while McCain had to content himself with a startled glance in the rearview mirror.

“Why do you think the incident is related to our assignment, Van?” Ngan asked.

Van’s grin grew wider. “First off, one of the crew on the garbage truck is missing. The police are saying kidnapped, but the news kept saying ‘vanished into thin air.’ Between him and your guys out at the mental hospital, there’s an awful lot of that going on suddenly. Second, there was a van there with Elgin Mental Health Center on the side. Third . . .” His grin shifted a bit, and McCain caught the signs of a faltering confidence. “Well, I just have this feeling. Ned’s been telling me to listen to those feelings, and this time I am.”

“Good advice,” said Ngan, “though it takes long practice to distinguish a true premonition from the rationalizing of a decision already made.” Van’s face fell completely at the old man’s words but Ngan smiled reassuringly. “Don’t be disappointed, Van. Doubt must temper every talent. And I think your first two observations are reason enough for us to investigate. Do you know where this attack took place?”

Van brightened considerably and pulled a slip of paper from his pocket. He passed it forward to McCain.

“Good kid.” McCain glanced back and nodded at Van in the rearview mirror. “Don’t worry. It takes a while to get used to Ngan.”

The frosty look from Ngan made McCain laugh, and he

realized that somewhere his worries about Shani had melted away. The quick intensity of an active investigation—not just paper-pushing—had already taken over, and it felt good.

McCain flipped his cell phone out of his pocket and passed it back to Van. “Time to start working, then. Let’s dial up the central office and see if Emma happens to have more information for us. . . .”

After a brief consultation with the Institute’s computer network, Emma was able to report its media monitors had begun tracking the incident when it appeared on the news—the presence of the Elgin van had, in fact, already been noted and logged. If the team had made it into the office, they would have found a message regarding the link to their case waiting for them. Beyond that, however, there was nothing to report. The agents’ involvement would shift monitoring to active and begin the skimming of information from a variety of sources including police communications, but until something showed up there, McCain and Ngan *were* the primary sources on the scene. McCain was left staring at the cell phone in his hand and feeling as though he been handed a plastic cup and instructed to fill it.

The street on which the attack had occurred had been closed to traffic, but that hadn’t stopped a murmuring crowd of spectators from gathering. There were three police cruisers on the scene, and McCain was willing to bet that there was at least one unmarked car. The van from Elgin was still present as well, two drivers in warm jackets over hospital whites standing around idly. The focus of the crowd’s attention, however, was the garbage truck pulled over to one side of the street, cordoned off by bright yellow swatches of crime scene tape.

“There was an ambulance here earlier,” whispered Van,

“and more police. I saw it on TV. They were trying to keep the TV reporters from asking people too many questions.”

“Interesting,” Ngan murmured.

He moved into the crowd, slipping through the press of bodies with an ease that left McCain and Van shoving along behind him. When they caught up to him, he was standing at the leading edge of the crowd, only a few feet from a fresh-faced young officer doing his best to keep the crowd well back from the yellow tape.

Ngan made a small, concealed gesture and said, “Look at the side of the truck.”

McCain stared and, after a moment looking at the grubby metal, spotted what Ngan was pointing at: something had splattered the truck, leaving the paint discolored and blistered. McCain had mentioned the apparent use of acid in Renfield’s escape to Ngan, and the old man had, like him, immediately made the connection to the acidic spray described in the old report on Renfield. Was this more acid?

McCain gave Ngan a skeptical look. “It’s a garbage truck,” he said. “That could be anything.”

“What about that then?” Van asked, grabbing McCain’s sleeve and pointing. The motion was obvious, and more than a few people besides McCain and Ngan turned to look. McCain brushed Van’s hand down gently.

“Easy,” McCain said. “Remember, we’re just regular people having a look-see.”

He followed Van’s briefly outstretched arm and saw that the black asphalt under the side of the truck was pale with what looked like ashes, maybe something the garbage men had spilled. It might have been concentrated once, but a light breeze had shifted it and people had been walking through it all morning. It was all over the street, a fine film punctuated by heavier footprints. The crowd-control officer near them had some clinging to his shoes and to the hem of his pants. Under the guise of adjusting his own shoes, McCain knelt

down and took a somewhat closer look. The dust was very fine—and distinctly grey. Just like the dust he’d seen in the observation room at Elgin.

McCain stood up and said, “Good eye, Van.”

Ngan was looking at the dust, too. “What is it?”

“I don’t know.” McCain brushed his hands off. “But there’s a lot more of it than there was at Elgin, and it looks like it was at least initially all in one spot. I—hey!”

His words were cut off as a large man in a leather coat pushed his way through the crowd. He was tall, with broad shoulders and short black hair, and he shoved right in between McCain and Ngan without even glancing at them.

McCain glared after him and snapped, “Watch it!”

He might have added more, but the man ducked under the yellow police line, then looked behind him as if searching for a gnat in the air. His eyes flickered across McCain for a moment before he simply turned away and headed over to one of the police cruisers. McCain ground his teeth together in annoyance.

“Asshole, isn’t he?”

It was a woman’s voice, just behind him and on his right, the other side from Ngan and Van. The words came out deep and rich, like a radio voice. Reporter, McCain thought immediately.

“I’d say so,” he said lightly, and turned around.

Radio? Television! The woman smiled at him and light could have flashed off her teeth. She was tall, easily as tall as the pushy cop, and trim like an athlete. Her face was full, but not too round, lightly colored by time spent outdoors in the wind and sun. Her hair, also touched by the sun, was golden-brown and shoulder length. If she wasn’t in television news, she should have been.

She blew Olivia Marquez and every other woman he had known straight out of his head, leaving only thoughts of Shani struggling weakly for attention. With a conscious

effort, McCain focused back on the investigation. There was no camera crew with the woman, though, nor did she appear to have a tape recorder with her—maybe she was a print journalist. In any case, she might have some useful information. He let his face settle into an expression of mild concern with just the hint of a friendly smile.

“You’d think the police would try to be a little more personable. Especially,” he added with a wave that encompassed the scene, “when it looks like they’re running on empty and need witnesses.” He turned the wattage of his smile up a bit. “Any idea what’s going on?”

She smiled back. “A bit.”

As she recapped the same basic information Van had heard on the news, McCain saw Ngan draw the young man a discrete distance away. Good man, McCain thought, give me some room to work. He focused his gaze on the woman’s face, listening intently and nodding at all the right places. Her manner was easy and open—information poured from her like she had written the news herself. He had her hooked, McCain knew. When she had finished, he drew breath to make a more formal introduction. She beat him to it.

“By the way,” she said, sticking out her hand, “I’m Rebecca.” Her grip was warm. Her smile was warmer. This *was* going well.

“Robert Blair, but you can call me ‘Fitz,’ ” said McCain. When she raised an eyebrow, he said, “It’s an old family nickname.”

She laughed and winked. “Mine’s ‘Calamity.’ ” She nodded toward the garbage truck. “So what do you think. Weird, huh?”

“I’ll say,” McCain said as smoothly as he could manage. He glanced at Calamity closely and asked, “Who’d want to kidnap a garbage man?”

She shrugged, then cocked her head and looked back at

him. “Apparently, the other man on the truck got a glimpse of something before someone clocked him from behind. He described a dark shape, big as a football player.” She leaned a little bit closer. “What do you think?”

McCain struggled to keep a straight face. Calamity was trying to pump *him* for information? There was something disturbing in the way she phrased her information, though. “A dark shape as big as a man?” he asked casually. “Why not just say it was a man?” If the attack was Renfield’s doing, she had someone working with her. Or something.

“His words, not mine,” Calamity replied. She stepped back a bit, and McCain was suddenly aware of how close they had been. Calamity didn’t appear to notice, or if she did, it didn’t bother her. “Maybe a big woman. What else could it be?”

You’d be surprised, McCain thought to himself. Out loud, he said, “Listen, could you do me a favor?” He reached into his suit pocket and produced one of his cards, anonymous little things that carried no name but only his phone number. It didn’t seem like Calamity knew any more, but if she kept digging, there was always later. A contact in the media was always good to have. “I’m under contract to the union that represents the city’s sanitation workers,” he improvised. “I’m checking into how things are being handled here. If you happen to find out anything else, I’d really appreciate it if you let me know.”

A shout from the far side of the police tape broke the conversation before she could reply. “Hey, Calamity!” It was the big cop in the leather coat. “Save the flirting for off duty!”

Off duty? McCain almost choked. Suddenly he had the feeling he had made a big mistake. “You know him?”

There was a cunning glint in Calamity’s eye. “He’s my partner. Detective Rebecca James, at your service, Fitz.” She flashed the card at him as she tucked it into her pocket, then pulled out one of her own and flipped it to him. “I probably

won't be calling you with information, but hey, if *you* find anything out, give me a call." She winked at him again, then ducked under the police tape and trotted toward her partner with a yell of "Keep your pants on, Gibson, I'm coming!"

McCain stared down at the card in his hands and muttered a quiet curse.

Ngan saw the shift in McCain's face as he turned to talk to the lovely, brown-haired woman on his other side and knew what his partner was about. Perhaps, he reflected silently, I am beginning to understand Michael too well.

Still, he tugged on Van's arm and murmured up into his ear, "We should move away now. If Michael wants to include us in this conversation, he'll let us know."

Van spared one quick glance at McCain, then followed Ngan a short distance through the crowd. "Damn," he muttered, "*that's* how you work an investigation?"

"That's how Michael works an investigation," Ngan corrected him. "Personally, I prefer simple observation—patience reveals much. Everyone develops his own method of investigation, however, and very seldom consciously." He gave Van a gentle smile. "Much the same as the development of psychic ability."

"Hopefully not everything goes as slow as that," Van replied with a frustrated grunt.

"Patience and confidence, Van," Ngan said. "Your powers will be there when you need them. In the meantime—observation. Look around this scene." He made a small gesture. "Try to take as much of it in as you can, using all of your senses. Consider everything. The smallest detail, the most apparently insignificant connection may be relevant."

He heard Van click his teeth together as he looked over

the garbage trucks, the police cruisers, the police, and the milling crowd.

After a moment, the young man asked, "How insignificant?"

"What are you thinking?"

"The dust."

Ngan looked at him curiously, then at the grey film that lay across the pavement. "What about it?"

Van clicked his teeth together again as he found his words. "Renfield is obsessed with death and decay, right?" When Ngan nodded, he went on, building up his argument. "In old science fiction movies, people are always getting zapped with rays or whatever that make them age super-fast. Inevitably, they crumble away into dust. What if Renfield is doing the same thing? What if the dust here and at Elgin is what's left of the missing people?"

Ngan drew in a sharp breath and stared at the dust being tracked so carelessly and walked through like common dirt.

The suggestion was far fetched, yes, but Ngan had seen too much in his time to dismiss an idea simply because a science fiction writer had thought of it first. It explained why the police had yet to find any trace of the men who had disappeared from Elgin. It also fit with Renfield's obsession with decay and with her rather prosaic description of what had happened to her circle of friends.

"Swept away by the river of time," Ngan murmured. That could be a description of someone aged to oblivion.

Three instances of people vanishing. Three sets of circumstances involving acid. At least two cases where the fine dust was present. Fifteen years before, Institute investigators had determined that Renfield had been in contact, however unwillingly, with an ultraterrestrial entity. Now . . .

McCain caught up to them, intruding on his thoughts. "There is one sneaky detective working on this case," he complained, flashing a business card at them.

He tucked it into his pocket, then bent down to brush away a patch of dust on his pants. Ngan hissed involuntarily. McCain looked up.

“What?”

Ngan told him. McCain twitched, then shook his head slowly. “More bad news, then. There was a dark shape glimpsed during the attack. I was really hoping it was just another person working with Renfield.”

“Maybe it was,” Van pointed out.

“I’ll be happy if it turns out that way.” McCain frowned. “There is one major problem with this theory, Ngan. I hardly found any dust at Elgin. If one person left all the dust here, you’d think three people would leave a lot more. All I found was residue.”

Suspicion hit Ngan in the pit of the stomach like an echo of Lily’s look of concern. “Maybe that’s exactly what it was.” McCain glanced at him, then narrowed his eyes.

“The floor,” he said. “There were no scuff marks on it.”

Van looked from Ngan to McCain and back. “Spell it out for the new guy?”

“Someone cleaned up the scene at Elgin,” said Ngan. “Someone hid the dust.”

His cell phone chose that precise moment to ring. Ngan answered with a calm that belied the turmoil he fought.

“Ngan,” said a crisp, aristocratic voice. “It’s Lily. I have a heads up on the garbage truck assault. Are you still on the scene?”

Ngan almost laughed in spite of himself. Lily always had the most flawless timing. “Yes,” he answered. “Lily, I need to ask—”

She cut him off. “Since the Institute started monitoring police reports on your scene, we’ve picked up mention of an unidentified presence involved in the assault, possibly non-human.”

This time, Ngan did permit himself a thin smile. “The

warning is appreciated, Lily, but too late. We already know.”

“That’s not why I’m calling,” Lily said. “Observation division isn’t the only one that follows those reports. Archival monitors for any mention of potentially unusual life forms.” She hesitated, then added, “I just got a memo from the CSC. They’re putting a team in the field *and* they’re throwing their weight around.”

Ngan stifled a groan. The Hoffmann Institute maintained two branches in Chicago, the cramped Branch Office from which the team and a number of other agents operated—and the Chicago Specimen Collection, a state-of-the-art facility for the preservation and analysis of organic samples collected by Hoffmann Institute agents from around the world. While the two branches might have been part of the same tree, however, they grew in opposite directions. The CSC stole the show in Chicago. They took the lion’s share of any resources allocated to the city, and they guarded the investigations they saw as falling within their very particular domain with a single-minded jealousy.

“Are we off the case?” he asked.

“No.” Lily’s answer was emphatic. “I can throw some weight around, too, but you will have to work with them.”

“Do you know who they’ve assigned?” Ngan twisted around to look across the crowd.

He didn’t have to look far. Squirming through the crowd was a short man in a tweed jacket. Half-moon glasses slid on his nose, and long strands of hair had been combed carefully across a nearly bald head that seemed too big for his body. The man had seen them and was heading directly to them. The CSC had sent its big gun—or more likely the big gun had sent himself.

“Monty Desmond,” Ngan whispered.

Lily sighed. “He’s there already, then?”

“I’m afraid so.” Ngan turned away from the approaching

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CSC man and said quickly, "There's something else though, Lily. We may have found something odd at El—"

"Not on the cell phone, Ngan," Lily said sharply. She hung up, leaving Ngan staring at the phone.

chapter 6 | X

Monty was on top of them before Ngan could do anything else. He was a sour piece of work, especially next to the tall, handsome young man carrying a large gym bag who followed him like a shadow. Monty's skin was pale and sagged in jowls that gave him a permanent frown of disapproval. Or perhaps, Ngan thought, that was simply Monty's natural disposition. The short man clicked his tongue as soon as he was close and glared at the cell phone in Ngan's hand as though it were some piece of filth.

"No cell phones," he said sharply. "They interfere with my equipment."

McCain blinked. "Excuse me?" he asked in what a stranger might have mistaken for polite tones.

Van clearly knew better and shrank into the background. Ngan knew better, too. He stepped quickly between Monty and McCain.

“Michael, allow me introduce Montgomery Desmond, senior researcher with the Chicago Specimen Collection.” He caught McCain’s eye and put a special emphasis on Monty’s title. “That call was from Lily, apprising us of a change in the investigation.” He tried to find words that would convey Lily’s instructions without adding to McCain’s frustration—or his own. “The CSC has stepped in to contribute their expertise to the case.”

McCain’s face shifted from polite caution to dead neutrality.

That didn’t faze Monty at all. “What a charming way of putting it, Ngan. Now if you’ll follow me, we’ll find somewhere to talk, and I’ll tell you how this investigation will be handled.”

Monty turned briskly and began forcing his way across the front of the crowd of spectators to its nearest edge. The young man with the bag followed him as if used to sudden changes in direction.

Ngan grabbed McCain’s arm as soon as their backs were turned. His partner was turning a harsh red. “Easy, Michael.”

McCain just made an angry growl.

“Jeez,” breathed Van. “What the heck’s going on?”

“Politics,” Ngan said succinctly, drawing them after Monty. He described Lily’s call and the interest of the CSC in the dark shape described by Calamity, then gave McCain a direct look of warning. “And I know politics is a game at which you excel, Michael.”

McCain grumbled something under his breath, then relented. “Well,” he sighed, “he can’t be all that bad.”

He put a gratifyingly friendly smile on his face as they caught up to Monty in the quiet shadow of a building.

“Monty,” McCain said, sticking out his hand, “sorry we got off on the wrong foot. I’m Michael—”

“Don’t patronize me, Mr. McCain. I know who you are.” He gestured at the still silent young man who accompanied

him. “My assistant, Liam Crogher.” Liam nodded soberly to them. Monty frowned at McCain. “You seem familiar. Have we met before?”

“I have that kind of face,” McCain commented. A touch of frost had crept back into his voice, and Ngan groaned silently. This wasn’t going to be easy.

“Monty,” he intruded quickly, “Lily said the CSC’s decision to become involved in the case was based on the unidentified figure observed at the scene. Why not assume as the police have that it was just a large man?”

“Which police have you been talking to?” Monty asked. The perpetual frown of his mouth turned into a gloating sneer. “They might be telling people that, but the earliest witness statements that were being bandied about were considerably different. The second garbage man was quite adamant in his statements that while he didn’t know what it was he saw, it was *not* a human being. Hence my involvement. The CSC wants to make a conclusive identification and collect tissue samples.” He looked down his nose at both Ngan and McCain. “Something your team, I’ve noticed, is remarkably lax about. What is it now? Four investigations? An extraterrestrial in Washington, a spectral manifestation here in Illinois, and unidentified ultraterrestrials on your recently globetrotting jaunt. I won’t even mention the matter of this *vril* substance.” He snorted. “I mean, do you even *try* to collect samples?”

McCain’s mouth opened and closed once. It was a moment before even Ngan could respond. When he did, he studiously avoided Monty’s question. “Are you aware of our current investigation, Monty?”

“The escaped mental patient and her possible occult involvement? Of course.” Monty said it as though his knowledge should have been obvious. “Her claim of contact with an ultraterrestrial makes this especially interesting.” He cocked his head at Ngan like a bird attracted by a shiny

object. “Why?” he asked. “Have you uncovered something?”

“No,” said Ngan.

The smooth flow of the lie startled him. He knew he should tell Monty about the dust and their horrid suspicions. It might help the researcher identify whatever Renfield had summoned out of the void. He didn’t. Part of his silence was petty—the thought of aiding Monty more than he had to repulsed him. The other part, however, was more serious and it crept up on him like a fever. Monty’s sudden involvement was just too convenient. Had Lily been trying to warn him about more than just his presence with her phone call?

Ngan looked at Monty and said simply, “We haven’t found anything yet. We’re only here today because the Elgin Mental Health Center van was here. You know more than we do, it seems.”

Monty preened with the compliment, smiling triumphantly—a horrendous sight, but one that almost made Ngan smile. Flattery, it seemed was the way to close Monty’s mouth. Now if only he could stomach it himself!

“What would you like us to do, Monty?” Ngan asked.

“Ah.” Monty clasped his arms behind his back like a schoolmaster. “I’m a firm believer in following strengths. Liam and I are familiar with our equipment, of course, so we’ll take care of the metrical analysis of the scene.” He looked to McCain. “I understand that you have a way with people, Mr. McCain. I want you to canvass the crowd and determine if any of them have seen anything unusual in the neighborhood.”

McCain looked doubtful. “Isn’t that going to attract attention from the police? “

“Then make it look like you’re gossiping, Mr. McCain. This is your forte—work with it.” He turned to Ngan. “While Mr. McCain is talking to people, I’d like you to listen to them. Blend into the background. Eavesdrop. Just hang around—I doubt if anyone will notice you.”

It was a great effort to nod pleasantly, but Ngan managed it. Monty’s request wasn’t so unreasonable nor was it bad judgment. He was more than capable of doing just what Monty asked, slipping up to people, listening in on their conversations, then moving on, all completely unnoticed. No, the insult was in the way Monty gave the instructions, as if silent observation and the invisibility of the inconsequential was Ngan’s only role. Ngan could more than understand McCain’s barely concealed hostility. He drew a slow breath. No. They were only words, and Monty, Ngan’s own suspicions aside, was only a small-minded bureaucrat with a laboratory job. They had their orders. An unthinking insult from Monty Desmond was nothing.

“Of course,” he said calmly.

“Good. Now, as for you . . .” Monty turned to Van—and frowned, as if really looking at the young man for the first time. Van seemed ready to shrink from him. “Who are you?” Monty looked back to Ngan. “Where’s Jeane Meara?”

“Jeane’s away on personal business,” Ngan told him. What possible problem could Monty have with Van? “This is Van Dimitriat, an associate. He is accompanying us on our assignment.”

Monty stared at Van as though the young man’s credentials were more akin to *makes coffee at the office and we thought it would be a lark to bring him along*, then sniffed disapprovingly and shook his head. “No.”

“No.”

That one little word sank a fist into Van’s stomach and left him gasping for breath. “What?” he choked.

“I said, ‘no.’ ” Monty looked down his fat, droopy nose—or would have if he hadn’t had to look up at Van’s height. “I want trained agents working for me, not teenagers who need

to have their hands held. If you would be so good as to wait somewhere while we attend to business, I'm sure Mr. McCain and Mr. Kun'dren will be able to describe events to you after we're finished."

Van could only look at him in numb, helpless shock. When he had got Ngan's message yesterday, it had seemed like the greatest thing that could possibly have happened to him. Even the prospect that they might be facing someone or something that could age people to dust in moments had excited rather than frightened him. To be so arbitrarily dismissed . . . it made him feel sick with frustration. Monty had the power to do it, too. Ngan had said so, had said the pudgy researcher had rank.

"But . . ." he began to protest.

"But?" asked Monty, raising his eyebrows so high they almost disappeared into the baggy wrinkles of his forehead. "But what? But that's not fair? But if I don't give you the chance, how will you ever learn?" He dismissed the concerns with a flick of his hand. "Learning is what training courses are for. In the meantime—" He flicked his hand again, this time dismissing Van himself. "You go."

"No," said Ngan quietly, "he stays."

Monty rounded on the old man sharply. If Van hadn't been so frustrated, he might almost have found it comical. Ngan was short but he still stood a good few inches over Monty. His face was calm, though his eyes were flashing and angry. Monty's face was slowly burning red. He opened his mouth, but Ngan spoke first.

"Van is participating in this investigation at the direction of our superiors." Ngan caught and held Monty's eyes. There was a terrible intensity to his gaze. "We have been told to cooperate with you, but we were not told to bow to you. You can be assured that *every* instruction you give us will make its way into our final report. That report will go to Lily Adler's desk. And as you might be aware, our team has

received a certain amount of interest from the highest levels of the Hoffmann Institute." Ngan tilted his head slightly to the side but did not relinquish his grasp on Monty's gaze. "No doubt our report will go to their desks as well."

"Oh, all right!" Monty snapped. "He can stay. Liam could use a hand carrying our equipment." Monty spun around and jabbed a finger at Van. "You'll be with us. Happy?"

He would rather have been working with Ngan and McCain, but even Monty and the silent Liam were better than nothing. "Yes," he said, then added for good measure, "sir."

"Don't be obsequious," said Monty. He waved Ngan and McCain toward the crowd. "You two get to work. Liam, I'll start with the video surveillance, while you check for background radiation. . . ."

Van leaned over and caught Ngan's arm. "What did you do to him to make him change his mind?" he whispered with a nod toward Monty.

"Do to him?" Ngan smiled. "Nothing—except remind him that he was not the most powerful person with an interest in this case. His own fears and doubts did the rest. Nothing else was necessary. It's almost always easier to work with a person's worst qualities than against them." He clapped Van on the shoulder. "Look on this as an opportunity to see how another part of the Hoffmann Institute works."

Van sighed and turned back to Monty. Liam had set his gym bag down on the ground, and he and Monty were rummaging through it. Van tried to get a peek inside, but Monty quickly flipped up the bag's soft sides and gave him a nasty stare.

Van held back another sigh and asked instead, "So just how do you intend to do your 'metrical analysis' in the middle of a crowd with a police investigation going on? Isn't it going to be a little obvious that you're up to something?"

Monty's glare turned from nasty to withering. "We *have* done this before, Mr. Dimitriat." He managed to twist the

formality of ‘mister’ into an insult. Van clenched his teeth and ignored it. “Sometimes we’ve had to collect data under conditions that are even more public—or even more paranoid. Unlike a recognized agency, we can’t just walk into a scene and expect cooperation. So we’ve had to be creative.”

One of Monty’s hands had lingered inside the gym bag. He pulled it out, along with a small camcorder. Van didn’t know a tremendous amount about the things, but it looked like an expensive, high-end device. He also suspected that the thin cable that trailed from it and back into the bag was not factory-standard.

Monty showed off the camcorder proudly. “Innocuous. Almost ubiquitous these days. Digital, of course.” He passed the camcorder to Liam while he fished the other end of the cable out of the bag. It was attached to a dark plastic case about the size of Van’s hand and maybe twice as thick. Monty slipped it into the pocket of his jacket, then took the camcorder back. “This particular model, however, has been modified. In addition to capturing a visual record of the scene, it also contains infrared capability for rough thermal imaging and a range-finder that can be used to construct a reasonably accurate three-dimensional model.” He tapped the plastic case in his pocket. “Extended storage.”

“Wow.” Van blinked, genuinely impressed. “Can I take a look?”

“Don’t be absurd,” Monty said and clasped the device protectively. “This is sensitive equipment.”

Van bit his tongue in frustration. Sure, equipment so sensitive just a look could damage it, but that could still be carried around in a gym bag like old socks.

When he felt reasonably confident that he could say something civil again, he asked, “So what do you want me to do?”

Monty pointed at the bag without a word.

“Oh, right,” muttered Van. I get the grunt work. “What do I do with it?” he asked Monty. “Just carry it around behind you?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Monty looked thoughtful. “The camera takes patient and delicate handling to capture all the information with the necessary precision, so I’ll be using it for some time. Liam will need to swap instruments more frequently. You’ll stick with him.”

Van glanced down. Liam was still squatting beside the bag, adjusting what looked like a portable compact disc player, complete with headphones. At Monty’s words, though, he glanced up at Van and an interested, almost friendly expression flickered across his face. It was only present for a moment, but in that moment, Van realized with a start that Monty’s assistant wasn’t much older than he was himself, twenty-three or twenty-four at the most. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all. Even as he bent down and scooped up the bag though, Liam turned to lead the way back toward the taped-off police investigation—still silent.

Monty stuck close to the crowd, using it as cover for his surreptitious videotaping. Liam, on the other hand, worked his way around the scene to the far side of the taped-off area. The crowd was thinner there but Liam, dressed in plain khakis and an ordinary sweater, blended right in. Van, dressed in his best suit for a day at the Institute offices and now carting a large and fairly heavy gym bag, felt much more conspicuous.

He tried to ignore the feeling, concentrating instead on observing the scene as Ngan had suggested. More frequently, however, he found his attention wandering to Liam. There was something familiar about him, though Van couldn’t quite place it. His face, broad and rough, with brown, slightly curly hair and muddy green eyes, was good-looking but not so stunning that it was distinct. His movements were careful and deliberate, like the motions of a scientist in a lab. Every

few moments, he paused and scanned the scene, apparently listening with great intensity to his headphones, then moved on. Once or twice, he made a few strange but casual gestures with his right arm, and Van could see he was wearing an oddly large and chunky wristwatch. A very fine cable ran from the watch up the sleeve of his sweater. Van guessed that the other end plugged into the CD player that Liam now wore on his belt.

It took them quite a while to move around the taped-off area, though by the time they had come back to the far side of the crowd, Van was gratified to find that Monty had covered even less ground. Searching the crowd for his friends, he found McCain fairly easily, flirting with a pretty woman at the back of the crowd. He had a more difficult time spotting Ngan, but finally located him—he was only a few yards away, standing in the shadow of a pair of big construction workers. The old man gave him a quiet nod of encouragement.

“Excuse me,” said a new voice, “I’ll be needing into my bag now.”

The voice was deep and thick with a heavy Irish accent, and *that* Van remembered. A few weeks before, doing research for an assignment, he had stood in line at the reference desk in the university’s science library, and made small talk with the people around him. The owner of that voice had been exactly three people ahead of him. Van turned to Liam in astonishment. “You go to U. of C.!”

Liam stepped back, startled. “What?”

“You go to the University of Chicago. I saw you in line at the science library.”

“You must be mistaken.”

“I don’t think so.” Van smiled at him. “Hey, relax. It’s not like I’ve blown your cover—I go there, too. I’m a freshman, archaeology major.”

Tentatively, then in a rush, a smile grew on Liam’s face, transforming it from rough to gruff and majestic. “Starting a

doctorate in zoology. The CSC is sponsoring me—under the table, of course.”

Van gave a short chuckle. “Me, too! Well, the Institute anyway. Intelligence division, I suppose.” He considered Liam’s suddenly open, smiling face, trying to figure out a way to ask his next question without totally choking what might be a new friendship. “So, uh . . . what’s the deal with Monty?”

Liam’s laugh was a healthy, rolling thing. “Monty is an unmitigated, constipated arse. That’s what the deal is.” He gasped for breath and shook his head. “God, Van, I’m sorry you guys got saddled with us. Well, with him anyway.”

“How come he doesn’t seem to razz you about being a student, then?”

“I guess because I am actually a full agent,” Liam said with a shrug. “That didn’t stop him from commenting on it constantly at first, but I’m the only one who’ll stand for being his assistant, so he doesn’t have a lot of choice. I keep my mouth shut and do whatever he says and he’s got nothing to complain about. Speaking of which . . .” He waved the CD player and headphones.

“Oh, right.”

Van swung the bag around and held it out. Liam unzipped it part way, putting the CD player inside carefully. This time, Van got a look into the bag. Most of the interior was taken up by foam padding with deep pockets. Tucked into the pockets were a variety of electronic gadgets, some that looked like ordinary home electronics, others that were clearly more scientific in nature.

“What was that CD player really?” asked Van.

“Geiger counter,” Liam told him. “When we’re hunting for evidence of a xenofom presence, it’s standard practice to check for local anomalies like increases in radiation. One of the things Monty is doing with his camera is checking for unusual thermal activity. Cold spots, hot spots . . .”

Van felt a shiver pass up his spine. “Like hunting for ghosts?” he asked with a sense of horrid familiarity.

“Exactly,” confirmed Liam. “Your friends are the team that tangled with the Madonna of Bachelor’s Grove, aren’t they?”

“In Midlothian, yeah.” Van shook himself as though he could shake off the frightening memories of that encounter. “That’s us . . . er, them.” Liam looked up from the bag in surprise, and Van hastily amended, “Us, I suppose. I was there.”

Liam let out a whistle. “So you’ve actually encountered a ghost? Your name wasn’t in the reports.”

“My being there was kind of unofficial. The whole thing was pretty damn scary actually.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it sometime.” His eyes narrowed suddenly. “Someplace where Monty isn’t likely to come stumbling over,” he murmured.

Van twisted his head around to look back over his shoulder. Sure enough, Monty was coming straight for them, moving like an old, wrinkled bull through a crowd that was starting to break up.

“The police are moving out,” he huffed. “We need to get in close and take our readings quickly. The Sanitation Department has sent someone to take the garbage truck away.”

Liam nodded and began digging through the bag. Van glanced over beyond the police tape. There were fewer officers around already, and those who were left were beginning to climb into their cruisers or take down the lines of tape. Most of the curious on-lookers had disappeared, too. Calamity James was over having a last few words with the men from the Elgin Mental Health Center van. Meanwhile, the big man that McCain had identified as her partner was standing off with an official-looking man in a suit and a third man in worker’s overalls—the new driver from the Sanitation Department. Even as he watched, the trio broke up, the big man and the man in the suit going to their cars while the

driver started toward the truck. McCain was approaching the truck driver, talking to him and slowing him down.

Ngan appeared abruptly at Monty’s side. “Michael will buy you some time, Monty.”

The researcher grunted and gestured to Liam. His assistant had two devices out of the bag—one of them resembling a slightly over-sized cellular phone, and the other a palm computer. He kept the first for himself and passed the second to Monty as they trotted toward the garbage truck. Van followed without hesitating.

“What are those?” he asked quickly.

Monty, his eyes focused on the tiny computer’s screen, ignored him. Liam had the cell phone held to his ear, but he glanced back.

“For magnetic anomalies,” he whispered, tapping his fingers against the cell phone. “Monty’s is designed to pick up any irregularities in time flow.”

He turned away. Van drew a sharp breath and hurried to catch up with Monty. If the missing garbage man had been supernaturally aged into the dust that filmed the street, would Monty’s device detect anything? Grotesquely, Van found himself almost hoping for some positive result that might suggest his theory was correct.

It didn’t happen. Monty walked alongside the truck once, looped back, and paused—right over what must have been the original concentration of the dust, though he didn’t even glance down at the ground. His eyes were still on his device.

“Nothing,” he reported and looked at Liam.

His assistant shook his head as well. Monty growled in frustration. Back along the street, McCain and the garbage man parted company.

“Time’s up,” Van said.

Scowling, Monty led them away from the garbage truck and back to the quiet corner where they had gathered before. When McCain and Ngan had joined them, he shook his head

and reported, “Inconclusive. The results may need further processing, but there was no obvious unusual thermal activity and no chronological distortions.”

“No abnormal radiation,” reported Liam. “No electromagnetic anomalies.”

McCain and Ngan glanced at each other. Ngan shook his head, and McCain shrugged. “It looks like we drew a blank, too. No one I talked to has seen anything strange in the neighborhood, though the new man from Sanitation said rumors are flying between the other garbage men—nothing substantial that we didn’t already know, though.”

“Damn,” said Monty.

He rapped the fake palm computer against the knuckles of his other hand and sucked on his teeth as he thought. There was a muted grinding, and the garbage truck roared into life. As it swung past them, the driver waved to McCain. McCain waved back. Monty’s eyes followed both actions.

“You shouldn’t be fraternizing with the general populace,” he commented distantly.

Van saw McCain’s jaw strain with the effort of holding back some acid comment. It took McCain a moment, but he finally managed to muster up some strained good will and ask instead, “If we don’t fraternize and your instruments come up blank, just how are we supposed to find this thing?”

Monty grunted. “The old-fashioned way. We hunt for it.” He reached out and pulled Van closer to him so that he could stuff the palm computer back in the bag. “We’ll reconvene here at dusk. A creature of the size reported can’t move unnoticed through the city very easily, especially by daylight. I’m willing to guess that it—and your Renfield—are still in the area.” McCain looked doubtful, but Monty ignored him and instead frowned at Van. “This operation will not be a place for amateurs. You may stay home tonight.”

“Oh, give me a break!” Van yelled. “We’ve been through this.” He looked to Ngan beseechingly.

The old man cleared his throat. “This time I have to agree with Monty, Van. If the . . . xeniform is in the area, the hunt will be dangerous. I don’t want to see you hurt.” He looked apologetic. “Stay home. We’ll fill you in on everything in the morning.”

Van looked from Ngan to McCain, but the younger agent’s face was set as well. He gave a little shake of his head. *Sorry*. Liam wouldn’t meet his eyes. Van suppressed a groan of resignation.

“Fine.” He forced a smile onto his face. “I guess there’s always school assignments to work on.”

chapter

7 E V E N

Ned was already in the hotel's restaurant when Jeane came down for breakfast the next morning. He waved her over to join him.

"You're looking more . . . optimistic today," he said.

"Don't mistake resolution for optimism, Ned. I'm still a very long way from being a happy camper."

She glanced briefly over the menu the waitress handed her, then handed it back.

"Coffee," she said, "orange juice, a toasted bagel, and light cream cheese."

The waitress nodded and went away, and Jeane looked back to Ned. "I don't like being lied to," she said. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

"*We're* going to get to the bottom of this," Ned reminded her, "unless my function here has been reduced to the purely ornamental."

"Ornamental like a gargoyle," Jean said. She

couldn't help smiling a little bit, though. "In case I didn't say it yesterday, thanks for coming. I needed someone with me."

"You could have fooled me. And you didn't say it."

Jeane growled at the big man. "Well, I am now, so enjoy it while you have the chance." She glanced at the table in front of him. Except for a coffee cup, it was still empty. "What are you having?"

"My own special: Eggs Devromme. It takes a little longer to make."

"What would that be? Eggs over easy on a bed of lard?"

"Ha-ha." Ned slurped at his coffee. "You'll see. This will take off the way 'shaken, not stirred' did for James Bond."

"You're no James Bond, Ned."

He smiled kindly. "That's all right, Jeane. You're no Bond girl."

Jeane snorted. "Oh, ouch. I'm not a useless bimbo. I'll take that as a compliment, thank you."

"Well, it's nice to see Marilyn Monroe isn't the only actress you despise," observed Ned. "Have you considered seeing a specialist about this?"

"I don't like seeing women dumbed down in films, Ned. It's insulting. Marilyn . . ." Jeane shuddered. "I don't know. It's like she was just the pinnacle of everything. Dumbed down, screwed up, manipulated, and turned into the plaything of popular culture until you can't tell the real person from the roles she played. I've instinctively loathed her from the first time I saw a picture of her. And her voice just drives me crazy."

"Ah," Ned said and sipped at his coffee again. "So other than the bashing of movie stars, what's on the agenda? How are we going to go about finding out what's really up with your adoption?"

Jeane produced a list carefully copied out from the yellow pages in her hotel room. "We start with a visit to an adoption agency—I'm figuring they get requests for people wanting to

find their birth information all the time. They should know the process for getting it.”

Ned frowned. “You don’t already know? Didn’t you do some of this as a teenager when you first found out you were adopted?”

“Not . . . as such.” Jeane looked down at the table. This was what really hurt. “I didn’t have to. When I turned eighteen and told Stan and Rose I wanted to meet my birth mother, they looked after everything.” She smiled bitterly. “I just didn’t realize how much they really had to look after.”

Suddenly, her eyes felt wet. Jeane blinked hard, trying to fight back tears. She wasn’t going to cry. She wouldn’t. Ned shifted uncomfortably, then cleared his throat as if preparing to say something. She silenced him with a quick, harsh glare, then shifted her gaze to the kitchen.

“Damn it,” she grumbled, “how long does it take to toast a bagel?”

As if on cue, the kitchen door swung open and their waitress appeared with a tray. Bagel, orange juice, and coffee went down in front of Jeane. Ned got a platter heaped with . . .

“Dear God,” Jeane gasped through her angry self-loathing. “What is that?”

Ned spread a napkin across his lap and picked up his fork and knife. “Eggs Devromme. Poached eggs on a breakfast steak on top of toasted English muffins, with Swiss cheese, mushrooms, and hollandaise sauce.” He clinked the plate with his knife. “And in this case, home fries, an extra side of hollandaise, and a little slice of melon that has absolutely no business being there.” He speared the fruit and offered it to her. “Want it? If you promise not to go all maudlin again, you can even try some of the main dish.”

Jeane couldn’t help the laughter that came bubbling up out of her belly and—just for a moment—overwhelmed her more bitter emotions.

“Ned,” she said, plucking the melon off the end of his knife, “the only way I will eat that mess is if I’m beyond maudlin and considering suicide by heart attack.”

“There, you see,” replied Ned with a grin, “I am more than ornamental. Dr. Kevorkian, eat your heart out.”

Her plan was, as it turned out, a good one. They waited until the first agency on Jeane’s list opened and went in. The receptionist listened to Jeane’s request without batting an eyelash and handed her a glossy, four-color brochure entitled *Finding Your Birth Family in Ohio*. It shouldn’t have been surprising, Jeane realized. Her need to find her real birth mother wasn’t all *that* different from the need of any other adopted child.

And the news got better, it seemed. According to the brochure, how you went about getting your birth information in Ohio basically depended on when you were adopted. For adoptions before 1964—and her adoption in 1962 would qualify—copies of adoption files and original birth certificates were available simply by requesting them from the Ohio Department of Health.

“That’s too easy,” Ned said, reading over her shoulder. “There’s got to be a catch.”

There was. The brochure had the phone number for the Ohio Department of Health on it, and Jeane called it from her room back at the hotel. After transferring through more departments than she cared to count and waiting on hold longer than she wanted to consider, she had her answer.

“Four to six weeks waiting time,” she said in frustration as she hung up. “I need to fill out an affidavit, get it notarized, provide two pieces of identification, and pay a twenty dollar fee.”

“Bugger,” muttered Ned. He sat down on the edge of the bed beside her. “You know,” he said, “You could just wait the

four to six weeks. Is it really so urgent that you know right now?”

Jeane shrugged. Four weeks wasn't that long, she told herself. Six weeks wasn't much worse. It was possible. She could wait.

Bull.

One of the foundation blocks of her life had just been knocked out from under her. Twenty years of a lie designed to make her trust the people who had lied to her . . . she wasn't about to take that sitting down. But what could she do? She groaned out loud and put her hands over her face. Damn it, this was McCain's area. He could probably sweet talk a clerk into giving them the run of the entire department of health. For the first time, she began to regret running out of Chicago. As much as she hated to admit it, the Hoffmann Institute's resources would have been very welcome at the moment. Maybe the Institute wasn't the ATF, but it had its ways of getting fast information when it needed . . .

Her eyes popped open, and for a second she stared at the hotel room and Ned from between her fingers. “Damn.” She dropped her hands and reached for her purse and jacket. “Get your coat, Ned. We're going to the police.”

“Hold on there.” He jumped to his feet. “Isn't that just a bit drastic?”

“It's not as bad as it sounds. Trust me—I have an idea that would make Fitz jealous.”

The Parma Police Department was housed in a low, red-brick building just off one of the city's main streets. Jeane parked across the street and led Ned up the concrete steps to the door. She took a deep breath, then pushed open the door and walked up to the front desk and the young officer sitting behind it.

“Is Lieutenant Barlough around?” she asked with a wide, friendly smile.

Before the woman on the other side of the counter could even respond, there was a booming laugh from deeper inside the station.

“Is that little Jeannie Meara?” A broad red face appeared from an office door, and soft blue eyes sparkled. “Do you have any more high school seniors to turn in for sneaking a beer into the football game?”

“Just remember that I caught them and you didn't, Miles.” Jeane reached a hand across the desk. “How are you doing?”

The man who emerged from the office was thick and stout in the way of someone who had once been muscular but couldn't be bothered anymore. Miles Barlough had cut a sharp figure twenty years before. At the time, he had been one of the youngest members of Parma's police force and only about ten years older than Jeane herself. Now he was probably the most senior, if not the highest ranking. He grabbed Jeane's hand and pulled her into a rough hug.

“It's good to see you again, Jeane.”

“You ratted on beer at a high school football game?” Ned asked dryly.

“I like to think of it as a practice run for the ATF,” Jeane said. She slapped Miles's ample belly. “Miles was something of a mentor for me when I first decided I wanted to go into law enforcement. Miles, Ned. Ned, Miles.”

The two men shook hands, and Miles's face broke out into a wide grin once more. “Jeane, don't tell me you've finally—”

“No!” said Jeane sharply while Ned glowered. “Ned's just a friend.”

“Mm-hmm . . .” Miles nodded and Jeane turned her slap against his belly into a light punch that made him gasp. “Ow. Nice to know you haven't lost your touch.” He rubbed his stomach. “And to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit then?”

Jeane inclined her head slightly in the direction of his office. Miles might not have been the quickest at letting a

subject drop, but he was no slouch when it came to taking a hint. He led the way back to his office, gestured for them to sit down, and closed the door behind them.

"Is everything okay, Jeane?" he asked, sliding in behind his desk. "I heard you weren't with the ATF anymore."

His tone and expression said more than his words. Jeane wondered what he had heard. All parties involved in her rather abrupt "resignation" from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms had done their best to keep the circumstance of that departure quiet, but Jeane knew better than most the way gossip tended to spread through law enforcement circles. Stan had, of course, known that she'd taken a new job as well, and gossip spread even faster through a small place like Parma. Whatever Miles might have heard, though, his expression was sympathetic rather than suspicious, and Jeane smiled.

"Everything is fine," she lied. "I'm working for a private company in Chicago now."

"So what brings you back to Parma?" Miles sat back in his chair. "This can't be a social call."

"I . . ." Jeane clenched her teeth. Did McCain always feel this awkward when he tried to talk someone into doing something for him? Probably not. McCain was too smooth. She, on the other hand . . . Aw, hell, Jeane thought, and went with the blunt, straight-forward approach. "I need a little favor, Miles."

Miles sat up. "I get really nervous whenever I hear those words, Jeane. You should know that."

"I do, but this is different."

"How?"

Now came the tricky part. She had known Miles would listen to her, but convincing him to do what she needed was something else again.

"You know I'm adopted, right?" Miles nodded and Jeane pressed on. "Well, I wanted to know more, so I decided to

come back and see what I could find out. It turns out that getting a copy of the adoption file is pretty easy—if I want to wait on the bureaucrats in Columbus to get around to it. What I was hoping was that maybe you could make the request a little more . . . official."

The old boy was quick, there was no denying it. Miles's brow furrowed, and he looked at her as if she had just asked him to shoot her in the foot. "You want me to ask for your record through police channels?"

"Pretty much, yes." Jeane smiled at him. "I've gotten used to having the inside track, I guess. Make it sound like part of an investigation, and the paper-pushers will hop right to it. You could probably get from them in a day what would take a civilian weeks. How about it, Miles? Please?"

Miles just folded his arms on his desk and looked at her. Jeane found herself holding her breath as his silence stretched out. Finally though, he shook his head wearily. "Patience never was your strong suit, was it?"

"You'll do it?"

He wrinkled up his nose. "Do I have a choice? But just so you know, this may not work. I'll have to get a court order, and frankly, I don't think the department of health gets that many requests from the police for thirty-nine-year-old adoption records." Miles shoved a pad of paper and a pen across the desk. "Give me what you've got, then go away and let me work my magic. Check back in a couple of hours. That should give me enough time to find out whether this is doable."

Jeane grabbed the pad and scribbled down all of the basic information that seemed relevant. "Thanks, Miles. You're the best."

"Yeah, yeah." He took the pad back and waved them to the door. "Hey, Jammie's is still open across the street. Why don't you stop in and grab some lunch?"

"Maybe we will." Jeane ushered Ned out, then leaned back into the office. "Really, Miles—thanks. I appreciate it."

He shooed her away. “Just get out.” She laughed and closed the door.

Ned was waiting for her on the steps outside. “That was clever,” he said approvingly.

“Fitz would have had Miles eating out of his hand with two words.”

Still, Jeane was quite pleased with herself. She glanced at her watch. 12:30. If Miles actually managed to get a court order during lunch hour, she’d eat out of *his* hand.

She grinned at Ned. “So how about some lunch?”

“Absolutely.” Ned rubbed his stomach. “I’m eager to try this shrine of culinary delight called Jammie’s.”

“You’ll like it, Ned.” Jeane checked the traffic and crossed the street, angling a bit toward a white clapboard restaurant with big windows and a sign advertising the best milkshakes in Ohio. “They fry everything.”

With the exception of new upholstery on the chairs, Jammie’s Grill hardly seemed to have changed a bit. The floor was still tile linoleum, faded advertisements for jumbo burgers and sides of coleslaw still decorated the walls behind the counter, and the same greasy swinging saloon doors masked the entrance to the kitchen. The smells of fried meat and boiled coffee hung in the air together with the clatter of thick, institutional tableware. Jeane turned instinctively toward the window that looked back onto the street—even her old favorite table was still there. She headed for it while Ned trailed behind her, peering at everything curiously.

“I’ll be damned,” he murmured as they sat down. “It’s like walking into a time warp.”

Jeane smiled. “Try the milkshakes. If they haven’t changed, they really are good.”

Ned raised his eyebrows. “Careful, Jeane—I think you’re dangerously close to actually having a good time.”

“It’s just nostalgia.” She nodded at a waitress as she

dropped menus on the table. “Thanks, Marilee.” The waitress smiled back with a look of vague recognition before moving on.

“Do you know *everyone* in Parma?” griped Ned.

“I used to baby-sit her, Ned. It’s not that big a city—at least it wasn’t twenty years ago.” Jeane flipped through the stained menu. “I presume you didn’t grow up in a small town, then.”

“There wasn’t much small about Toronto, even in the seventies.”

Jeane let him have a moment before glancing up inquiringly. “That’s it? No reminiscences of high school?”

Ned kept his eyes on the menu. “I loathed high school, thank you. I wrote my last exam, then skipped town. Cheeseburger with bacon and a side of fries with gravy, please,” he told the waitress as she returned to the table. “And a vanilla milkshake.”

“You’re not still full from your Eggs Devromme?” Jeane groaned. “Toasted western on whole wheat. Iced tea.” The waitress went away and Jeane turned back to Ned. “Where did you go after you left Toronto?” she asked. She had done enough talking about herself in the last two days to keep her set for years. It was time for a change of subject—anything to get her mind onto another track. Ned, however, just shrugged.

“Chicago for a few years,” he said simply. “I knew people there. Then my gifts manifested, and I spent a few more years wandering around, figuring things out and practicing.”

“Around?”

“The world.”

Jeane nodded. “I didn’t really get the whole Grand Tour experience—for me it was straight into college, then law enforcement.”

“My Grand Tour wasn’t exactly the standard post-high school trip to Europe, Jeane.”

“I suppose not.” Jeane leaned forward a bit. “So what exactly is it like?” she asked quietly, hiding her words under

the general noise of the restaurant. “Being psychic, I mean. What’s it like to know what other people are feeling or move things telekinetically?”

Ned shook his head. “It’s a little like having a second sense of smell. Some odors you can block out, some you can focus on, but you can never ignore them completely. They’re just there, waiting for your nose. Moving things telekinetically, on the other hand, is a totally different matter. It’s not like having an extra arm. It’s all focus. There’s no bone or muscles to give it direction.”

Jeane thought back to what she had seen Ned do in Bachelor’s Grove Cemetery. He had stopped a possessed man in his tracks. He had rolled a bank of ghostly mist away from himself in a billowing white wave. She had a sneaking suspicion he might even have deflected two of her own bullets shot wildly into the mist, but she couldn’t be sure. Then again, not much more than a year ago she would never have considered such a thing even to be possible.

“How do you got about learning how to control a power like that?”

“Part of it’s instinct,” Ned answered. “Usually that’s what surfaces first in response to initial manifestations. If you want to go further, though, it takes practice and training. There have been groups that have tried to develop psychic abilities in subjects by force, but even if they succeeded in creating the ability, they almost always fell down on the training.” Ned closed his eyes, exhaled softly, and brought his hands in to touch his chest. “It may sound corny, but a psychic who can’t incorporate his gift into his world view and his self-image is never going to master it. What you’re capable of depends largely on how you see yourself.”

“You’re right,” Jeane said, “it does sound corny. So is that why Van’s abilities haven’t broken out yet? He doesn’t see himself in the right way?”

Ned grimaced. “Van’s ready, I think. It’s really more of a case that we just haven’t found the key. Ngan is a better example.” Jeane raised an eyebrow, and Ned nodded. “He has the gift—don’t tell me you haven’t seen him do some weird stuff.”

“I thought it was some kind of martial arts training thing.”

“That’s pretty much how Ngan views it, too. Ultimately, it’s the same gift, but he’s limited by the color he’s chosen to paint it. Of course, there are always a few people who develop on their own and would probably never consider themselves psychic unless it was pointed out to them. Like Fitz.”

“Fitz is psychic?” Jeane asked.

“You didn’t think that silver tongue of his was entirely natural, did you?” Ned grinned. “It’s a very focused talent, and he’ll probably never be able to do anything else, but he is very—” He glanced out the window and froze. “Jeane,” he hissed, “your father is out in the street.”

Jeane twisted around in her chair. Stan Meara was loping along the sidewalk across the street, straightening a coat that looked like it had been pulled on in haste. In one hand, he held a thin brown envelope. If he had looked at the restaurant, he would surely have seen them in the window, but his attention was fixed on his destination. As they watched, he trotted up the steps of the Parma Police Department.

Jeane sucked in a shallow breath. There was something about the envelope that Stan carried that set her teeth on edge. Something suspiciously anonymous and yet exactly the right size for what she imagined an adoption file might look like.

“What the hell is going on here?” she muttered. She glanced at Ned. “I don’t suppose you could sense his emotions, could you?”

He shook his head. “No.” He met her gaze. “What do you want to do?”

Temper and patience fought briefly. Patience won. “Wait,” she said. “We’ll see if he comes back out again—and if he has that envelope when he does.” She drummed her fingers across the tabletop. What was going on inside the police department? Could it be a coincidence that Stan had shown up there now? It didn’t seem likely. There was no reason for him to go to the police . . . unless Miles had called and told him they had been there.

And why would her old mentor betray her like that?

“Here you go,” said the waitress brightly, breaking into Jeane’s dour thoughts. She started sliding plates and glasses onto the table. “Toasted western on brown. Cheeseburger with bacon, fries, and gravy. Vanilla milkshake.”

“Iced tea,” Jeane reminded her.

“Coming in a second.”

The waitress ducked back around the counter. As Jeane started on her sandwich, she watched the waitress slide a glass into the soda dispenser. On the wall behind the soda dispenser, a phone rang. The waitress picked up it with her spare hand.

“Jammie’s,” she answered. She listened for a second, then cushioned the receiver against her chest and yelled back into the kitchen, “Dick, phone for you.”

The cook, a beefy man of advanced middle-age who Jeane recognized vaguely, emerged from the kitchen to take the call. She didn’t quite catch what he said, but she did catch his eyes as they scanned the room. They flickered briefly over her, and the cook nodded.

At the very same moment, Ned stiffened abruptly. “Interest,” he mumbled around a thick mouthful of beef and cheese. “Someone is *very* interested in us.”

Jeane was already standing up and pulling a couple of bills from her purse to leave on the table. Her nostalgia was

gone, completely replaced by seething anger. Miles. Miles had suggested Jammie’s. He had known where they would be.

“Drop the burger, Ned. We’re leaving.”

Ned followed her gaze, his eyes darting to take in the cook. His face shifted minutely for a second, and Jeane caught sudden movement as the telephone’s cradle pressed down of its own accord. The cook stared at the dead receiver in his hand in surprise.

“He’ll have to dial again before he can tell the people on the other end that we’re leaving,” Ned muttered, standing up. Burger still in hand, he followed Jeane’s brisk stride from the restaurant. “That’ll buy us a few seconds. Are we going to the station?”

“No.”

Jeane broke into a dash for the car. A portion of her anger wanted to run, as Ned had suggested, into the police station, to confront Stan and Miles and demand to know what game they were playing. That anger was mingled, however, with a little fear, and all she could think of was old advice from her ATF training. *Never hesitate in the crunch. If you don’t like what’s in front of you, fall back.* And she didn’t like this at all.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jeane caught a glimpse of movement at the door of the police department even as she was climbing into the car. Two figures, one big and broad, one tall and lean, were coming out. She jammed her key into the ignition and glanced at Ned buckling in beside her. “Got any other tricks for buying time?”

The psychic twisted around in his seat, popped the door open, and flicked the remains of his bacon cheeseburger out of the car. Jeane watched in amazement as the arc of the burger changed and it hurtled back down the street like a greasy missile. A quarter pound of beef, gooey cheese, bacon, ketchup, and mustard slapped Miles in the face hard enough to send him staggering.

“Go!” Ned shouted. “Stop staring and go!”

Jeane slammed down on the accelerator, and the car leaped out into the street, tires squealing as it sped away from the police station. She didn’t try to turn or even slow down until they were a good five blocks away from the station. Finally, she spared a glance for Ned.

“Your cheeseburger?”

“I was under pressure,” he snapped, “and it was the first non-damaging thing I could think of. I presumed you didn’t want to hurt them.”

“I’m not so sure about that anymore.”

She turned the car in the direction of their hotel. That should still be safe. She hadn’t mentioned to anyone where they were staying. If Miles wanted to, he would probably be able to find out, but by then they would be out of Parma. She needed time to think. Just what the hell was going on that her adoption could need such secrecy and her search for answers provoke such a response?

They left the car parked close to the front door of the hotel and ran upstairs to their rooms. “Grab your stuff fast,” Jeane told Ned, “I’ll meet you back out here.”

All of her own things were clustered together for a fast departure, a habit picked up in years of investigations for the ATF. In the bathroom, she shoved her toothbrush into a toiletry bag, then took that out and shoved it into the overnight bag she had brought from Chicago. Under thirty seconds and she was ready to go. She made a last visual sweep of the hotel room.

The message light was blinking on her phone.

She stared at it for a second. A message from who? Maybe Ngan or Fitz—no, they would have called her cell phone. She snatched up the phone and dialed the messaging system.

“You have one message,” said an impersonal female voice. “First message.” There was a moment’s pause, and . . . “Jeane? Jeane, we need to—”

It was Stan’s voice. Jeane slammed the receiver down. She grabbed her bag and ran for the door. “Ned! I’m checking out. Meet me downstairs at the counter.”

She took the stairs without even waiting for the elevator. Thankfully, the clerk was already standing at the desk with no one else in line. Jeane slapped her room key on the desk.

“Checking out,” she said. “The other key will be down in a minute. I’m getting both rooms. You have a credit card impression from last night. Bill it to that.”

The clerk nodded and flipped through a file of slips, but clicked his tongue in disappointment as he pulled hers. “It’s a bad impression. Can I have your card again?”

“Make it quick,” she snapped, digging the card out and passing it to him. He nodded and disappeared into a side room just as the elevator doors opened on the other side of the lobby and Ned came hustling out.

“Jeane,” he said urgently, “there was a message on the phone in my room.”

She hissed. “From my father?”

Ned nodded. “He wants to talk to you. He seemed very sincere about it.”

“Maybe later.” She craned her neck to see into the side room. “What the hell is taking so . . .”

Her eyes fell on the black and grey box of a credit card machine sitting right behind the front desk.

“Damn!”

Her bag hit the floor and she was vaulting the desk before Ned could even ask what was wrong. In the corner of the side room, the clerk was on the telephone. Jeane grabbed his hand, twisting it sharply and ripping the phone out of it.

“Card!” she demanded and gave his hand another twist so that he gasped in pain. His free hand scrabbled on the table in front of him.

Damn it, what the hell was going on? How many people were in on this?

She had her answer when the clerk held up her card and she snatched it out of his shaking hand. There was a ring on one of his fingers, a simple silver band inset with two black strips framing a tiny symbol of an interlocking triangle and geometry compass.

"Damn!" she spat again, this time almost in disbelief. She shoved the clerk to the ground and sprinted back out to Ned. "Get in the car!" she ordered, scooping up her bag on the way past.

"What is it?" Ned asked, following her through the doors.

"Masons," Jeane growled. She hurled her bag into the back seat, then pounded a fist on the car roof. "They're all bloody Masons!"

"You're kidding."

"No." Her recent brush, in the course of the case of Luther Blisset, with the strange forces that swirled around Freemasonry had left her with very little doubt that there was much more to the Masonic orders than charitable groups of middle-aged men conducting funny ceremonies. "Dad was . . . is a Mason. I knew he was important somehow, but maybe he's more important than I thought."

"So what exactly does that mean?"

"Damned if I know, and damned if I'm going to stand here and wait for the answer to find me."

She climbed into the car and started it, pulling away before Ned even had his door closed. The freeway wasn't far.

As she made a sharp turn out of the hotel driveway, however, a police cruiser slid across the intersection at the end of the block, closing it off.

Jeane cursed and glanced over her shoulder. The other end of the block headed back into Parma—but it too was now sealed by a second cruiser. Jeane turned forward again.

The first cruiser was parked badly. There was a huge gap by its tail, easily wide enough to drive through.

"Buckle up, Ned!" she snapped, and gunned the motor.

She was bearing down on the gap, just seconds away from breaking through, when a tall, lean, grey-haired figure stepped around the cruiser to stand directly in her path.

Stan.

Never hesitate in the crunch. If you don't like what's in front of you, fall back.

Jeane's foot jumped from the accelerator to the brake and slammed down hard. Tires and brake shoes squealed in protest. She and Ned were thrown hard against the restraints of their seatbelts.

The car came to a stop only about ten feet from Stan. For a moment, nobody moved—not Jeane, not Ned, not Stan in the street, not Miles beside the cruiser. Then Stan began to walk slowly toward the car. Jeane unbuckled her seat belt and got out to meet him. She had never seen him look more pale or more troubled.

"You're a hard person to talk to, Jeane," he said tentatively.

"Being lied to doesn't make it easier."

Stan nodded. "I know. That's why I need to talk to you now." He met her eyes. "I can give you the answers you want."

They got a police escort back to the Meara house. Miles, his face and uniform still greasy and stained from Ned's cheeseburger, whispered an apology to Jeane as he walked them to the door. She didn't say anything back, and he didn't wait for a reply, just clapped his hat on his head and went back down the walk to his car. Stan ushered Jeane and Ned inside, and it was just the three of them in her parents' old living room.

Stan and Ned sat. Jeane remained standing. “So what brought about the sudden change of heart?” she asked.

Stan sighed. He sat in his favorite armchair with his shoulders hunched and his back bent, really showing his age for the first time Jeane could remember. “I made a few phone calls last night and this morning.”

“I’ll say,” Jeane snorted. “Rallying the Masonic troops? Sworn to mutual aid and support and all that stuff.”

“Jeane,” Stan said, “they’re my friends. I needed to find you, and they helped me out. I’m sorry if it looked like something else.” He looked up. “But this did all start with the Masons.”

Stan shifted in his chair and continued, “You know that your mother and I tried to have children for years after we were married. Your mother miscarried five times. It was hard on us—especially on her. We had a lot of friends through the Masons, all over the country, and I guess word got around. One day I got a call from a friend in St. Louis asking if Rose and I would like to have dinner with him and some other Masons. I don’t really remember everyone who was at that dinner, but one of them was a doctor from Los Angeles named Samuel Hollister.” He sighed. “In hindsight, that dinner was more like an interview, because a couple days later, I heard from Sam Hollister again.

“It turns out Sam had somehow heard about our difficulties having children. At the same time, he had a problem of his own. He knew a young, unmarried woman—one of his patients—who was pregnant and needed to find a home for her baby.”

“That’s sounding pretty familiar,” Jeane pointed out, “and really, really sordid. It sounds like your Dr. Hollister knocked this girl up himself.”

“Jeane,” said Stan, “that girl was your mother.”

“But not Dale Churchill.”

Stan sighed again. “No,” he confessed, “not Dale Churchill.

However, Sam Hollister was also not your father. Rose and I suspected the same thing, but Sam swore that the young woman really was his patient and nothing more. We believed him.”

“So why the big secret, then?” demanded Jeane. “Why the lie?”

“Because she was from a good family,” Stan explained. “A *very* good family and very prominent locally. Sam said she had initially been pressured to have an abortion but had run away in hopes of keeping the baby. Eventually she realized that would be impossible. She was going to have to go back to her family eventually. She asked for Sam’s help to find someone who would adopt her baby, raise it well, and, most importantly, keep it away from her family.” He looked down at his hands. “Rose and I talked it over. Even back then there was a waiting list for adoptions, so we agreed. Sam even paid for our plane tickets out to LA. In return, all we had to do was stay quiet about the arrangement and just treat it like a private adoption.

“On August twenty-eighth, 1962, Rose and I told everyone we were going to Cleveland to adopt. Instead we flew to Los Angeles. On September fourth—the same day you were born—we adopted you. We never met your mother, and Sam told us later he never saw or communicated with her again after you were delivered. Sam must have had some connections because he had the whole identity of Dale Churchill in Cleveland set up as a cover story. He even got your birth officially registered in Ohio.”

Stan reached down beside his chair and produced the plain brown envelope Jeane had seen him carrying into the police department. He offered it to her.

“This is a copy of what you would find in your adoption file, including a birth certificate for Jeane Churchill. When Miles called to say you were at the station, I came over to give it to you and explain everything.” There were big

tears in his eyes. “And that’s the truth, angel.”

Jeane felt a certain moisture in her own eyes, too, but after so many years of a lie . . . She glanced at Ned, his face fixed on Stan in concentration.

“Is it the truth?” she asked. Ned nodded solemnly, and Jeane turned back to Stan. “So when I told you I wanted to meet Dale when I was eighteen . . .”

Stan nodded. “It was Sam’s idea to hire someone to reject you so that you wouldn’t look any further. He decided to hire someone from Los Angeles, figuring it was far enough away that you’d never meet her again.”

“Except that I did.”

Jeane closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, she took the envelope that Stan still held out—and passed it to Ned so that she had both hands free to draw her father out of his chair and hug him.

“Oh, Dad.”

“Jeane, I’m sorry. Your mother was always sorry, too.”

Jeane drew back a bit so that she could look him in the eyes. “So why are you telling me this now, Dad? Last night you said you couldn’t.”

Stan wiped away tears. “Those calls I made. I hadn’t heard from Sam Hollister in a while, so I tried to get in touch with him again. It turns out he died seven years ago.”

A weight settled back into Jeane’s stomach. “But if he was the only one who knew who my real birth mother was . . .”

Stan flicked her under the chin. “No, angel. Sam had a son, and he was one of the people I talked to this morning. He was the one who said to go ahead and tell you the whole story—and to encourage you to get in touch with him. It seems Sam left something for you.”

The weight in Jeane’s belly turned to an electric excitement. She threw her arms around her father and hugged him

hard, then spun him bodily around so that she could look at Ned over his shoulder. “How about it, Ned? Fancy a quick trip to LA?”

The big man groaned and threw up his hands. “Why not? I’m sure Chicago is doing well enough without us.”

chapter

RIGHT

Night fell over Chicago. Somewhere out in the darkness, McCain and Ngan searched for some supernatural creature that might already have killed four people.

Perversely, Van wished he were with them. He turned back to his anthropology text book and tried, for the ninth or tenth time, to apply himself to the details of the Neolithic period in Anatolia and the Levant. For the ninth or tenth time, they slipped away with astonishing rapidity, and he found himself thinking about McCain and Ngan again.

The rest of the afternoon after leaving Monty and Liam had been spent in the team's office. He, McCain, and Ngan had split Lisa Renfield's file from Elgin between them and sifted through the photocopied pages for any clue that might help them locate her, determine her agenda in the city, or figure out a little more information about the mysterious

creature from the morning's attack. The two agents treated him as an equal, and when Emma had brought coffee, she had brought a third mug for Van without even asking. It was a good feeling.

Unfortunately, they hadn't uncovered anything new. Fifteen years of being a patient at Elgin had produced a lot of notes on Lisa Renfield, but much of what the agents and Van read was information they already knew or had inferred. Specific diagnoses of Renfield's illness had varied over the years as doctors came and went. Only Olivia Marquez's notes appeared to indicate any real improvement—right alongside mention of Renfield's emerging belief in a protector who could fend off the decay that obsessed her. All they could glean from the information was that they were dealing with a very intelligent, very clever woman. That wasn't at all encouraging.

At the end of a long, frustrating day, McCain and Ngan had sent Van back home in a cab while they tried to prepare for what was likely to be a long, frustrating night. Neither of them was confident in Monty's plan for locating the creature, though Ngan had admitted that they had no better plan to propose.

Van realized he was staring out the window again.

Damn it, it wasn't fair! Monty had made that argument sound petulant this morning, but it was true. Van wanted to be out there with the other Institute agents instead of stuck safely away in a dorm room. He knew what sort of things lurked in the world and yet he wasn't permitted to do anything about it. How fair was that? The creature didn't scare him—much.

His bitter fretting was interrupted as the door of the room flew open and his roommate tore in. "Hey, man, a bunch of us are going to a kegger." He spared a glance for Van as he whirled around the room—pulling off the grungy sweatpants he had been wearing, pulling on a slightly less grungy pair of

jeans, jamming his feet into a pair of shoes, and snatching up a jacket and his wallet. "You coming?"

Van shook his head. "Can't tonight, Dillon." He flapped his text book in the air. "Too much work."

"Dude, a *kegger!*"

"Dude," Van shot back, "*no time!*"

Dillon shrugged. "Your loss, my gain." He paused halfway out the door with his hand on the knob. "Hey, how did your job interview go?"

It took Van a moment to remember his excuse for dressing up that morning. "Okay," he said noncommittally. "We'll see if they call back."

"What was the job again?"

"Just office work for a charity. Nothing big—just a little extra cash."

"Well, when you got some, you're going to have to come out and buy a round. See you later." Dillon pulled the door closed. Van kept his eye on it and started counting slowly. At ten, Dillon stuck his head back in. "You're sure? You look like you need a break."

"Next time," Van promised and sighed as Dillon closed the door.

Dillon was a good roommate, but he never took "no" for an answer. Van looked down at his textbook again. Dillon was right about one thing, though. He did need a break. He wasn't getting any work done. Not this kind of work, anyway. He closed the textbook, stood up from his desk, and stretched.

One of the good things that had come out of his experiences in Bachelor's Grove Cemetery was the revelation of his psychic potential. Under Ned's tutelage, Van had been trying to draw out his gifts. He hadn't had any luck so far, but Ned had urged him to keep trying and to listen to his instincts. Well, if his instincts were dragging his thoughts to McCain and Ngan maybe he should be trying to help them along. Van

had had no luck before with the exercises in clairvoyance Ned taught him, but maybe this time . . .

He lay down on his bed and took three slow, deep breaths, trying to let the tension flow from his body with each breath. On the third, he let his mind go blank and concentrated—really concentrated—on Michael McCain and Ngan Song Kun'dren. Their images came to his mind easily enough, the essence of what he knew of them a little more slowly. He kept at it, holding them in his mind's eye until his sense of them was almost real. Then he took a fourth deep breath and reached deep inside himself for the still, quiet place from which Ned said a psychic's power flowed.

And reached. And reached.

He had the power. He knew he did. Somehow, though, it always eluded him. He could feel it, but he just couldn't find it. Confidence, he reminded himself. He *would* reach his power. He *would* bring the images of McCain and Ngan to life and he *would* see them as they walked the dark streets of Chicago's west side. He *would*—

He would fail again, just as he had so many times before. He wouldn't find the power.

The moment broke.

"Damn," Van murmured to himself as he swam back into a sort of warm, relaxed semi-consciousness.

He let himself float in that state, not quite awake, not quite asleep, but definitely not psychically active. Maybe he didn't have the gift of clairvoyance but what the hell was holding back whatever gift he did have? It was as frustrating as . . . well, as searching Renfield's file and finding nothing new, nothing suspicious.

No, that wasn't quite true, he realized. There had been one thing that had nagged at him. Among the papers Van had skimmed had been a record of the fourteen visits Renfield had received in 1987, the first year she had been deemed sufficiently fit to talk to visitors. Twelve of the visits, once a

month like clockwork, were her parents, both now dead. The remaining visits had been from a Norm Medvede claiming to be a friend of Renfield's. His first visit had ended with Renfield breaking down in a fit of violence. Medvede's second appearance was a visit in name only: her doctors had rejected his request on the grounds of protecting their patient.

Van had shown the sheet to McCain, who had nodded. He had seen it, too, and had found Renfield's reaction strange as well. He had also, however, taken a few moments to use the Institute's resources to try to find out something about Mr. Medvede—without success. In all likelihood, the name was fake, and as suspicious as that visit was, it had taken place almost fifteen years ago. There wasn't much they could do to follow up on it.

"*Medvede*," Van whispered aloud in his half-dreaming state.

Except for being spelled with an "e" on the end, it was the Russian word for bear. "Honey-eater." Ned had told him that. Van had been a little disappointed—he had wanted to surprise his mentor with what he had learned about taboo words, but Ned had already known it. Ned knew *medved*.

Ned Medvede.

Norm Devromme.

Van's eyes snapped open. He rolled off the bed and scrambled for a piece of paper and a pen, hurriedly writing out Ned Devromme, then scratching off the letters to spell out . . . Norm Medvede. An anagram.

"Holy crap," he choked. "God damn."

Something else came back to him as well. The first time he had met Ned, Van had confessed to holding a séance in Bachelor's Grove Cemetery. Ned turned on him, describing some of the horrendous things that could have gone wrong. If Van closed his eyes, he could still see the psychic standing over him and hissing a menacing warning.

"There are more than just ghosts out there, you know. Oh, yes. There was a group right here in Chicago that managed to summon up something much worse than a ghost. No one knows what they summoned because only one person survived. All the rest were just . . . gone. And the person who survived, the leader, she had her mind totally burned away . . ."

Ned knew about Renfield. Ned *knew* Renfield.

Van reached for the telephone, then paused. Who was he going to call? McCain and Ngan? He had no way of reaching them thanks to Monty's insistence on no cell phones. Should he call Ned directly? That just didn't seem like the right way to go about confronting his mentor. If he'd known how to get in touch with Jeane, he would have, but not even her partners knew where she was. The only person left working on the investigation was . . .

Him.

Van couldn't help grinning as he pulled on a jacket and shoes, checked his transit pass, and ran out the door.

"What do you mean Ned's not here?" Van demanded. "Where is he?"

"Don't know," mumbled Kaz without looking directly at him.

Perched, as always, behind the counter in Ned's shop, the skinny clerk was trying his best to simultaneously speak with Van and watch an old episode of *Star Trek*. Van had the distinct impression that *Star Trek* was beating him out. Just as the captain of the *Enterprise* and his crew were stepping into the transporter, Van reached out and clicked off the set. Kaz whined in protest, but at least Van had his full attention.

"If you don't know where Ned is," he said firmly, "do you know when he'll be back?"

Kaz shrugged. "Couple of days."

Van grimaced and drummed his fingers against the counter. The bus and L train ride from the University of Chicago campus to Ned's shop in Wicker Park was just long enough that going back empty-handed was going to be completely frustrating. So much for his excitement at the discovery of Ned's connection to the case.

"When did Ned leave, Kaz?"

The clerk twisted around and peered intently at an old electric clock that hung on the wall before turning back around.

"Yesterday," he said. "With Jeane. They had bags." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Get out."

Ngan said Jeane had taken time off on a personal matter, but Van found the possibility of Jeane and Ned running away for a romantic interlude together as likely as the possibility of Kaz getting a haircut. Then again, the idea of Jeane and Ned going *anywhere* together was a little difficult to believe. He looked at Kaz doubtfully. The clerk just nodded with greater vigor and a wider, more leering grin.

Van shook his head. "Thanks, Kaz."

He flicked the television back on and left the shop.

It was only a short walk to the Damen station and the Blue Line L train that would take him back downtown. Van spent most of the walk and his wait for the train in a sullen mood. He had news, sure, but it wasn't the great news that he had wanted to present to McCain and Ngan. They didn't have Ned to answer their questions. In fact, they had a new little puzzle—where had Jeane and Ned gone together?

A train pulled into the station, and Van stepped aboard. He found a window seat and stared out at the lights of the city flickering past. At least he had something interesting to report tomorrow, and at least his curiosity about what Monty's hunting party was up to had left him. Ngan and McCain—and Liam—were probably still stalking the streets

behind Monty. McCain would likely be complaining about sore feet. Ngan wouldn't be saying anything at all, just following along in that stoic, inscrutable way of his. Liam . . . Van supposed that Liam would be silent, too, though he had been talkative enough once he was away from Monty and out of his shell. As for Monty, Van had a sudden vision of the tubby little researcher in an absurdly outsized pith helmet, leading the party like some Victorian adventurer, and it made him laugh out loud. Damn, that was better!

Van was still chuckling when the train pulled into the Washington station. He glanced at his watch as he passed from the Blue Line platform to the Red Line on his way down to State Street and the Jeffrey Express bus that would take him back to the university campus. It was going to be late by the time he got home. It had been a long day, and the temptation of Dillon's keg party aside, he was looking forward to—

He froze.

There was a southbound train just coming to a stop along the Red Line. Even at this hour the platform was busy, though it was still open enough that he had a pretty good view of everyone climbing aboard. Including a pale woman with a pointed chin and light chestnut hair.

Renfield. There was absolutely no doubt in Van's mind. The woman wore a threadbare winter coat, and her arm was weighed with blandly normal grocery bags, but it was definitely Renfield. She was nowhere near the west side where Monty and the others were searching. She didn't look to be going that way at all.

The first chime of the train's doors rang.

Van didn't really even stop to think about what he was doing, just sprinted for the Red Line train and jumped onto the car behind the one Renfield had entered. He made it just as the doors shivered and slid shut, earning a disapproving look from a portly older woman. Van smiled slightly,

shrugged his shoulders, and headed up toward the front of the car, swaying slightly with the movement of the train. He took a seat a little distance back, one from which he could see through the windows that looked between the cars.

Renfield was clearly visible. She sat about halfway along the length of her car—facing back toward him. For a moment, Van wanted to crouch down and hide, but he fought the urge and took another discrete glance. Renfield wasn't even looking in his direction at all, just staring out the side windows like so many of the other passengers. There was no sign of any shadowy figure or ultraterrestrial monster. She was completely alone. Van took a longer glance, then another. Renfield looked so very normal, just another poor woman taking the late night train home from a menial job. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe this wasn't Renfield at all.

Maybe.

Van's doubts grew as the train made its short, jerky trips between the downtown stations of Washington, Monroe, and Jackson and Renfield made no move to get off. They breezed through the Harrison station, closed for the night. They were getting into residential areas now, and with her grocery bags, Renfield certainly did look like any other woman on her way home. At Roosevelt station, he watched her carefully, alert for any sign that she might be preparing to get off, but the train pulled out of Roosevelt, made the long roll to Cermak-Chinatown, and left that station for Sox-35th without any move on Renfield's part. Van began to wonder just how far south she was going.

He also began to wonder about Ned's connection to her. The Hoffmann Institute files said that Renfield had been involved with black magic before her breakdown. He believed the Institute files. Ned had described her as the leader of a group. Van believed Ned, too, but just how did Ned know she was the leader? His mentor certainly knew as much about magic as he did about psychic gifts, and he had always been

reluctant to talk about his past. Van had always found that a little strange before. Now he found it downright disturbing.

The train slowed for its approach to Sox-35th. Van glanced ahead to check on Renfield.

She had turned away from the window. She had turned to stare at him.

Any doubt about her identity vanished as he met, for a second, those haunted eyes. A shudder ran down his back, crawling along his skin and radiating out from his spine. It was all he could do not to jerk his head down and away from Renfield's gaze. He forced himself to keep his face neutral, to shift his glance casually past, as if he were just looking around, focussing on nothing in particular. He knew that she was staring at him—there was no one in either car between them, and there was no one immediately behind him in his car. There no one else she could be looking at. Renfield was staring at him and him alone.

The train squealed to a halt at the Sox-35th station. A few people got off. Fewer people got on. Renfield didn't move. Out of the corner of his eye, Van could see the open doors of his car. He could get off. He *should* get off. There would be no shame in it, he knew. Neither McCain nor Ngan would blame him. But there were too many stops to the south still. Renfield could get off at any of them, and they would lose her completely.

The train made his decision for him. The doors chimed and closed on Sox-35th. The car jerked and swayed and began moving again. Renfield continued to stare. In spite of the distance between them, Van could see that her eyes were deep and intense, like holes punched into her face.

He was, he realized a little belatedly, staring back at her now. This time he did jerk his gaze away—there didn't seem to be any point in hiding it. How had she picked him out? Had he been looking at her too openly or too frequently before? Did Renfield somehow know he was with the Hoffmann Institute?

No. How could she? How could she even know about the Hoffmann Institute? Van was just a stranger on the train. He could be anybody. He had simply had the misfortune of catching Renfield's attention.

Like the garbage truck driver this morning?

The crawling of his skin had turned to a cold, light sweat. A fast glance from under his brows showed Renfield still staring. This time when he looked away, he could still feel that gaze on him. His heart was racing suddenly, his breath coming quick and sharp. He ground his teeth together. *No*, he told himself, *get a grip*. She was in another car with people around her. There were at least a dozen people more in his own car. Even if she tried anything there would be warning. It was okay. He seized on another one of Ned's exercises, a calming exercise that had always come easily to him. It didn't come easily this time though, and even when it did come, it didn't help. Time stretched out. He could still feel Renfield's stare.

The train began to slow again. 47th Street. He risked raising his head a little.

Renfield wasn't looking at him anymore. Instead she was gathering her grocery bags and rising. She spared one last glance for him, then turned to sway toward the door as the lights of the station rushed up on them.

Her stop. He was safe. Except . . .

Van swallowed again, trying to draw moisture through a mouth that was suddenly very, very dry. Except that there was still a lot of territory around the 47th Street station. Renfield could get a bus from there. She could walk back to the north—or further south, or east or west. Knowing only that Renfield got off the train at 47th Street was hardly of greater use to McCain and Ngan than Monty's insistence on searching the west side. They needed more.

The doors of the train opened. Renfield stepped out of her car.

There were a couple of people getting off from Van's car as well. He darted out in their wake, using them as cover. The train doors closed after him, and the train rumbled as it began to move. No turning back.

The scant handful of people on the platform were funneling toward the stairs that led to the rest of the station and its various exits. Renfield was already on the stairs, her bags like white plastic beacons. The other people gave her a wide berth, perhaps out of instinct, and she moved quickly. She didn't look back. She hadn't seen Van get off the train—he hoped. He hung back, waiting until he thought that she had reached the other end of the stairs, then took them himself with the last of the passengers from the platform.

In the station itself, however, his cover dispersed. Van slid in behind a pillar, scanning the open areas for signs of Renfield. There were a number of bus bays at this level: 47, 43, 51 west and east, 24 north and south. Renfield stood in none of them. There were street exits, too, short dim walkways from the station. He could see straight down the passage to 47th Street east at South LaSalle Street. It was empty. But the passage to 47th Street west at South Wells Street was around a corner, and at that corner—

A flicker of white plastic. Quickly, but carefully Van went that way. He was alone. None of the other passengers had come in this direction. Taking a deep breath, he ducked around the corner.

The passage was long and disquietingly dim, with a darkened ticket collector's booth at the far end. It was also quite empty, though the door at its far end was just clicking closed. Van took a step into the passage—and stopped.

Renfield should still have been in sight. The passage was just too long for her to have gotten all the way to the doors so fast.

How many times have I seen this in a movie? he asked himself. His heart was beating so fast it hurt. His whole body

d o n b a s s i n g t h w a i t e

was shaking with the effort of breathing. How many times have I yelled at the characters not to go in there?

And yet it took effort to step back away from the passage—to step well back, not turning around until he was a good twenty feet back inside the well lit, open area of the station. He could feel the rumble and wind of another train approaching the station. Northbound, this time. Back to safety. He turned and ran—*ran*—to catch it.

In the shadows beyond the collector's booth, Renfield watched the young man flee.

"Too bad," she whispered to the worm curled inside her jacket. "He had potential."



chapter
9

M

McCain sipped at his second coffee of the morning. The bitter brew was black and as strong as he could get it.

Monty's monster hunt had, as expected, been a wash. For a little more than eight hours they had blundered around the dark streets and alleys of Chicago's west side. They had started at the site of the attack on the garbage man and worked their way outward in ever increasing spirals, all of them searching for some sign of their ill-defined quarry. Monty had sent them peering into every corner, behind every trash bin, and into every door that didn't seem properly secured. McCain had spent most of the night on edge in case someone should notice their suspicious quartet and call the cops. There were many things that Monty's techniques were not and one of them was subtle.

They had, of course, found nothing at all related

to their case, although they had made some interesting discoveries. For instance, McCain had never fully appreciated just how many raccoons there were in Chicago. Nor had he known about Ngan's apparently unerring ability to locate dog shit by stepping in it. He had also discovered that the little thermographic camera Monty had walked around staring into all night could register sufficient heat inside a bin of rotting garbage to send them digging into it, yet it could not warn Monty of any number of rocks or other debris in his path that might trip him. As long as the researcher had insisted on relying on the device, however, neither McCain nor Ngan—nor, surprisingly, Liam—had found it necessary to point the obstacles out to him. And Monty, stubbornly, had refused to give it up.

The hunt had finally broken off around two a.m. when even Monty had been forced to admit that there was nothing to find. They had all gone their separate ways, McCain driving Ngan home to Devon Avenue before himself retiring to his loft in the downtown River North neighborhood. Unfortunately, that hadn't quite been the end of the night for him. There had been two messages on his answering machine—true to his warning of the morning before, Monty had made McCain leave his cell phone behind in the car. The first message had been from Jeane, finally calling in to let them know where she was: en route to Los Angeles. She didn't say why. McCain hoped she was all right.

The second message was from Van. There had been urgency in his voice and frustration at getting a machine rather than McCain directly. "Call me," the message said, "as soon as you get in." To his regret, McCain hadn't, opting instead for immediate, deep, and dreamless sleep.

Precisely at nine o'clock, his phone had begun ringing with tremendous insistence until he finally answered it. It was Van. All he had to say to bring McCain fully awake were three words: "I've seen Renfield."

Two cups of coffee and a little more than an hour later, McCain looked at Van over the rim of his cup and across the meeting table in the team's office, cursing himself for not calling back the night before—and cursing Van for putting himself in such danger. When the young man finished his story, McCain grimaced.

"Getting on that train was probably the stupidest, most dangerous thing you could have done." He sighed. "I probably would have done exactly the same thing."

"Except that you probably wouldn't have turned around, Michael," commented Ngan. He nodded to Van. "I think you made the right choice."

"Thanks." Van took a deep swallow of coffee. "I just can't believe that this whole time, we might have been able to get answers just by going to Ned."

"If he did leave town with Jeane the day before yesterday, it's a moot point—he wouldn't have been around anyway." McCain turned to Ngan and said, "There's actually more to that story of Ned's. I should have remembered it, too, because he told me the whole thing. I just kept my mouth closed because I wasn't sure how much he wanted spilled to the public. Eventually it was buried deep enough that I just didn't make the connection."

Ngan leaned forward. "I think it may be time to 'spill.' "

McCain took a deep breath and mentally apologized to Ned. "You know part of this, I think," he told Ngan, then glanced at Van. "You don't. Ned used to be a diabolist before he discovered he was psychic. After he tried to scare you straight with that story, I asked him if it was true. Ned said it was—that the group that disappeared was actually his old circle of diabolists. He'd left them and diabolism behind shortly before they had their little accident."

Van looked startled. Ngan just sat back again and said, "Ah." He put his fingertips together and contemplated the ceiling for a moment before adding, "I had known about

Ned's experience with the occult. I didn't realize he had such a close connection to Renfield, however. No wonder he tried to visit her at Elgin."

"No wonder she had fits," Van said. He looked from Ngan to McCain and back. "So without Ned around, does knowing this do us any good? Are we any further ahead?"

McCain wrinkled up his nose and thought about it. The connection was interesting but, like Ned's alias of Norm Medvede, it was also fifteen years old. If they could get in touch with him, Ned might be able to give them some general answers, but beyond that . . .

"Frankly," McCain said with another grimace, "I think Renfield's getting off at 47th Street is a better lead, though if there was anything else, I'd take it. My feet are still sore from last night, and I'm not looking forward to another back-alley search."

"Actually, I wonder if we are perhaps farther ahead than we should be," said Ngan in a cautious tone that made McCain swing around in his chair to look at his partner. The old man still had his fingertips together and his face tilted up to the ceiling. He brought it down again and looked at both of them. There was a shadow in his eyes. "Why did it take us so long—"

Before he could complete that thought, however, McCain's desk phone rang, the little intercom light flashing to show it was a call from the outer office. McCain reached over and hit the speakerphone button. "Hello, Emma."

"Monty Desmond and Liam Crogher to see you, Fitz."

McCain made a face. So did Van. And while Ngan's face did not shift from its usual placid inscrutability, he certainly didn't look pleased.

"Tell Monty we'll see him in five minutes," the old man said.

"He'd like to see you now, Ngan." Their secretary sounded rather irritated. McCain couldn't say he blamed her.

"Five minutes, Emma. Impress that upon Monty if you have to." Ngan hung up the phone with a stab of his finger and sat up straight. "Why did it take us so long," he repeated, "to discover Ned's connection to Renfield—his being out of Chicago aside?"

"There was nothing about Ned in the file," Van pointed out. "Maybe no one knew about him and Renfield."

"Exactly."

"What are you getting at Ngan?" asked McCain. "We know Ned doesn't like to talk about his past. It's not a stretch to assume he worked at keeping it out of Institute files."

Ngan nodded. "Which means that no one else knows we have inside information on Renfield." He sat back again. "Renfield is slippery. She always seems to be one step ahead of us. Our brushes with her, all of our leads, have turned up by accident. The information we have been given is very little use at all." Ngan folded his hands on the table. "I think that perhaps we have been lazy in simply accepting only the information that was presented to us."

If that wasn't a loaded statement, then McCain had never heard one in his life and he looked at Ngan again, trying to guess at exactly what he meant. On one level, the old man's meaning was clear. They really hadn't dug into the Hoffmann Institute's resources, but had worked only from the thin folder that Lily had handed to them.

On another level though, Ngan's statement had a more sinister significance. If their information on Renfield was so useless, why hadn't they been warned when it was given to them? A resounding impact that shook the office doors interrupted his thoughts, though. Ngan frowned. "I don't think that was five minutes, but perhaps we should take up this line of inquiry another time." He glanced at McCain and Van. "Your discretion on this, please?"

McCain nodded without hesitation, but Van looked

frightened. “Wondering what you’ve got yourself into now, Van?” McCain asked.

“Just a little.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll steer through it and come up smelling like roses.” McCain gave the young man a reassuring smile and Van looked relieved. Now if only, McCain thought to himself, someone could do that for me. He stood, walked over to the office doors, and pulled them open.

Emma was holding Monty in a painful-looking joint lock just on the other side of the doors. The researcher might have been angry a moment before, but now he just seemed dazed. Liam was very wisely waiting in the background.

When Ngan looked at Emma questioningly, she smiled and said, “You said to impress five minutes upon him if necessary.” She released her hold on Monty. “Ngan and Fitz will see you now, Mr. Desmond.”

McCain took Monty’s arm and helped him to a chair. “Sorry about that, Monty,” he apologized. “Emma takes her work very seriously.”

“Bull.” Monty touched his face gently. “She enjoyed that.”

I’m sure she did, thought McCain, and I envy her the chance. “What brings you out to the wastelands of Schiller Park, Monty?”

The researcher sat back in his chair. “The police are investigating another missing person report this morning. North side. The victim went out on an errand last night and never came back. Her car was found near her destination, the store clerk confirmed that she had been in, but there’s no sign of her.”

“You think it could be Renfield,” McCain guessed.

“And/or the creature seen at the garbage truck attack,” corrected Monty. “There were no witnesses this time.”

“Now you want to go investigate the scene yourself.” It could have been a question but Ngan made it more of a statement. The old man looked at Monty expectantly.

Monty just shook his head and held up a computer disk. “We’ve already been there. This is from my digital camera. If you can manage to plug it into a computer, you can see the pictures.”

McCain snatched the disk away from him with a growl and jammed it into the computer on his desk. While the machine opened the images on the disk, he swiveled around to face Monty again. “So if you’ve already been there, why come back to us?”

Monty sniffed. “In spite of your attitude, Mr. McCain, we are supposed to be working together.”

“Files are open,” said Van before McCain could get a verbal shot back at Monty. He turned back to the computer in silence. Everyone crowded around to peer over his shoulder.

The photographs showed a fairly typical crime scene of police officers, a couple of cars, and a small crowd hanging around—much like the day before, in fact. Strip out all of those things, though, and there was only an expensive, late model car sitting in the middle of a parking lot. A late-model car with a strange pale streak across the ground just beside the trunk. McCain magnified the picture as much as he could without reducing it to a pixilated blur.

“Monty, what’s that?” McCain asked.

The researcher shrugged. “Dirt on the ground. The wind was blowing it around.”

Maybe it was just dirt, but McCain didn’t think so. A disappearance on the city’s north side—and Van had seen Renfield on the train coming from the north. McCain brought the picture back to normal size and looked at the background behind the car. The parking lot belonged to a medium-sized mall. There were a number of stores visible, including a large supermarket. Renfield had been carrying bags of groceries. Waste not, want not, he supposed.

“The victim was grocery shopping before she disappeared, wasn’t she?” asked McCain.

“Yes,” said Monty slowly and with some suspicion. “How did you know that?”

McCain glanced at Van and Ngan. Ngan gave him a slight nod. “Hold onto your chair, Monty,” McCain said gleefully. “We’re already way ahead of you.”

All things considered, Monty took the news of Van’s encounter the previous night rather well. He ranted, of course, complaining about Van’s lack of respect for orders and Ngan and McCain’s irresponsibility in not informing him of this *immediately*. In the end, though, and with a few whispered words from Liam, he settled down. Even he had to admit that the encounter with Renfield gave them a valuable lead. He was also quick to re-exert control over the case. Rather than returning to the scene of the latest disappearance, he decreed, they would investigate the area west of the 47th Street station and try to pick up Renfield’s trail there.

As if there was any other real choice. McCain felt like he had held back so many choice words in the past twenty-four hours that they would cramp him up like a bad case of gas. He had also held back the matter of Ned’s connection to Renfield. There seemed to be no point in sharing with Monty the psychic’s past. After a silent exchange of glances with Ngan, though, he had told Monty their theory about the gruesome origins of the dust at the disappearances. Monty had glowered and berated Liam for not thinking to collect specimens of the dust for analysis.

They drove down to the area in two separate cars and parked a short ways from the station. The wind off of Lake Michigan was cold as he got out of the car, but McCain savored the feel of the early afternoon sun on his face. He and Ngan had insisted on conducting this new search by

daylight. The chances of running into Renfield or the supposedly nocturnal beast might have been lower, but at least they would be able to see what they were doing. Somewhat to their surprise, Monty had agreed readily. McCain had decided to press their luck, and while the demand that Van come along this time brought three shades of purple to Monty’s face, the researcher eventually, and with bad grace, agreed to that as well.

The region west and north of the 47th Street L station was an old working-class neighborhood. Most of the houses were weathered brick rowhouses, probably dating to the twenties and set close to the street with no front lawns to speak of. The alleys that ran behind them were, by contrast, quite wide and lined with a motley variety of garages. Glimpsed over fences, the backyards of the houses were a fair size, many of them dense with flower and vegetable gardens. There were the usual urban eyesores of graffiti and garbage, but the houses were generally in good repair. It had the feel of a place that had been born in hard times, seen harder, and was now slowly recovering.

More than a few people paused and watched them from porches and lawns. Most were older, retired people, though some were younger—parents with small children, perhaps, or on shift work, or without a job altogether. McCain went to work without prompting, approaching the people they encountered with a smile and a handshake. Even if the people wore dour expressions on his approach, a few words and a pleasant comment was usually all it took to get them smiling. Once he had their interest, McCain would show them the picture of Renfield from their file and ask if they’d seen her. Unfortunately, no one had.

“Maybe you’re just not asking the right questions,” sneered Monty. “Let me try.”

There was a jogger coming up behind them, a young black woman with a fresh, healthy beauty that made McCain

think guiltily of Shani again. Monty plucked the photograph from McCain's fingers and, holding it up, stepped directly into the jogger's path. "Have you seen this . . . ?"

The young woman went right around him without even blinking or breaking stride. Monty glared after her in flabbergasted silence. Everyone else was silent, too, though McCain was simply trying his hardest not to laugh and suspected that the others were doing the same.

"Sorry, Monty," he managed finally, taking back the photo. "It looked like she was in a runner's trance. You know how joggers are when they really find their focus."

"Of course," said Monty. His face was red. He peered along a side street to the mouth of a back alley with a sudden, exaggerated intensity. "Hmmm . . . I think this might bear investigation. No, no—I can check it alone." He waved as if keeping them back, though no one had actually moved to accompany him. "Liam, perhaps you could meet me at the other end of the block?"

"Of course, Monty."

Liam sprinted ahead while Monty ducked down the side street and up the alley. McCain looked after him and murmured, "What a boob."

"Michael . . ." warned Ngan sternly, but his eyes were wrinkled with glee.

McCain shook his head. "I mean it. The man is a total boob. How does someone like that get the rank of Senior Researcher?" He sighed, then looked around them as they followed the jogger west along the street. The houses on this block were rougher than the ones they passed so far, a gradual shift toward decay, weeds, and more litter. "So what neighborhood would this be exactly anyway? It's too far south to be Bridgeport, right?"

"It's kind of on the border," Van said. "Bridgeport's north, and Back of the Yards is south and west."

"Back of the Yards?" asked Ngan.

"The area beside the old Union Stockyards." Van waved around them. "They used to be right up ahead on the far side of Halsted Street—blocks and blocks of feed pens, slaughterhouses, and railway facilities to ship meat across the country. They closed in 1971." He made a face. "We had to study them in school for local history. Gross. It turned half the class vegetarian for a few weeks."

"Interesting. About the stockyards, that is." Ngan looked speculative. "What's there now?"

"Industrial park. Just about everything from the old stockyards is totally gone." Van was staring after Liam. "Listen guys," he added suddenly, "I'm going to go hang with Liam for a bit while Monty's off sulking, okay?"

Ngan nodded and Van took off after Monty's assistant. As soon as he was out of earshot, McCain glanced at his partner. "You're thinking about something," he said quietly.

"I had been thinking that the old stockyards would be an excellent hiding place for someone obsessed with death. An industrial park doesn't have the same grim atmosphere, but I imagine it would offer a number of good hiding places as well."

"That's not what I mean, Ngan." They kept walking, slowly pacing off the length of the block. "What were you getting on about back at the office this morning?" McCain jammed his hands down into the pockets of his coat. "What's up?"

Ngan was silent for several moments before replying. "I think we're being played, Michael."

McCain blinked. "Why? Who?"

Ngan shook his head very slightly.

"Why, I don't know. Who . . ." Ngan hesitated, then said, "I told you once I thought there was a mole inside the Institute. I haven't changed my mind, but in addition to that, I have seen something in Lily's manner since we were assigned to this investigation. Something about it has her

spooked, but she can't or won't tell me what. In addition to any irregularities with the information we've been able to obtain concerning Renfield, there's the matter of the dust at the scene of her escape. That's a vital clue and yet it was cleaned away. I can't help wondering if we're being set up to fail."

"What about Jeane's running off right now?" McCain asked. "And with Ned yet. Do you think there's a connection?"

"No," answered Ngan. "I think Jeane's going away is indeed personal and simply a matter of very bad timing. I believe she would recognize if she were being manipulated. Ned's accompanying her is probably just a coincidence as well, though a very unfortunate one from our standpoint." He looked reflective for a moment. "I think," he said, "it may be time to interrupt them, however. We need to get in touch with Ned."

"We can try Jeane's cell phone as soon as we can get some privacy." McCain hesitated, then added, "Lily did call to warn you about Monty. Is he . . . ?"

Ngan shook his head more emphatically. "I wondered at first, but I don't think Monty is any more than he seems: a scientist who is completely focused on his work." He gave a little smile. "And who has very poor social skills."

"Liam?"

"I hope not." His smile twitched a little. "For Van's sake."

The cross-street at the end of the block was broad and busy Halsted—closer than Van had thought it was—and the industrial park that had once been the stockyards started on its other side. The jogger who had passed them had crossed the intersection and was just disappearing among the park's squat buildings.

Liam was waiting for him at the corner. "Thought I could use a little company?" he asked with a smile.

Van returned the grin. "Fitz and Ngan are cool, but I've been with them all morning. It seemed like a good time for a break."

"You're lucky there's someone young on your team." Liam shook his head as they walked up Halsted to the end of the alley. Monty was still perhaps two-thirds of the way back down the alley and taking his sweet time. Liam jerked his thumb discretely toward the researcher. "I've got him. At least your Mr. McCain looks like he doesn't take things too seriously." His face twisted into a grimace. "Crap. Monty's got me doing all this 'Mister' talk now. What is it you call McCain?"

"Fitz. I don't think he'd mind at all if you called him that—sometimes I think he's more comfortable with it than his real name." Van shrugged casually. "Ngan's okay too. You haven't met Jeane or Ned. Jeane's a former ATF agent, so she can be pretty intense, and she's *tough*. Ned's cool to hang around, but he can be pretty intense, too. They're both fairly old. Almost forty."

Liam snickered. "If you cringe when you say 'twenty,' you get a swift smack upside the head."

"Geezer," taunted Van and danced back from Liam's playful punch. "What about you? Aren't there any younger people at the CSC?"

Liam shook his head. "There are younger agents assigned to the CSC's parent division, but they're almost always out in the field or working in smaller offices. I guess working with the CSC at my age is a coup. It's deadly dull, though, and I can't talk about my work there to anyone." He looked at Van. "How do you handle the secrecy?"

"I guess I hang with Ned enough that I can talk about everything I need to. He's really my mentor more than Fitz or Ngan or Jeane." To Liam's quizzical expression, he coughed and said, "Apparently I'm a latent psychic."

It felt weird to actually discuss his ability out loud. He'd never spoken about it to anyone except Ned and the team before, and he half expected Liam to shy away from him because of it. Liam didn't even blink though. He actually seemed impressed. "That's wild." He glanced down the alley to where Monty was still slowly picking his way along, then turned back. "Van, would you like to go out for coffee sometime?"

Van's heart swapped places with his stomach for one sweet, thundering moment. "Yeah," he said thickly. "That would be gr—"

A short, sharp scream broke his words. Liam spun instantly to check on Monty, but the portly researcher was staring up at them. Van twisted around the other way. The scream had come from across the street, from somewhere just inside the industrial park.

The jogger, Ngan realized, it was the jogger who had passed them. He had seen her cross the street.

Without saying a word, he broke into a sprint. He didn't really have to say anything—McCain raced along behind him without needing instruction or explanation. He'd probably guessed exactly the same thing.

Van and Liam met them at the corner, with Monty huffing his way up out of the alley behind them. Van jammed his thumb against the crosswalk button but the lights resolutely ignored him.

"Turn, damn it," he snarled, "Turn!"

"Do you think it's Renfield?" panted Monty. "Do you think it's the creature?"

Ngan gave him a harsh glare and said, "Does it matter if it is?" The light was taking too long. "We need to cross now!"

"Watch your asses and follow me!" McCain dodged out

into the street. In one hand, he had the rectangular wallet containing his Hoffmann Institute ID. He brandished the open wallet at the oncoming traffic like a police badge. "Official business!" he shouted as he ran, "Official business!"

"He's insane!" Monty gasped.

"Then you can stay on this side," said Ngan and followed McCain, his own ID wallet held high.

Cars slammed on their brakes and honked their horns in a cacophony of frustration, but both of them made it across with Van and Liam in their wake, and Monty bringing up the rear, both arms wrapped protectively over his head.

"That was the most irresponsible—" he began.

Ngan cut him off before he could utter another word of complaint. "Did anyone see which way the jogger went?" he demanded. "Can anyone tell where the scream came from?"

"This way!" said Van, pointing.

The road was narrow, the buildings on either side just old enough to be abandoned. There would be no one else to respond to the jogger's scream. Her cry had been one of shock and surprise, not pain or death. She was, he was certain, still alive, and while Monty was right to question whether it was Renfield that had made her scream, Ngan had a horrible feeling the question was unnecessary.

A fluttering cloth, snagged on a chain-link gate that stood half open in the fence surrounding a vast lot of truck trailers caught Ngan's eye. A tear of yellow nylon, the color of the runner's shorts. There were marks in the dirt below. Someone had come to a sharp stop there, then run into the lot.

"There!" he told the others.

Even as he squeezed through the gates, though, there was another scream, this time of fear. And this time it cut off so abruptly they were all left in silence.

"Damn," hissed McCain.

"We keep going," whispered Ngan.

He touched a finger to the cloth. There was blood on it, and blood tipped the stiff, sharp wire that had snagged it. More blood made oblong drops on the cold ground. He slid forward, all senses alert. The only sounds were the nearby traffic and their own footsteps. The trail of blood was clear, leading back in among the trailers. They had not been well parked and, as a result, turned the lot into a narrow, twisted, shadowy maze. The jogger had tried to hide back there, Ngan guessed, perhaps startled into seeking refuge in the yard. It was not the best of choices—retreating back to the busy street would have been better—but it had long been his experience that people very seldom made the best decisions when they were scared.

After a few turns, the drops of blood became more frequent. The jogger had slowed down, perhaps thinking she had shaken off her pursuer. She hadn't. One of the drops was smeared across the pavement in a footprint. More footprints followed it, stamped out in blood.

"I heard something!" Monty gasped.

"No, you didn't," Ngan told him firmly.

The end of the trail lay around one more turn, ironically just a few trailers over from where they had entered the maze. This final space was larger than the other metal-sided canyons and two or three other deeply shadowed passages fed into it. There were some garbage cans and a few old wooden skids leaned against one of the trailers. In a patch of sunlight, blood made a concentrated little pattern. The jogger must have stopped, maybe to gather her strength. More drops, however, had fallen in rapid succession to make a short trail away from that pattern. Some of them had again been smeared by a footprint, but this time the footprint pointed backward. The jogger had been surprised as she rested. She had taken a few steps back away from her pursuer. There had been time to scream once more, but not to run again.

The short trail of blood ended in a drift of pale grey dust.

Renfield had been there. All of them stood frozen for a moment, then Monty swooped down on the dust with a muted exclamation of glee. He pulled a small plastic bag from a pocket, slipped it over his hand inside out, and dug into the drift, flipping the bag rightside out again around his specimen. Liam took a step forward as well, a digital camera at the ready. Van just looked away, his face pale. McCain stepped out into the middle of the open space, turning to look all around them and cursing.

Ngan didn't move, but instead swept his gaze around the open space. Everything seemed all right, and yet the inner voice that sometimes woke him from even the most profound sleep was stirring now.

"Stop," he said. "We're being watched."

chapter

1 0 E N

The afternoon found Jeane and Ned driving slowly through the streets of West Hollywood. An early flight out of Cleveland through Denver had put them into the busy terminal at LAX just after lunch. They had called ahead from Stan's the night before, and Dr. Sam Hollister's son had given them directions to his apartment. Unfortunately, the directions lacked some of the precision Jeane would have liked. She stared out the window of their rental car as she drove, searching for Holyoake Avenue. Ned, on the other hand, leaned back in his seat with his window rolled all the way down and basked in the California sunshine.

"Why not just stick your head out all the way so your tongue and ears can flap in the wind, Ned?" Jeane said finally. "It's not *that* warm out."

"It's better than late November in Chicago." Ned cracked his eyes open to peer at her. "You know, you

choose some great spots to have crises. Invite me along anytime." He glanced out the windshield and added, "Holyoake next intersection."

Jeane cursed as she looked up to see the intersection almost upon them. Amid a flurry of blaring horns and screeching tires, she made a hard turn and squealed around the corner. She shot a quick glance at Ned. The psychic was sitting all the way upright now, his eyes wide open.

"What?" she asked with a smile. "Not quite as relaxing as you thought?"

"Please try to remember that the car is rented in my name."

"Don't worry, I won't let anything happen to it." She bent down to look out the window at street numbers. "1204 . . . 1202 . . . 1200 . . . We need 992."

She pushed down on the accelerator and they roared forward to the accompaniment of Ned's small gasps of protest.

992 Holyoake Avenue turned out to be an old four-story apartment building from the 1930's. The edges of the building's deep yellow bricks were beginning to crumble, and the windows were dull with accumulated dirt. Two stubby wings of apartments swept forward to embrace a small courtyard. Apparently all attempts at gardening had been abandoned some years before. The courtyard had been paved over except for a few scraggly shrubs that collected litter at their bases. There was a strange smell in the cramped little vestibule just inside the door. Jeane held her breath as she buzzed apartment 3-F.

The voice that answered was distorted by the cheap intercom. "Hello?"

"Keith Hollister? It's Jeane Meara."

"Jeane! Come on up!"

The inner door of the vestibule clicked open. The halls and stairway on the other side smelled better, though the odors of cooking and stale smoke were still noticeable.

Worse, the stink of the vestibule clung to them. Ned beat at his clothes as they climbed.

“Not exactly the sort of place I’d expect to find a doctor’s son,” he commented, eyeing a long crack in the plaster of the wall.

“Yet strangely you seem perfectly content with your place,” Jeane replied dryly. “At least we don’t have to walk through a used bookstore to get to his apartment.”

Ned scowled at her.

The light in the hallway outside apartment 3-F was burned out, casting the hall into shadow. Jeane stepped up to the door and knocked sharply.

“It’s open!” Keith called from inside.

“In a building like this?” muttered Ned.

Jeane shrugged, opened the door, and stepped—

A sudden, blinding flash caught her full in the face. Instinct drove a warning yell from her lungs as she dived to the floor and rolled, reaching for her gun—or at least the empty place where she normally would have carried one. It was at home, she remembered belatedly. Instead, she thrust her legs out in a low, sharp kick toward the source of the light. If it had been held by a person, that kick would have taken him in the knees. Instead, her foot hit what felt like a thin tube of light metal. Through a haze of bright afterimages, she saw something start to topple. A figure jumped to grab it.

“Hey! That’s my camera!”

Jeane blinked the afterimages away as she rose into a cautious crouch. A man in his mid-thirties, with black hair and a big, blunt nose—a hatchet nose—cradled an instant camera mounted atop a cheap aluminum tripod with a bad dent in one of its legs. The camera had been modified with some sort of device replacing the more standard flash bulb.

“What the hell was that?” Jeane demanded, straightening up warily.

“My big project.” The man stood and carefully reset the tripod. It wobbled slightly. He muttered a curse. “It’s on a motion sensor with a two second delay. It takes a picture of everyone who walks through my door. Most people are surprised,” he added with a nasty glance at her, “but they don’t try to take out the camera.”

Jeane bit back a vicious retort. If this man was who she thought he was, she didn’t want to antagonize him. Fortunately, Ned saved the conversation—in his own dubious fashion. “Well, our Jeane isn’t what you might call photogenic.”

She elbowed him sharply in the stomach and smiled at the man. “I’m sorry about your tripod,” she apologized, “I’m just a little high strung right now.” She extended her hand. “I’m Jeane Meara. This is Ned Devromme. You must be Keith Hollister. I didn’t realize you were a photographer.”

“An artist,” Keith corrected her. “Instant photographs are my medium.”

Reaching behind himself, he plucked the little photograph from the camera and flashed it at her. The picture was pale, its colors still developing, but it was a near perfect shot of her face captured as she opened the door. Ironically, it was one of the better pictures of herself that Jeane could remember.

“Lovely,” she said.

“It did turn out well, didn’t it?” Keith looked over the picture himself, eyes bright. “It caught the shape and structure of your face perfectly, and the light completely washes out any imperfections in your skin. This is screen goddess material!” He tucked the picture into his shirt pocket, turned and waved them after him as went farther into the apartment. “Come on in.”

Dark doorways and halls hinted at other rooms beyond the cramped living room to which Keith led them. The living room itself was cluttered with crooked shelves, a worn coffee table, and a sofa that had been covered with a cheap red and orange throw. Jeane didn’t want to speculate about what

the throw might hide. A matching throw served as drapes over the room's window—it had been partly pulled back to allow a little daylight in. Every horizontal surface was piled with art books or magazines or kitschy little knickknacks that looked like they had been collected in the vain hope that they might one day become valuable. Keith's apartment was certainly no less messy than Ned's, though it had a ragged Bohemian air that was totally lacking in Ned's pigsty. Dry-mounted prints of famous photographs hung on two walls, but the third was dominated by an enormous board that had been marked off into a series of large grids. A calendar. Eleven months were filled with instant photographs stuck into the various days, sometimes more than one on a day but just as frequently none at all.

"Your project?" asked Ned. Keith nodded, and the big man added, "It's . . . interesting."

"Thanks." Keith stepped forward, sweeping an arm across the giant calendar. "This isn't all the photographs, of course, only the best ones as a representative sample. The whole installation would be too big for my apartment. In its full form, it will be a triptych representing the solitude and struggle of an artist's—"

Jeane coughed. "Uh, Keith? I'm sorry to interrupt, but we did just fly in from Ohio. If you don't mind, I'm kind of anxious to get to the reason we came here."

The artist let his hands drop. "I'm sorry. Of course, you are. Please, sit down anywhere." He dragged a chair closer to the couch. "Would either of you like something to drink first?"

"Water would be great," said Jeane.

"I have stronger stuff," Keith offered. "I'm having a shot of bourbon myself." He gave them a half grin. "I'm sort of nervous, too."

"Water," Jeane reiterated. Keith shrugged and glanced at Ned. The psychic shook his head. Keith shrugged again and went into one of the rooms of the living room, turning on a

light to reveal a cubby-hole of a kitchen. As soon as he was out of the room, Ned leaned over to Jeane.

"You're up to something," he whispered.

"Have you . . ." Jeane tapped her forehead, ". . . him?"

"I try not to eavesdrop constantly, thank you," Ned murmured in wounded tones.

"Well, could you check?" She gave him a quick glance. "I guess after Parma, I'm a little bit paranoid."

"I don't blame you at all." Ned's eyes glazed for a moment, then he blinked. "Nervous, like he said," he reported. "A little excited. Pretty normal under the circumstances, I think."

"Why should he be nervous?" Jeane muttered, annoyed. "I'm the one who—"

"Beg pardon?" asked Keith, coming out of the kitchen. In one hand he had a tall glass of water, in the other a glass of bourbon that was easily two shots if it was one. He handed the water to Jeane. "Did you say something to me?"

Jeane found herself blushing. "Not to you as such," she confessed. "I guess I was wondering why you should be nervous—I mean, considering I'm the one with the mysterious something left for me."

"Ah," said Keith and sipped at his bourbon as he sat down in the chair. Jeane and Ned took the couch. If Keith was upset that they had been talking about him behind his back, he didn't show it. "Well, I suppose I'm nervous because I'm the one giving away the mysterious something."

Keith set his drink down on the coffee table, then stood and went to a small chest of drawers in a corner of the room. He opened one of the drawers and took out a plain white envelope.

"My father gave this to me on his deathbed seven years ago. Very melodramatic. Very mysterious. He told me to keep it—and keep it a secret—because one day a woman might contact me looking for her mother."

Jeane almost spilled her water. “What?”

“That’s all he said.” Keith came back and sat down. The envelope, however, stayed in his hands. “For seven years I’ve wondered what was in this envelope and who this woman was. When your father called last night, he mentioned that my father had helped them adopt a daughter a long time ago. I put two and two together. This,” he said, holding up the envelope, “is for you. But in return, I want to know something.”

“What’s that?” Jeane asked carefully.

“What the hell is all this about?”

And that was probably the last thing she had expected him to ask. It certainly made sense though. If Sam Hollister had kept this secret the way Stan and Rose had, Keith was probably even more in the dark than she was. Jeane considered his request for a minute. What would it hurt if he knew, too? He didn’t need to know all of the details, but the basic story was easy enough. He had kept the envelope for her and as Hollister’s son, he probably had as much right to know what his father had been up to as anyone.

She sat back. “I don’t have all the answers right now, Keith—I’m hoping the rest are in that envelope.” She gave him the most basic details of her discoveries over the last two days. “Apparently the only person who knew the identity of my real birth parents—or my birth mother anyway—was your father.” She caught Keith’s scandalized expression and added quickly, “Your father swore that I wasn’t his. All my parents knew about my birth mother was that she was from a very prominent local family and that she was one of your father’s patients.”

Keith’s face shifted from scandalized to deeply puzzled almost instantly. “That can’t be right,” he said with a frown. “My father didn’t have patients.”

“Why not?” Ned asked suspiciously. “He was a doctor, wasn’t he?”

“Not a *medical* doctor.” Keith shook his head. “He was a scientist. For most of my life he was with the UCLA department of neurobiology.”

Jeane hissed through her teeth. “Why would he lie about something like that?”

“I don’t know,” Keith said, “but it sounds like you’re right. The only answers might be in here.”

He held out the envelope. For a moment, Jeane just stared at it. It was creased and worn, as any envelope that had been around for seven years might have been. It was thin, too, surprisingly thin for something on which so many unanswered questions rested. She took it from Keith, held it for a second—there was something small and heavy inside—then she slid one finger under a corner of the flap and quickly ripped it the length of the envelope. Keith and Ned leaned forward as she pulled out two carefully-folded pieces of paper.

The first piece was blank and wrapped around the other. Protection, Jeane guessed, against people trying to hold the envelope up to a light and read through it. The second page, however, was almost filled with typing. Taped to the bottom of it was a small, silver key.

“What is it for?” Keith asked.

Ned shushed him. Jeane sat back and read.

Jeane,

If you’re reading this, you know who I am, so introductions are unnecessary, although I think an apology is certainly in order. I’m sorry that we all had to lie to you, and I’m sorry that I had to lie to your adopted parents. They’re wonderful people and I know they raised you well. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive them and me—and your mother.

You may be wondering why I am writing this after so many years of secrecy. For one thing, I am dying. I know

that sounds like a line from a soap opera, so I encourage you to accept it as a simple statement of truth from an old man of science. I am dying and I commit my secrets to paper because your mother made me promise to tell you the truth if you ever asked. This letter, entrusted to my son Keith, seems like the best way to keep that promise. However, I am also writing this because I have watched you grow up. I have watched you mature into a brilliant and inquisitive woman, and I have followed your progress as an investigator, so I know full well what you are capable of. I know that if you turn your mind to learning the true secret of your birth, you will find it. I suspect that one whiff of the lies you have been told over the years will be enough to set you on this course, and that once set you will—one way or another—find either me or Keith, and from there the truth of your birth. As I gave your adopted parents to believe, that truth is messy and my promise to your mother aside, it is far better that I make it relatively easy for you rather than have you come upon it in some more public way.

You may very well already know the part that your adopted parents have played in all of this—they swore to keep the truth that I gave them a secret, but I know that no oath in the world can truly stand up to their love for you. Most of what they will have told you is the truth. Your mother did come to me and ask for my help to conceal her pregnancy and your birth. It would indeed have caused a scandal if it had been publicly known, and the man who fathered you did indeed demand that your mother seek an abortion. What lies I did tell to them are relatively small: your mother was prominent, but not from any local family, nor was she my patient as such.

The truths that those lies conceal, however, are too dark and deep to commit to a simple letter and once again I must apologize—this time for leading you on while an

old man makes his confession. I will not lead you any farther. The key that is attached to this letter opens a safe deposit box held in your name by the Union Bank of California at its Los Angeles Main branch (445 South Figueroa St.). The box number, however, corresponds to a number only you will know: the date of the most important event of your life. I think I've been involved in your life enough to be certain of what that date is. In the box are all of the answers you are looking for. I will warn you now that they are not likely to be what you expect. They will shock even a seasoned investigator such as yourself. I won't, however, warn you to turn back because I know that you won't.

I realize that yet another delay in search will be frustrating, so let me pass along two final pieces of information to try to ease some of that frustration until you can retrieve the safe deposit box.

First, I am sad to say that both your mother and your father are dead and have been for a long time. I am sorry that there can be no joyous reunion. That statement may seem cruel now, but I hope that it gives you a sense of closure.

The second piece of information is, I hope, happier. Jeane is your true name and always has been. Your mother chose it for you before you were born—if you had been a boy, you would have been Francis.

If it counts for anything, I think she would have been proud of you.

—Dr. Samuel Hollister

“Well?” asked Ned.

Jeane tore the key off the second page, then thrust the letter at him. Keith hopped up and around to try to peer over Ned's shoulder, but Jeane grabbed him before he could.

“Do you know how to get to South Figueroa Street?” she asked.

He nodded. “Anywhere in particular?”

“The Los Angeles main branch of the Union Bank of California.”

Keith’s eyes went wide. “Oh, my God, I know exactly where that is! What’s there?”

“Answers.” Jeane held up the key. “I hope.”

They passed through the steel and glass doors of the bank in a kind of solemn silence. In fact, the whole of the drive over had been largely silent except for terse directions from Keith and a few quickly stifled gasps of amazement as he read his father’s letter. For their own parts, neither Jeane nor Ned had said anything at all.

The bank was busy. People crowded the broad, cool granite floor. They stood in long lines between brushed metal rails. They sat in ranks of well-used, grey-upholstered chairs like the waiting lounge at an airport. They came, they went, and the buzz of their conversation and transactions filled the bank all the way up to its cavernously high ceiling. At the personal service counter, Ned and Keith sat down among the ubiquitous grey chairs while Jeane went up and took a number from a little red machine. Her ticket said 169. An electronic sign on the counter read “Serving 160.” Jeane went back and sat down.

“We’ll be a little while, I think,” she said and lapsed back into silence.

It lasted about five minutes before Keith whispered, “Who do you think they are?”

She didn’t have to ask who he meant. “I’m trying not to think about it,” she murmured back. Ned glanced at her and she added, “Honestly.”

It was the truth. She *was* trying very hard not to think about the mysterious parents of Sam Hollister’s letter. Unfortunately, it wasn’t working.

So many questions whirled through her head, it was like struggling with a slippery armful of live fish. Who were her parents? Who was this mother who had loved her so much, yet had given her up? Who was the father her mother had defied by carrying her? Why had she gone to a scientist for help? In a way she was grateful to Sam Hollister for telling her about their deaths—she wasn’t fantasizing about finding her mother now. Of course, she was instead wondering how her mother and father had died and when. Had they been close after her birth? Had they kept in touch? What was it about them that would prompt Hollister to warn her that what she would find would shock her? Just who were they?

The cycle started all over again.

And there was the other question. The box number would correspond to the date of the most important event of her life. What event was that? Her birthday? Too obvious. Other important events . . . Graduating high school? Graduating university? Acceptance into the ATF? Her first solo investigation? Any of her promotions within the ATF? Her disgraced dismissal from the ATF and her entrance into the Hoffmann Institute? No, that was out—Hollister had already been dead by that time. She tried to think of other—

The sign on the counter beeped. Now serving 169. Jeane climbed to her feet and approached the counter, Ned and Keith at her heels. The woman standing on the other side was young, blond and unbearably perky.

“How can I help you today?” she asked as Jeane slid her ticket across the counter.

“I need to access a safe deposit box, please.”

The young woman’s smile seemed to get even bigger and brighter. “Certainly.” She reached down to a computer set

below the counter, hands poised over the keyboard. “Box number, please?”

Jeane tried to stretch her memory. Important events . . . important events . . . Hollister had said in his letter that he had watched her grow up. Stan had likewise said that Hollister had checked in on her over the years. Something from her childhood, maybe, or her teen years? She dredged over the events of those times once more. It had to be something obvious, but not too obvious. Jeane groped for the dates of her high school or university graduation. No, she realized, that was too obscure. She didn’t remember those dates, so why should Hollister? It had to be a date they would both have recalled easily.

“Ma’am?” prompted the young woman, her smile wavering just a bit.

I think I’ve been involved in your life enough to be certain of what that date is. The key phrase. Jeane looked up sharply. “Box 101280.”

October 12, 1980. The date of her meeting with “Dale Churchill” and probably Hollister’s last direct involvement in her life.

She held her breath as the young woman checked the number against her computer—and let it out as her smile returned to full strength.

“I’ll need to see two pieces of identification, please, and I’m afraid we don’t have your signature on file.”

“No,” said Jeane, “I don’t expect you would.”

She dug out her driver’s license and a credit card, then signed the little card the woman passed her. The young woman nodded in approval. “If you’ll wait a moment, someone will be out to escort you into a security room. Thank you for banking with us.”

She pressed a button on the counter and the now serving sign clicked over to 170. Jeane shuffled off to the side.

A few minutes later, another woman—as young and

blonde, as the first—appeared and led them back to a small, brightly light room with a long table and four chairs. The chairs were upholstered in dark green leather. The table was covered in thick baize the same color. Jeane almost felt as though she were sitting down at billiard table. Keith took the seat across from hers eagerly. Ned, after a moment of hesitation, took the one beside Keith rather than the one beside her to give her space.

Silence settled in once more as they waited. Eventually, the young woman came back again, this time with the safe deposit box. She set it on the table in front of Jeane, smiled, and left, closing the door behind herself.

Ned looked over at Jeane and asked, “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

She snorted. “I am trained as an ATF investigator. I have been shot at, burned, dropped, beaten, and damn near blown up several times. I have been to crime scenes that would make most people vomit. I have seen . . . things . . . that would make *you* wet yourself, Ned.” She took a deep breath and produced the key that Sam Hollister had left for her. “No, I’m not ready.”

The box was larger than she had expected, maybe sixteen inches long, ten inches wide, and half as many deep. The top clicked open when she turned the key in the lock. She took another deep breath before lifting it any farther. Inside, two envelopes rested atop a plain beige file folder. A yellowed newspaper clipping had slipped partway out of the folder, exposing the date it had run: August 6, 1962. Just slightly less than a month before her birth, the trained investigator in her noted. All of the rest of her, though, was focused on the smaller of the two envelopes and the words that had been written on it in a light, open hand thirty-nine years ago.

For Jeane.

She lifted it out carefully. Reverently. The writing on the envelope was a woman’s. She swallowed hard. Her mother’s handwriting? A letter from her mother?

The investigator stirred again and Jeane frowned. No, that couldn't be right. Something Stan had said the night before came back to her. *We never met your mother, and Sam told us later he never saw or communicated with her again after you were delivered.* Jeane stared at the envelope. If Hollister had never communicated with her birth mother again, how could she have left a letter for Jeane? There had been no way of determining a baby's sex before birth in 1962. Why not "For Jeane or Francis?"

"Jeane?" asked Ned. There was concern in his voice.

"I don't like this," she breathed. "Something doesn't feel right."

"Open the letter," Keith urged. "It will have the answers, won't it?"

"Maybe," Jeane said, but she set the small envelope aside and reached back into the box for the larger envelope. This one was thick and heavy and there was no writing on it. It was sealed with an old-fashioned string and button type closure that had gone stiff with time and shed short red fibers as she unwound it.

Inside was a small stack of photographs, all black and white. They showed a laboratory. There were people in some of them, most prominently a man with the same black hair and big nose as Keith. Sam Hollister, Jeane guessed. It wasn't hard to see in him the balding man who had hired Shelley Brooks in 1980. By the hair and clothes in the photographs, though, she would place them as taken in the very early sixties. The lab equipment seemed to fit the time period, too, though some pieces seemed strangely advanced. sixties high tech? One piece in particular stuck out—a dark-colored thing that looked like a large, old-fashioned beehive. There were several of them in the lab. All of them were rounded and ridged, with a number of tubes feeding in at the top and bottom. Several pictures showed Sam Hollister standing proudly beside them.

Keith leaned forward, partly standing up to look across the table and peer at the photographs. Ned hauled him back down into his seat.

"Sit!" he ordered sharply. "Jeane, are you all right?"

"No," Jeane whispered back.

What were these photographs doing here? A year and a half ago, her first thought might have been that they were something of Hollister's, some souvenir of a project, placed in the box for safekeeping and forgotten. A year and a half ago, though, she hadn't been working for the Hoffmann Institute.

Eerie shivers crawled up her spine and wrapped around her brain. Her head was throbbing. Her stomach churned and clenched. She wanted to vomit. Hollister had said she would be shocked. She was, but not for the reasons she had imagined. Not because of who her parents were, but . . .

Could you fit a baby in one of those beehives?

Jeane dropped the pictures on the table and pulled the file folder out of the box. August 6, 1962. The date tickled her memory. It was something important, something she had found out long ago and filed away because of the proximity to her birthday. What was it? She flipped open the folder.

It was full of newspaper clippings. The top one, the one that had been sticking out, was from the *Los Angeles Times*. Three words ran across it in big, bold letters.

MARILYN IS DEAD.

Jeane's breath caught in her throat. The file folder slipped from her fingers, spilling clippings across the green fabric of the table. All of them carried the same headline.

"No," Jeane gasped.

chapter

E L E V E N

June 2, 1962.

Dearest Jeane,

I've started this letter five times already, just trying to get the beginning right. I hope I've done it this time. How do you start a letter to a daughter you've never met?

Sam Hollister tells me you're a girl, that he can open up a little window and watch you growing. He offered to bring me a picture, but I said no. Seeing you now would break my heart and I couldn't take that, not with everything else. But I don't need a picture anyway. I knew you were a girl all along. I don't know how. Maybe it's something mothers just know.

I wish I could hold you, Jeane. I wish I could watch you grow up. I've always had a dream of playing tea with my own little girl, just the two of us dressed up like proper ladies, with all of our

dolls as guests—I wish I was going to be able to do that with you. I saw the most darling tiny tea set in a shop window three days ago and it almost made me cry. I'm not going to be able to play tea with you, Jeane, and I'm so sorry. I thought that with Sam's help maybe someday I would. I know that's not going to happen. Sam still thinks it will, but he's wrong. I have a horrible feeling I'm never going to see you, Jeane. Maybe that's something else mothers just know.

I want you to know everything, just in case I'm right. When I finish this letter, I'm going to give it to Sam and make him promise to give it to you if you ever ask about me when you're older. What I'm going to tell you is top secret classified. I wish it didn't have to be that way, but it must.

Your father is the Attorney General of the United States of America, Robert Francis Kennedy.

I tried, but I couldn't think of a way to say that gently, so I decided to do it fast, like pulling off a bandage. Bobby Kennedy is your father. The President is your uncle. They're both such strong, handsome men. I'm sure you'll have seen them both on television and in the newspapers by the time you're reading this. Maybe Bobby will even have been President, too. I think he could do it—the Kennedy brothers, back to back terms in the White House. I love them both, Jeane, so I don't want you to be thinking any bad thoughts about either of them for this. It's all my fault. I guess I'm just weak. Please don't be shocked. I knew both Bobby and Jack, but Bobby was the one I loved. I think that he loved me, too.

We saw each other for maybe seven months. I met him through Jack and their brother-in-law Peter, of course. It was wonderful. We saw each other whenever he was on the west coast and could slip away for a visit—I don't know how he managed to do it, he had such a busy schedule. We had to be careful, of course, but there was still so

much we could do. Once me and a friend—another Jeanne!—dressed him up in a beard and cap and sunglasses and took him to a nude beach! Bobby was so much fun, I wanted to keep him forever.

It all started to fall apart last December. Bobby surprised me with a private Christmas party. I don't think anyone knew he was even in Los Angeles—well, nobody public anyway. There was always somebody who knew where he was. We made love, of course. The whole evening was wonderful. Bobby left at midnight. I'll never forget the way he kissed me at the door. I didn't see him for two months after that, but on February 1, I had dinner with him at Peter's house. I met his wife for the first time that night. I don't think that could have been worse timing, because after dinner I got Bobby alone for an hour and told him I was two months pregnant.

I don't know what I thought, Jeane. Maybe I thought he would be happy. Maybe I thought he would leave Ethel for me. That was all silly, of course. He was the Attorney General. What was he supposed to do? An affair he could hide, but not a child. He told me to get an abortion.

I'm sorry that I have to keep giving one shock after another, Jeane, but they aren't over yet. I'd had abortions before. I don't think there's a single girl in Hollywood who hasn't. But they'd done something to me—I tried to have children when I was married, but I always miscarried. It's a terrible thing and I hope it never happens to you (maybe you're old enough when you're reading this that you have children of your own—I could be a grandmother! Isn't that a kicker?). This time it was different though. I could feel that already. I could carry this child all the way, I knew it. And it might be my last chance. I told Bobby that. I told him that I wanted to keep the baby and I didn't care what he said.

I'm so ashamed that I made him mad. He didn't hit me, of course, but what he called me hurt worse. Then he

told me I had a month to have the abortion on my own because in March he would have a doctor look at me to make sure.

I went home and I cried for two days. Somewhere in there, I made up my mind. I was going to keep you no matter what. I knew how to do it, too. Both Jack and Bobby liked to talk after we made love. There are so many secrets I know, Jeane, but Jack and Bobby told them to me in confidence, so I can't repeat them, not even to you. Except for one, because you're part of it.

While I was still seeing him, Jack told me about a project the government was working on, a way to grow babies in a scientific womb. I remember because I asked him if it was for women like me who couldn't carry a baby to term. He laughed and tickled me and said "Sure, baby doll." Maybe he thought I forgot after that, but I didn't. I knew the name of the man who was in charge of the project and he was right here in Los Angeles. After I decided that I was going to keep you, I knew he was the only person who could help me, so I went to see him.

It was Sam Hollister, of course, and he agreed to talk to me. I guess if there's one thing this movie star business is good for, it's getting people to want to talk to you! Unfortunately, when I told Sam why I needed his help, he said no. He said it couldn't be done, that the artificial wombs in his lab were part of a bigger project. I knew what he really meant: he was afraid of Jack and Bobby finding out. I can't say I blame him—I was afraid, too! So I tried everything I could to get him to help me. I offered him cars. I offered him money. I even offered to make love to him if that's what he wanted.

I think it was seeing how desperate I was that finally touched him. He said yes and we started to make plans. In the middle of February, I went down to Florida for a little rest. I saw Joe there and had dinner with Arthur's

father—Isadore is such a dear sweet man and I think he would have been like a grandfather to you, Jeane. Then, once everybody knew I was in Florida, I got on a plane and flew to Mexico for a very quiet, private vacation. Of course, that got leaked and the vacation turned out not so quiet or private after all. Reporters mobbed me as I was coming off the airplane and insisted on following me around the whole time. The whole vacation was one big party. Except, of course, that it wasn't me.

Just in case you don't already know, Jeane, Sam is brilliant! He hired an actress who looked almost exactly like me and I spent a lot of my time in Florida coaching her to act like me, too. While Joe and Isadore could vouch for the fact that I had been in Florida, she was the one who went to Mexico and kept everyone's attention down there (the big ham!). In the meantime, Sam spirited me away to his lab. If I hadn't been so scared, I'm sure it would have been quite the adventure, just like being in a spy movie. Everything was bright white and so clean I was afraid to walk. It was all very technical with more gadgets than I've ever seen. I had no idea what most of them did, and I was afraid to ask.

Sam brought me into an operating room and put me up on the table. I can't tell you exactly what he did because he put a screen up across my middle, but it felt an awful lot like an abortion, only worse. It seemed to take forever. When Sam was done, though, he showed me the womb. It was a big black plastic dome. He said you were inside it now, suspended in liquid that was just like a real womb and that you'd grow just like any other baby. He even told me when your birthday would be: September 4. I told him that would make you a Virgo and we both laughed.

I stayed in a little hotel in Las Vegas for a while after that, having a real quiet vacation. Sam called every few days to let me know how you were doing. When the

actress pretending to be me flew back from Mexico, I swapped places with her at the airport and picked up right where she left off. It worked like a charm.

A week later, I went and saw Bobby's doctor. He told Bobby I'd had the abortion and no one was the wiser. I started making plans with Sam. I was going to retire after you were born and we'd go away and live somewhere quiet. Or maybe I'd adopt you and we'd live together in Hollywood with no one knowing that you really were my own little girl.

All that's falling apart now.

I don't know how, but I think Bobby knows about you, or at least suspects something. Sam swears that he couldn't, but I know he does. We don't see each other anymore. Until recently we talked. Now he won't take my calls. I sang Happy Birthday to Jack at his birthday party at Madison Square Garden in May and that's the last time I saw either of them. I don't think even Peter wants to see me anymore. Dr. Greenson gives me new prescriptions, but I don't think they're helping. He's out of the country, so I can't get more. It feels like everyone is leaving me.

I'm so scared, Jeane. I'm scared of Jack and Bobby. I've heard they have connections. I know lots of people with connections, but not like these. I'm scared Bobby will take you away from me. I was scared when I got up on Sam's operating table, but now that I have you waiting for me, I'm even more scared. I'm scared that I'm going to die alone, with nothing but my little bottles of pills for company. They're sitting on the table beside my bed now. I can see them. I'm scared that someday I'm going to open one of them up and I won't be able to close it again.

I turned 36 yesterday, Jeane. They had a party for me on the set and I took Dino's boy to Dodger Stadium—I threw out the first ball. I had dinner and I came home and

*drank champagne with Dr. Greenson's son and his wife.
Always someone else's children.*

*I'm writing you this because I want someone to
remember me, Jeane. Maybe even remember me fondly, not
just as some crazy, sad, old whore. I've had my time.
Bobby and Jack, they'll go on to big things. By the time
you read this, I'll bet everyone will have forgotten me.
I love you, Jeane.*

—Mama

"Watched?" McCain was at his side in a moment. "Where, Ngan?"

Ngan frowned, trying to draw some greater sense out of what he was feeling, but there was nothing else. *Danger. Waiting.* These things he knew, but no more, like the awareness of a storm brewing in the mountains of his childhood. He drew a breath and looked around the space among the truck trailers. Monty was sealing his bag of dust and passing it to Liam to tuck away somewhere. Van had followed McCain and stood with his back against the rusting side of one of the trailers, looking frightened and confused.

"We should go now," said Ngan. "Quickly."

"So soon? We just got here." Rebecca James stepped into the gap that led out into the open part of the trailer lot. A big man in a leather coat moved in after her. "Fitz, I don't think you got an introduction to my partner yesterday. Robert Blair, Detective Anthony Gibson. Tony, Robert."

"Fitz," said McCain politely. He shot a very fast glance at his partner but there was nothing Ngan could do except shrug.

The whispers of that inner voice had drawn away, but they were still there. Ngan held himself ready for action as

McCain stepped forward, his hand outstretched. Gibson looked at it as though McCain were offering him a slice of cold pizza that had been sitting in the refrigerator far too long.

"What are you doing here?" he asked bluntly.

McCain drew a breath, and Ngan could almost hear a cover story spinning out in his partner's mind. They might yet be able to extract themselves from this.

Before McCain could say anything, though, Monty piped up, "We heard screams for help and came to investigate."

Ngan found his heart sinking. The friendly smile that had spread itself across McCain's face became a little bit more brittle.

"In a nutshell," the younger agent agreed rather sharply.

"Well, aren't you the little troop of boy scouts?" commented Rebecca. She and Gibson came a little farther into the space between the trailers, though they still remained well back from the Institute agents. "We heard the screams, too, though from where we were, they sounded more like plain old fear than a call for help." Rebecca nodded to the blood that dotted the ground. "We saw the blood outside. We were going to follow it the long way around, but it looks like you've already found the end of the trail." She looked at McCain. "Find anything you want to tell us about?"

"Whoever was screaming, there's no sign of her now," he said sincerely. "We got here too late. There's some footprints in the blood trail, though."

"Sure they're not yours?" Gibson grunted.

Monty looked insulted. "As if we would walk through evidence!"

"You're all doing it right now!"

"As I said," Monty snapped crossly, "we came here in response to screams. If that makes us—"

The researcher was going to get them all in trouble. Ngan stepped up behind Monty quickly. "Monty," he whispered,

“maybe you should let Michael do all the talking for a little while?”

There had been a great many teachers in Ngan’s life, and he had learned a great many things over the years, some of them more . . . esoteric than others. Ned Devromme might have called those things psychic gifts, but Ngan preferred to think of them more as the products of hard-earned knowledge, there to be developed by anyone who followed the correct paths. They were subtle things, mostly matters of internal discipline and physical training, but there were a few that could be somewhat more dramatic, though they always had their consequences. Techniques of suggestion, for example, always left Ngan feeling unpleasantly invasive. Sometimes, however, unpleasant tools were necessary.

Monty fell obediently silent. Ngan smiled at Gibson and stepped back again. McCain blinked once, then picked up the conversation with renewed vigor.

“My apologies. Sometimes my associate gets carried away. But he does have a point.” McCain glanced at both Rebecca and Gibson in turn. “Are you asking if we had something to do with those screams?”

“In a nutshell,” replied Gibson, “yes.”

“Well, we didn’t. We only got here a few moments before you did.”

“Then it’s a damned good thing you were so close,” Rebecca said. Her voice was even and silky, but Ngan could see a fire in her eyes when she looked at McCain. “Still on that contract for the sanitation workers union, Fitz?”

McCain’s voice was just as even. “Working on a different contract, Calamity. You know how these freelancing things are.”

“Business must be good.”

“It is.”

“If I might ask,” Ngan said mildly, “what brings *you* down to this neighborhood, detectives? You seem to have been very

well placed to respond to the trouble here as well.”

Rebecca smiled, a dazzling sight. “Funny you should ask.” She turned back to McCain. “The local precinct got a call a little while ago from a gentleman resident of the neighborhood. It seems there’s a group of men wandering around looking for a woman. One of the men asked this resident about her, and while he said the man he talked to was very respectful and polite, he didn’t identify himself as a police officer. The resident thought this was rather odd. So he called the precinct to check on it.”

“It’s nice to know that there are still socially concerned citizens out there,” McCain observed.

“Isn’t it?” Rebecca paced back to stand beside Monty. The researcher looked like he wanted to say something very badly, but couldn’t. Rebecca just lifted a thin eyebrow at him, then looked over to McCain again. “The local precinct recognized the woman in question as someone we’ve been looking for as well. They called us and we came down. We’ve been looking for this group of men, Fitz. We’re thinking they might want to talk to us, especially as they might be in very suspicious circumstances at the moment.” She smiled again like a happy fox. “Know where we might find them?”

Ngan found himself holding his breath, waiting for McCain’s response. The Hoffmann Institute had ways of smoothing over trouble with the police—he himself had favors he could call in if need be—but the best policy was to avoid trouble in the first place. That was looking increasingly less likely. His inner voice was wailing *danger* again. If anyone could pull them out now, though, it was his partner.

McCain looked up and matched Rebecca’s smile, fox to fox. “Not a clue,” he said smoothly, “but it just so happens we’re looking for a woman ourselves. Does the name Lisa Renfield ring any bells?”

Rebecca started to reply. Ngan didn’t hear what she said. *Danger! Danger! Danger!* He turned sharply.

It was like a gift.

Renfield clung to the shadows, peering out from the narrow passage between the trailers at the group gathered beyond. She wanted to laugh but held it back. The creature felt her joy, however, and stirred eagerly in her hands.

Almost twenty-four hours between the garbage man at dawn and the woman in the parking lot at night. So long. Renfield knew that her protector would be a rare person, but when even the people in whom she could sense the potential were rare, how long would it take to find one who could pass the test?

She had all but stumbled over the young woman that morning. For all that the woman's potential had shone out like a beacon, though, she had failed the test as well. But this . . . oh, this made up for it all!

Three. Three individuals with the potential to pass the test and protect her from the ravages of decay. Hope made her almost giddy. Surely one of them had to be her protector.

There were the others, of course. The range of vision that her hiding place permitted was limited, but between what she could see and what she could hear, there were seven people out there. Four of them should not witness the testing. If she waited for them to leave, though, she would certainly lose the three she so desperately wanted. The choice was aching.

In the end, it was no choice at all. She had to find her protector.

Of the three, two flickered with dim potential. The third, however, shone even brighter than the woman had. She would test him first. If he was the one, it wouldn't matter what the others saw.

Renfield squatted slowly in the shadows and placed the creature on the ground, then bent close to it and whispered, "The old man."

Powerful muscles surged under slick skin, and the creature all but leaped away from her.

The attack came from the side.

McCain caught the motion out of the corner of his eye: a pale streak thrusting itself from the shadows, lunging directly at Ngan. It was a worm, a fat worm, sickly grey with tiny black eyes far back on its head. It was as long and thick as his forearm, but moving with the speed of a striking snake. And growing! By the midpoint of its lunge it was the size of a big dog. By the time it was descending, it was as tall as a man and just as broad. Just as McCain grasped that impossibility, the worm's belly split open along almost its entire length, exposing a gigantic mouth ringed with thousands of tiny teeth. He heard Calamity let out a gasp. It was the only reaction any of them could manage.

Any of them except Ngan. The old man's head turned as the worm moved, a natural motion of surprise—except that it didn't stop. Ngan's entire body followed the turn. From a standing start, Ngan whirled aside in a leaping spin that would have done a champion figure skater proud. The worm smashed into the space he had occupied less than a heartbeat before. The thing's enormous mouth bit down on a garbage can instead of Ngan. When the worm reared back, blindly seeking its prey, three-quarters of the can was simply gone. The ground where it had stood was covered in powdery grey dust.

Not the can's lid though. Ngan had that—McCain wasn't sure exactly how he'd managed to snatch it up in his whirling escape, but he had. He spun around once, heaving the lid into the side of the worm with the force of a heavy discus. That much force would have put a serious dent in a

car door. It would have knocked a strong man off his feet and maybe broken a couple of ribs.

It bounced off the worm's hide like a brick off a trampoline.

Van found his voice first, screaming and slamming back against the trailer behind him.

Calamity was a little more articulate. "What the fuck is that thing?"

She and Gibson both had guns out. So, surprisingly, did Liam—an odd-looking little pistol pulled from under his jacket. Monty's eyes went wide, not at the worm, but at the detectives' firearms.

"No!" he finally managed to choke, flailing his arms around madly. "Alive!"

McCain threw himself at the researcher and brought him crashing to the ground a heartbeat before the detectives filled the small space with the crack and roar of gunfire. The worm thrashed as the bullets hit it, puncturing the thick grey skin in ragged holes.

It did no more good than pushing a needle through a brick of lard. The blubbery skin squeezed itself shut. The worm swung toward them for a moment, a low, rumbling growl shaking the air like a warning, then twisted back to Ngan. Once more he threw himself aside, rolling low to avoid the strike. The worm didn't bite down on anything this time, but its bulk slammed into a trailer, setting the massive metal box rocking. Ngan came up beside Van. Thrusting the speechless young man ahead of him, they darted toward the others.

"Down!" shouted Liam, and Ngan pulled Van to the ground.

Liam sighted the odd pistol and squeezed the trigger. A red-fledged dart—a tranquilizer—blossomed in the worm's side as it came around for another lunge and the creature shuddered though it didn't slow down.

"Give it a minute!" Liam said.

"We may not have that long." Ngan scrambled to his feet, dragging Van with him.

Under McCain, Monty was struggling with something in the pocket of his tweed jacket. McCain rolled off him and Monty pressed a heavy little device into his hand.

"Taser," the researcher wheezed. "Use it."

It was worth a try. McCain jumped forward, toward the worm, trying to get a good shot at its flank. The thing seemed so totally focussed on going after Ngan that getting the right angle wasn't at all hard. He aimed the taser's blunt head carefully and squeezed the first trigger. Two darts, thin wires trailing behind, leaped from the weapon to bury themselves in the worm's side. The beast whirled toward him like an avalanche switching direction in mid-fall.

"Shit!" gasped McCain.

His fingers spasmed on the second trigger just as the worm made a nasty gurgling noise. Thick bluish slime arced out of the creature's mouth at the same moment the taser's powerful electric charge raced along the wire. The worm stiffened but the slime sprayed across the ground and trailer wall to McCain's right. A bit splattered against his arm—the sleeve of his jacket, the taser, and a single drop on the back of his hand. Cloth smoked. Plastic and painted metal bubbled and blistered. Skin burned. Acid!

McCain cursed in pain, stripped off his jacket, and hurled the taser away. It had done its job. The only movements the worm was making were a lot of twitches and shudders. Then, while McCain watched, the beast shrank down until it was the size of his forearm again, squirming and mewling like a weak kitten. He stared down at it in amazement. Calamity and Gibson stepped forward and stared, too. Gibson brought up his gun.

"No!"

Snarling like a wildcat, Renfield leaped out of the same shadows from which the worm had emerged and stood over

the defeated beast. McCain and Calamity flinched back, but the only part of Gibson that twitched was his arm. He brought the gun up to cover Renfield's chest.

Faster than McCain could follow, she grabbed Gibson's arm, shoved it up into the air, stepped in against his chest, and heaved. Gibson flew over her shoulder to slam hard into the side of the trailer and slide to the ground in a heap. Renfield snatched up the worm, cradling it in her arms like a child. Sparing them all one vicious, hate-filled look, she whirled and sprinted back into the shadows between the truck trailers.

"Gibson!" Calamity gasped. Gun still covering the shadows, she crouched down beside her partner.

That left the Hoffmann Institute team standing free with open space and an exit from the lot ahead of them. McCain knew an out when he saw one. With a sharp gesture, he waved the others to go. With the exception of Monty, they didn't need much encouragement, and even the senior researcher was no match for Liam and Ngan combined. McCain paused just long enough to scoop up a fistful of the dust that had been a trash can and ran after them.

"Hold it!" shouted Calamity from behind. "We need to talk!"

McCain twisted his head around just enough to see her rising, torn between pursuing them, pursuing Renfield, and staying with her badly dazed partner.

"Another time!" he called back.

chapter TWELVE

That was a brilliantly unorthodox strategy, Mr. McCain," Monty observed sourly as Ngan and McCain climbed out of their car. "Deflecting attention from our activities by confessing to them. I'd never have thought of that!"

McCain gave the researcher a tight glare. He was almost disappointed now that the shortness of breath and alarming grey pallor Monty had developed on the long run from the crime scene back to their cars hadn't been something more permanent. Apparently CSC senior researchers didn't get a lot of exercise. McCain could imagine Monty sitting in the CSC car and stewing in his own frustration as they drove away from the scene to go to ground.

"I wasn't confessing," McCain shot back, "I was sparring. Calamity knew something was up. There was squat I could do about that. What I was trying to do was talk her into helping us." He turned his back

on Monty sharply to stare up at the backside of the old, brick building behind which they had parked: the Chicago Specimen Collection facility itself.

The arch-rival of the Chicago branch office didn't look any more remarkable than the branch office itself. It was a bland square of bricks, with vertical strips of tinted glass and black metal marking tall, narrow windows. At one time, it might have been mistaken for a respectable, if anonymous, medical building, just one of the dozens of such buildings that cluttered the area around the University of Illinois Circle Campus. Now the brick work was dull, the reflective film on the windows was peeling away in patches, and the style of the building dated it badly. Shabby and decaying, it barely even looked occupied.

The interior of the building was another matter entirely. Monty guided them in through a back door that itself led to a double set of security doors before finally opening into the CSC facilities proper. The walls and floors here were gleaming white. Every fixture was stainless steel. The halls were luxuriously wide. The air was cool—almost cold—and carried a sharp, chemical tang that made McCain's nose itch.

Ngan's face had collapsed into an impassive mask of suppressed discomfort. McCain leaned over to his partner and said, "I can see why you don't like hospitals."

"This isn't a hospital," Ngan whispered back. "This is a tomb."

"What was that?" snapped Monty.

"He said you have a lot of room." McCain gestured around them. "This is a lot bigger than the branch office."

"Of course it is," Monty said smugly. "It's a much more important facility."

McCain restrained the urge to sucker punch him.

Monty led the way down several of the wide, white corridors and into a conference room that was also wide and

white. The big meeting table was all glass and metal, the chairs metal and slick white fabric. A computer stood on a matching workstation in one corner of the room, and McCain had the feeling that more electronic gadgets were waiting behind concealed panels in the pristine walls. If the branch office had anything this extravagant, he hadn't seen it.

Naturally, Monty took a seat at the head of the table. He waited until everyone else had seated themselves as well, then folded his hands on the tabletop. "Well," he said, "that was an unmitigated disaster. We completely failed to recover the specimen."

McCain could only stare at the researcher. It was, for a moment, all any of them could do. Finally, Ngan added coldly, "Monty, Renfield has claimed another victim."

"That hasn't escaped me." Monty's glare was vicious. "But have you considered that our failure to capture the creature means that she can now go on to claim more? Our objectives may vary, Mr. Kun'dren, but our ultimate goals are the same."

For a moment, the silence around the table was complete, then Ngan nodded. "I cede the point." The look he shared with Monty was challenging, though. "However, I think we did learn from this encounter. We have faced the enemy and know what it is capable of. Guns do little damage, and tranquilizers have an unproven effectiveness."

"The creature has amazing abilities," Monty agreed. "I'd like the chance to study it further, but that will have to wait. At least we have this."

He pulled the sealed bag of pale dust from his pocket and laid it on the table. "Analysis may give us some insight into exactly how the creature is able to reduce its victims to this state." Monty glanced at Van. "Accelerated aging is an intriguing possibility, but unlikely given the role of insect scavengers in decomposition."

Van shook his head. "Come again?"

“When a body decays, a lot of the decomposition is actually a function of insect activity,” explained Liam. “Various flies lay eggs in the dead flesh, and the maggots eat it when they hatch. Other insects consume the flesh directly. The process is precise enough that it can be used to establish time of death, but those insects need time to reach the body. Any other improbabilities aside, a person might die of sudden old age, but they wouldn’t decompose instantly.”

“Exactly,” agreed Monty. “As well, I presume you all noted the effect of the creature’s strike upon the trash can. Metal isn’t subject to decay in the same way as a human body, of course, and yet the can collapsed into what was apparently the same dust.” He frowned. “It’s unfortunate that I wasn’t able to collect a sample of that for comparison.”

McCain cleared his throat and smiled. “If you’ve got another plastic bag, I might be able to help you out with that.”

He set his jacket on the table in front of him. The worm acid had eaten brittle-edged holes in the fine fabric—the tiny amount that had struck his hand still stung. The jacket was basically ruined beyond repair anyway, so McCain had felt no guilt in dirtying it further. He unfolded the cloth to reveal a scant handful of grey dust, scooped up at the last minute from the remains of the garbage can.

He slid the jacket across the table to Monty and said, “Hopefully it’s not too contaminated or anything.”

“It . . . should be sufficient.” Monty had the look of a hyena circling a rotting carcass. He stood and carefully folded the jacket around the sample again. “I can run a preliminary analysis on this now. Liam, I’ll need your help. The rest of you can work on writing up our report.” He nodded toward the computer in the corner. With Liam holding the door open for him, Monty carried his two prizes—bag and folded jacket—to the door with the same care someone else might have given priceless works of art. At the last moment, he paused and looked back. “Well done, Mr. McCain.”

The door closed behind him. McCain immediately tucked his neck down in imitation of Monty’s jowly face. “Well done, Mr. McCain,” he whined. “Too bad you didn’t catch the worm. Maybe next time you could just let it eat you and while it was busy digesting, the rest of us could beat it with sticks.” He snorted and stretched his neck back out. “Why exactly did I pull him out of the line of fire again?”

“Because you have a sharper sense of the value of a team, I suspect,” Ngan said. “I think I would take Monty’s thanks at face value, though. Taking a second sample was quick thinking. As was your word play with Detectives James and Gibson, and your use of the taser.”

“Well, that was Monty’s idea,” McCain admitted grudgingly. “Maybe the old guy knows something about his end of the business after all.”

Van waved his hand like a kid in class. “I have a question. Does this mean that Renfield *isn’t* holed up somewhere around the 47th Street L station? Up till now, she’s been all over the city, so why would she risk taking someone right in her own backyard?”

Ngan shook his head. “I don’t know, Van. Serial killers sometimes strike close to home, too. I don’t think we’ll be able to know for sure until we’ve established a pattern in the people she’s been attacking and her motivation in doing so.”

“Her belief that there’s a protector who can ward off death and decay,” McCain pointed out. “Olivia Marquez said Renfield kept hinting at testing people. It strikes me that pointing a monster worm at someone and seeing if they crumble into dust is a pretty good test.”

“You have a point, Michael.” Ngan put his elbow on the tabletop and rested his chin on his fist as he thought. “But still, why the people she has attacked?” He counted off fingers on his free hand. “The doctor and orderlies at Elgin were likely simply in her way when she need to escape, but then there’s the garbage man, the woman at the grocery

store, and the jogger. Different ages, different races, different backgrounds. Why them?"

"You forgot someone," Van said suddenly. When McCain and Ngan glanced at him, the young man pointed at Ngan. "You."

Ngan blinked. "I believe that falls into the same category as the attack at Elgin—I was merely in Renfield's way."

"I don't know about that, Ngan." McCain thought through the shocking, rapid moments of the fight in the truck lot. "The worm went for you first, and it kept going for you. Even when Calamity and Gibson hit it, even after Liam stuck it with his tranquilizer, it kept turning back to you."

"Perhaps." Ngan sounded doubtful, but not entirely unbelieving. "Even so, what do I have in common with the other victims?"

"Who knows? We've been moving so quickly after Renfield that we haven't stopped to look at the big picture, have we? Maybe the victims have been related to Renfield's old diabolist circle. Maybe she's just trying to match the old circle's composition."

"But I'm not related to Renfield's old circle, and if she was trying to recreate her old circle's composition, it strikes me that she could do it much more quickly than this." Ngan frowned. "But you are right. We haven't been looking at the big picture, have we?" He unfolded his arm. There was a telephone near the head of the table and he reached for it. "Perhaps Emma can get us the information."

"Actually," said McCain, "I was thinking more of Lily. She might want to know about our encounter, we've just had a run-in with the police, and there's that . . . other matter." He gave Ngan a significant glance. They had more information. Perhaps now was the time to try approaching the field director again.

The old man raised his eyebrows. "Lily seems reluctant to discuss that, Michael."

"Let me do the talking," McCain suggested. "Lily and I speak the same language."

Ngan nodded and dialed the telephone, switching it over to speaker phone mode so they could all hear. "Lily Adler," came the voice from the other end of the line.

"Lily," said McCain, "it's Fitz and Ngan. We've got something that we thought we should report in."

He spilled out the details of their morning encounter, keeping the report short and concise because that's how Lily liked it. He added their current whereabouts but kept quiet about the analysis Monty was working on. He did mention their need for background information on the victims. When he was finished, he sat back and waited, letting Lily mull over the story at her own pace in her office across the city.

Finally, she said, "That's everything? No injuries?"

"No, ma'am."

"Right." Lily's voice was firm and confident. "Good work so far, gentlemen. Keep it up. I'll see what I can get for you on the backgrounds of the victims. I'll have any information sent to Emma to hold for you."

"Thank you, ma'am," McCain replied, then added casually, "By the way, I hope you're feeling better. Ngan was telling me that you weren't looking one hundred percent the last time he saw you."

"I have felt better, Agent McCain," Lily said smoothly. "It's the change in the weather."

"I had an aunt with a similar problem. It took her a while to figure out there was something wrong. By the time she did, it was almost too late." He leaned closer to the phone. "What are your symptoms, Lily?"

For the first time, Lily hesitated. "Short term failure," she replied after a moment, "though I understand that in severe cases it can lead to more permanent conditions."

"That sounds nasty," said McCain. "Has anyone been able to diagnose a cause?"

“They’ve run tests, but nothing has come back positive. It’s an odd thing. The higher up you are, the more likely you are to get it, but the lower down, the worse you suffer. I understand research is continuing, but in the meantime, I’d watch myself if I were you, Agent McCain. I’d rather no one on your team came down with it.”

“Thanks, Lily. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Agent McCain.”

McCain hung up the phone and looked at Ngan. “Crap,” he cursed quietly. Ngan nodded.

Van looked from one of them to the other. “So what did Lily really say?”

“Nothing good. It looks like you were right, Ngan. We’re being set up.” McCain grimaced.

It broke down too perfectly. Short term failure matched Ngan’s own concerns. More permanent conditions—death? Maybe dismissal from the Institute. He didn’t really like the way either sounded, nor did he like the hint that no one had been able to diagnose the cause. Lily had no more answers than they did.

No, that wasn’t right. She did know something more: her whole comment about being more likely to get it if you were higher up, but more likely to suffer if you were lower down. What did that mean? He asked it out loud, and Ngan shook his head.

“I think it means exactly what it sounds like, Michael, except that ‘higher up’ doesn’t refer to altitude.” He held his hand one above the other. “It’s rank.”

Of course. When someone higher up in an organization had a problem, it was the people lower down who suffered the consequences. McCain narrowed his eyes and flicked his thumbnail against his teeth as he thought.

“When Lily called us into her office,” he said, “I don’t think she once said ‘I’m giving you this assignment.’ It was more like ‘the Institute has taken an interest in Renfield.’ ”

He looked up. “Could someone be putting pressure on Lily? It would explain why she’s been reluctant to say anything directly.”

“It would,” Ngan admitted. “But there’s something else as well.” He looked up at Van. “Lily also said the request that you join our next investigation came from higher up in the Institute as well.”

Van blanched. “That’s not good!” he squeaked, but McCain shook his head.

“Easy. There are a lot of people above us in the Institute, and any invitation to join an investigation would *have* to come from one of them.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“You can walk away, Van,” Ngan pointed out. “Michael and I don’t have that option, but you do. If you’re concerned, go home. I don’t believe anyone would think badly of you.”

The young man looked genuinely torn. McCain could sympathize. After a minute though, Van shook his head. “I’m staying,” he said flatly. “I want to help.”

“That’s the fighting spirit,” McCain grinned. “So what do we do now?”

Ngan folded his hands. “Stay alert. Watch for anything suspicious. This is largely conjecture at the moment. We need more substantial evidence before we can do anything.”

“And while we’re busy staying alert?”

“We have an investigation to look after.” Ngan gestured toward the computer in the corner. “Monty needs a report now, and we’ll need to make a written report at some point as well.”

McCain pushed his chair over to the computer. “Ah,” he sighed, “bureaucracy. What would we do without you?”

They were about halfway through the report when Van pointed out the one question none of them had asked. “So how exactly does a psycho wind up with a monster worm for a pet anyway?” he asked, leaning over McCain’s shoulder.

McCain’s fingers hesitated on the keyboard. “Damn.” They had been so busy worrying about the ‘why’ of Renfield’s attacks they hadn’t stopped to think about the ‘how.’

“We still have the possibility that the worm is related to whatever force Renfield’s diabolists summoned up fifteen years ago,” Ngan pointed out. “It has many of the same characteristics.”

McCain screwed up his face. “The worm didn’t exactly look demonic.”

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” quoted Van.

“Please, no Shakespeare right now.” McCain held his head. “I don’t think I could take it.”

His cell phone chose that moment to ring. Ngan gave him a little smile. “No cell phones around Monty’s equipment,” he reminded him.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.” McCain pressed the tiny receive button and held the phone up to his ear. “Hello?” he asked.

“So warm and cheerful,” said a woman’s rich voice. “Tell me the truth—you moonlight for a phone sex line, don’t you, Fitz?”

McCain sat bolt upright. “Calamity!” He glanced at Ngan and Van—both of them looked startled as well—then stood and walked down to the far end of the room. “How did you get this number?”

She laughed. “I’m a detective. Finding things out is what I do. And, if you’ll recall, you gave it to me yesterday.” McCain heard the flick of a card tapped against the receiver and almost cursed himself.

“Right,” he said with what grace he could muster. “So how’s Gibson?”

“Mad as a cop with a headache. Nothing that won’t go away.”

McCain nodded to himself. “Good. Sorry to run away like that, by the way.”

“There is a law against that you know, Fitz—and I hope you don’t mind if I call you that, since there are exactly six Robert Blairs in Chicago, and I’m quite sure you’re not one of them.”

“As long as I can still call you ‘Calamity.’ ”

“Absolutely.” She took a deep breath. “Fitz, we need to talk. I don’t know exactly what happened out there today, but I think you and your friends do.”

“I’d beg to differ.”

“Then you at least have a better idea than Gibson and I do. We’ve got another missing person, and I don’t even know how the hell to file a report on it. I think we’re both trying to stop Renfield. I’m willing to work together.”

McCain sighed. “Calamity,” he said sincerely, “I wish I could talk to you, but—”

“I’ve got information I’m pretty sure you don’t have.”

McCain froze. “What kind of information?”

He could hear the grin that must have been plastered across the detective’s face. “Something that I think you’ll be able to use, but in return I want the straight goods from you.”

Ngan was still shaking his head emphatically. McCain clenched his teeth. Take an ally in the hunt for Renfield and risk the secrecy under which the Hoffmann Institute operated? Or maybe not. He made his choice.

“Done,” he said, and looked away from Ngan, “but it has to be face to face.”

“All right. Dinner?”

McCain glanced at his watch. Time had flown by—it was almost seven o’clock and they hadn’t eaten yet. “All right.”

"There's a Thai restaurant on Carroll a couple of blocks east of the Merchandise Mart. I can get us a table. Half an hour?"

"Forty-five minutes and alone," McCain specified, "and you've got a deal."

He hung up and turned to face Ngan. His partner's expression was not happy. "Michael . . ."

McCain just shook his head. "Ngan, we need a lead. Don't worry, I'm not going to give anything away. And don't think this isn't going to cost me—I was supposed to be spending time with Shani tonight."

"It's also possible that this could be some kind of trap."

"Call me in a few hours." McCain wagged his cell phone. "If I don't answer, I'm in trouble. If Monty asks, tell him—"

"Tell me what?" Monty paused in the doorway, dressed in a lab coat with a clipboard in his hands.

"That I have personal business I have to take care of." McCain tucked his cell phone away in his pocket. "I can't stick around."

Monty shrugged. "There's probably no need for any of you to stay any longer tonight. I have the preliminary analysis."

McCain paused. "And?"

"The dust is organic—both samples. The trash can was not simply crumbled into dust. At the same time, however, neither sample contains obvious human genetic material." He shook his head. "We'll keep working, but at the moment we don't know what it is. Only what it isn't."

chapter THIRTEEN

Ned and Keith got her out of the bank as quickly as possible. They left the safe deposit box on the table, locked again but empty. Ned carried the folder of newspaper clippings and the envelope of photographs tucked tight under one arm. The letter, however, Jeane carried herself, her grasp crinkling the almost forty-year-old paper.

Walking through the cavern of the bank was hell. Jeane could imagine everyone there staring at her, whispering about her. That was just paranoia, of course, but the feeling stuck with her. She kept her attention on the ground and focused on putting one foot in front of the other, taking one shaky step at a time.

"Easy, Jeane," Ned whispered in her ear. "Just a little farther."

And mercifully they were at the car and Ned was helping her into the passenger seat. "We need to go somewhere," she heard Ned tell Keith. "Somewhere quiet."

“My place?”

Jeane stirred herself to look up. “No,” she said. She didn’t think she could stomach Keith’s wretched, artsy apartment again. “I need a drink.”

“No, you don’t,” Ned said. He looked back to Keith. “How about a coffee shop? Something nice and quiet.”

The artist nodded.

A short while later, they were ensconced in the tranquility of a corner table in a dim, hushed coffee shop in West Hollywood. Jeane wasn’t exactly sure where they were—she had let Ned drive and hadn’t really paid any attention to the passing city. The coffee shop was pleasant enough though, with decently large tables and old wooden railback chairs. The tables were a good distance apart too. She liked that. The last thing she wanted was the sense that someone was listening in on their conversation.

Ned and Keith sat across the table from her, sipping occasionally from large mugs. A similar mug sat at her elbow. She ignored it, and flipped through the clippings and photos and read through the letter once more. And again. And yet again, pouring over every shocking detail.

At some point, she registered movement as Ned sent Keith up to the counter for refills of their coffee and a replacement for Jeane’s untouched cup. She didn’t look up, though she did finally slide the letter over for them to read. The throbbing headache that had settled over her in the bank wouldn’t go away. Her skull seemed to pound with every word that she read and every glossy photo she scanned. Little details she had missed before crept into her awareness, like the man with a military uniform half-hidden in the background of one photo. Like the names in the letter—Joe would be Joe diMaggio, of course, and Arthur, Arthur Miller. Like the fatalism that the letter implied, as if . . .

Marilyn . . .

Her mother . . .

Jeane’s stomach clenched again. She wasn’t sure what bothered her more: the manner of her birth or the identity of her parents. To have been born from a tank like some cheesy B-movie was bad enough, but to discover that her mother was . . . Oh, God, she didn’t even want to think it. And she had told Stan the thought that Sam Hollister might have been her father was sordid?

What was worse was that it all made a horrible kind of sense. As much as she didn’t want to believe it, she also couldn’t deny it. Near impossible technology aside—and she had seen enough with the Hoffmann Institute to doubt that such technology was truly as impossible as it seemed—the story hung together. In fact, the very preposterousness of it was probably the strongest argument for its reality. Why make up a story like that? Why conceal it so carefully for thirty-nine years? Why so many details, themselves with the ring of truth?

She glanced up at Ned and asked, “What do you know about Marilyn Monroe’s life? Do you think this could be a hoax?”

“If it is, I’d say it’s one of the most elaborate going.” He pushed the letter back to her. “But I don’t know that much about her.”

“I do,” Keith added, and both Jeane and Ned turned to him. He shifted nervously. “Some stuff anyway.”

“How about the details in the letter?” asked Jeane. “Could some of them be accurate?”

Keith nodded. “Sure. The trip to Mexico made headlines. The first meeting with Bobby is well documented. The abortions and her later desire for children are well documented—but on the other hand, they wouldn’t have been public knowledge back then.” He rocked his hands back and forth. “There’s a lot of stuff in there that we know now but that would have been very private in 1962. There’s other stuff that’s so personal and private, there’s no way of being sure whether it’s true or not.”

“Let me phrase it another way, then,” Jeane said with a grimace. “Are any of the details blatantly wrong?”

“No. Not that I can see.” Keith drummed his fingers against the tabletop. “God, this explains so much about my father, too. He used to go off on projects, and we wouldn’t see him for days and weeks at a time. He was always dodgy about what he was working on. If he *was* doing work for the government—”

“Keith,” Jeane growled, “I don’t care.” She folded her arms on the table and brought her head down on top of them. “I don’t care if your father was actually secretly boffing his lab assistant. No.” She glanced up. “I’d *love* to know that your father was boffing his lab assistant because that would mean he wasn’t sneaking around working for the government and making babies in plastic pods and that this whole goddamn thing really is just a big hoax!”

“She doesn’t mean that literally,” Ned murmured to Keith.

“Like hell I don’t.” Jeane slammed her head down again. “How am I going to explain this back in Chicago?”

Ned didn’t have anything to say to that, but after a moment, Keith cleared his throat with all the subtlety of a used car salesman his first day on the job. “You know,” he said, “I think you’re coming at this all the wrong way.”

“There’s a right way?” Jeane asked without looking up.

“You’re the secret daughter of Marilyn Monroe and Bobby Kennedy, and you have enough proof to make it stick. How much do you think that story is worth?”

Jeane snapped upright. “No!”

“Jeane, think about it!” Keith’s eyes were wide. If he had been a cartoon, there would have been big green dollar signs painted in them. “Someone puts out a tell-all book on a celebrity and they can live high off the talk show circuit. We’re talking two of the ultimate celebrities here and the tell-all to top all tell-alls. There’s a bundle of money just waiting for—”

“No,” Jeane said flatly. Keith groaned in protest. Jeane glared at him. “Keith, I hate this. I am not interested in making money off it. I loathe Marilyn Monroe, and right now I’m not thinking too highly of Robert Kennedy.”

“It doesn’t matter how you feel about them, Jeane! Hating them works just fine. It’s all how other people feel. Think how many people there are out there who worship Marilyn. They’ll come to see you! Write a book and even people who don’t care about Marilyn will buy it.” Keith was almost drooling. “Hell, you could probably get movie deals. Or modeling deals. You look a whole lot like her already, but different hair and a little make-up and no one would doubt it!”

Jeane’s breath hissed through her teeth. “Let me spell it out, Keith. N-O. No. I don’t want write a book, I don’t want to be in a movie, I don’t want to be a model, and I *really* don’t want to look like . . .” She almost choked. “. . . *her*. End of story. Got it?” Keith started to protest again and Jeane glowered at him. “*Got it?*”

“Yeah,” said Keith. He shoved his chair away from the table. “You want to throw this away, be my guest.”

“My life, my business, Keith.”

“Hey, whatever.” He gestured vaguely toward the other side of the coffee shop. “Why don’t I give you some time alone? You want me, I’ll be over at the counter drowning my sorrows in a latte.” He stomped away.

“Someone,” Ned observed, “has been hanging around the Hollywood gossip crowd too much.” He turned back to her. “Keith’s right about one thing though, there is a certain family resemblance.”

“Piss off, Ned. I don’t need that.”

“Sorry.” Ned reached across the table and patted her hand. “Are you okay?”

Jeane sighed, closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again and shook her head. “Not really,” she said. “Can you blame me? Three days ago, I was happily living a

comfortable lie. Then everything drops out from under me and I end up travelling most of the way across the country, only to find out that my mother was someone I've detested for practically my entire life and that I wasn't so much born as decanted."

Ned swirled the last of the coffee in his cup. "You mentioned yesterday that the first thing you hated about Marilyn was her voice. Babies hear sounds. Do you think . . . ?"

"No psychoanalysis, please. I'm not in the mood." She rubbed her forehead. "Seriously, Ned—what the hell am I going to do? What am I going to tell my dad? What am I going to tell Fitz and Ngan?"

"Personally, I'd go with sparing Stan the whole truth. I think he's had enough of it already. As for Fitz and Ngan . . ." He shrugged. "You've got one thing going for you there, Jeane. They're both already used to weird."

"Hey, it doesn't get much weirder than this," Jeane groaned. "God, they're going to think I'm a freak!"

"You're not a freak, Jeane. Well, not much of a freak, anyway." Ned gave her a wink and an evil smile.

Jeane couldn't help returning the smile. "Freak yourself," she said fondly, swatting at him. "Didn't I tell you to piss off?"

"So you did." Ned stood up. "And I believe I will accept the invitation. Two cups of coffee and a long wait will do that to you. I'll be back in a minute, and we can talk about what you want to do next." He smiled again, reassuringly this time, and walked away.

For a moment, Jeane's eyes stayed fixed on the chairs where Ned and Keith had sat and on the empty coffee cups they had left behind. Then she forced her gaze down to stare once more at the photographs and newspaper clippings and that miserable letter.

"Well, Jeane," she murmured to herself, "this is another fine mess you've gotten us into."

This was insane. Approached from the point of view of a proper investigation, the evidence was almost entirely circumstantial. It all hinged on the letter. Jeane didn't doubt that Stan and Rose had indeed adopted her through Sam Hollister, nor did she really doubt that Hollister had made the arrangements on behalf of some pitiable young woman. But beyond that, the evidence consisted entirely of a folder of clippings that anybody could have put together, a series of photographs that could have been staged or even faked outright, and a letter that could all too easily have been a forgery.

In spite of that, it all came back to the same thought she had earlier: it was all just too preposterous *not* to be true.

She clenched her jaw. What kind of answer was that? Hadn't she pointed out to Ned that she was a trained investigator? What kind of investigator accepted "too preposterous not to be true" as an answer?

An investigator who wanted the situation to be true and needed an excuse to make it that way. Or maybe an investigator who was afraid of the truth and wanted an easy way out of accepting it.

Her hands started to shake, though whether it was from fear or from anger, she couldn't tell. She wasn't sure it really mattered. It shouldn't have been this way. All she had wanted to do was find her mother, the woman who had given birth to her. Instead it was like walking into one of the Hoffmann Institute's cases. Jeane reached numbly for the letter once more, staring at the written words. Why? Why her?

There were tests, of course. A simple blood test for starters. She was quite sure that she could get a record of Marilyn's blood type somewhere, and Bobby's, and of course she knew her own. That might be enough to establish that she could not be their child.

Of course, it could also provide another piece of evidence that she *was*.

“Jeane!” called Ned softly.

She blinked and looked up. The big man was hustling over to the table as quickly as he could, an expression of urgency on his face. He hadn’t been gone long enough to take care of his business in the washroom.

“What?” she asked.

“Come with me. There’s something you need to see.”

She stood without hesitation, scooping the papers and photos into the folder of clippings as she followed him. Ned led her back across the coffee shop to a hallway labeled with the sign “Ladies and Gentlemen.” He jerked a thumb around the corner.

“Down at the end. He was there when I came over.”

Jeane passed the folder to Ned, slid up to the corner, then glanced quickly around. The hallway was short and even more dim than the coffee shop. The floor was worn tile, scratched wainscoting crept up the walls, and down near the end of the hallway, just beside the door marked “Gentleman,” was a pay phone. Standing at the pay phone, his back to the open end of the hall, was Keith.

She ducked back around the corner and looked at Ned. He held a finger to his lips, then touched his ear and pointed down the hall. *Listen*. Jeane did, easing her head around the corner and concentrating hard on catching Keith’s words.

“ . . . tried, Roger, I really did,” the artist was saying. He shook his head and shifted position, leaning up against the wall. “I mean, Christ, man—she’s scary!” Keith paused, listening. “Yeah, she does look like Marilyn, but the resemblance ends there. You put her in a cage with two rabid pit bulls and I’d bet on her. She’s as tough as a whole bag of nails. There’s no way she’s going to sell the story voluntarily. We’re going to have to set her up.”

Jeane froze. Her hands ground themselves up into fists, and she felt the throbbing in her head build in speed and harsh percussion. The dirt-bag weasel was trying to deal her

like she was a pork belly! She took a step forward, but Ned caught her and held her back.

“Not yet,” he murmured.

Ngan was always counseling her to wait, too. Maybe some of his wisdom was finally wearing off, because she did hold back. For a moment, anyway.

Keith scratched his head, still facing the dead-end of the hallway. “I know that wasn’t the deal, Roger, but the deal just isn’t going to work. So what we do is I swipe the proof, you confront her, and between your footage and my story, you’ve got yourself the biggest scoop this town has ever see—” He frowned into the telephone. “Sure it’s messier, but like I said, she’s not going to walk into your newsroom on her own. Are you going to walk away from this now just because you’re afraid someone is going to throw a hissy fit when you try to catch her on camera? You want this story, Roger. I know it. You’ve kept me hanging on since I came to you with this. You could have cut me loose like some crank, but you didn’t. Now the proof we’ve been waiting for has dropped right into—”

Jeane’s vision seemed to go dim. The throbbing over her head broke into a steady roar. Keith knew. Keith had known—or had at least suspected. Keith had been planning to sell her out all along.

He didn’t even have time to squeak as she stormed along the short hallway, tore him away from the phone, and slammed him face first into the wall. The telephone receiver dropped out of his hand and swung down like a pendulum, a tiny, tinny voice calling out from it, “Keith? Keith, what’s going on?”

Ned, trailing along in Jeane’s wake, caught the receiver neatly and hung it up.

“You piece of shit,” Jeane snarled in Keith’s ear. She wrenched him around roughly so that she could see his dazed, startled face, then thrust him backward through the

door into the men's room. The cramped space smelled of urine. Jeane forced Keith all the way back until he was pinned against the tile wall between a paper towel dispenser and a urinal. "What is this is? What kind of game do you think you're playing?"

Keith looked at her with wild, frightened eyes, then sucked in air and opened his mouth. Jeane closed it for him with a slam of her forearm under his chin. She left it there, leaning on his throat. Her other fist dug into his belly at his diaphragm. "I said, *what kind of game do you think you're playing?*" She narrowed her eyes. "No, I think I know that answer already. Who were you talking, too?"

She eased up just enough to let him gulp some air. "A friend," he croaked desperately. "Just a friend."

"A friend who works for the *Weekly Global Inquiry*," said Ned. He stood by the door, peering through a narrow crack and keeping watch on the hallway outside. "I heard him say the name earlier. A vicious little cable TV scandal show, but one of the richest."

"Is he right?" Jeane demanded.

She twisted her fist in Keith's gut until he squealed out, "Yes!" He looked at her pleadingly. "Look, they're giving me a lot of money for this. We can split it!"

Jeane pulled her arm away and slapped him hard, so hard it made the paper towel dispenser rattle. Keith sagged down a bit. "I told you no before. I'm not for sale. And from what I heard, they're not giving you any money you didn't ask for." She grabbed his shirt and shoved him back up against the wall again. "What do you know?"

"Nothing!" Keith gasped. "Nothing that you don't already know!" Jeane raised her hand and hit him again.

"You knew enough to set me up, asshole." She leaned in close. "Listen to me and listen good, Keith. You are screwing with the wrong woman. You tell me how you knew about Marilyn before I did or you're going to find out what happens

to pit bulls that you bet against." She looked him straight in the eyes. "Understand?"

It only took a couple of seconds under her stare for him to crack. "I steamed open Dad's letter!" he blubbered. There was blood trickling from his nose and his lip was starting to swell already. "I wanted to know why it was so important, so I steamed it open and read it. I figured it out from the names—Jeane and Francis. Jeane for Norma Jeane, Marilyn's real name, and Francis for Robert Francis Kennedy. Dad never had anything good to say about the Kennedys, but he always had this thing for Marilyn. Mom used to say that when Marilyn died, Dad was really upset. She didn't think too much of it then because everybody was stunned, but I remember him always having a scrapbook of clippings about her death—until one day they all just disappeared."

"The folder in the safe deposit box," spat Jeane. "So you put it all together and took the story to the richest bidder you could find. Except they wouldn't believe you without solid proof, and you couldn't guess the number of the safe deposit box." She looked at Keith in disgust. "No wonder you knew exactly where to find the bank!"

"Hey," Keith shot back, "I need that money. I bet you could use some, too. Aside from leaving you in a lab, what did Marilyn ever do for you?"

"Nothing, and I'd like to keep it that way." She gave him a hard, narrow glare. "We'll be taking that folder, those photos, and the letter with us. Both letters, in fact. You're ending the day with no more hard evidence than you started with. The way I understand it, that doesn't give you a leg to stand on with your tabloid buddies, but on the bright side you're alive. As my friends will tell you, I'm not known for my restraint or my charming personality." Jeane set her mouth in a thin line and took a step back. "Try this again and I'll show you my bad side. Hope you never see me again, Keith."

She kicked out and swept Keith's wobbly legs out from under him. He dropped hard, back skidding down the wall, rump slamming into the cold floor. His head bounced sideways off the porcelain basin of the urinal. Jeane turned away. She opened the door and stalked out of the men's room. Ned fell into step beside her, but didn't say anything. The coffee shop fell silent as they emerged from the washroom hallway. Eyes stared and heads turned to watch their progress toward the door. Jeane didn't look sideways once.

Ned didn't say anything until they were outside and heading for the car. "How are you feeling?"

She glanced at him. "You tell me." She went around to the driver's side of the car. "We're going to the airport," she said. "I've had enough of this. I want to go home."

"I have a better idea." Ned regarded her across the car's roof. "We find a hotel, and you chill out a bit before you kill something. We'll leave first thing in the morning."

"Like a night's attempt at sleep is going to make this go away."

Ned shrugged. "It can't hurt."

Jeane closed her eyes for a moment. Her head throbbed so badly her teeth ached. Her arms and legs were trembling so fast they almost vibrated. As much as she wanted to get the hell out of LA, she didn't think that sitting still for the long flight back to Chicago was really a possibility right now.

"Fine," she said in resignation. "First flight tomorrow morning. I'll book the tickets from the hotel." She would, she was sure, have plenty of time for that. Sleep was likely going to be a stranger that night. Maybe for longer than that.

Keith had to blink a few times before his vision resolved all the way. He faltered when he tried to stand the first time. Eventually he had to resort to pulling himself to his feet by

clawing his way up the urinal. He peered at himself in the bathroom mirror and grimaced, then reached for a paper towel to clean away the blood that was dribbling down from his nose.

Fortunately, he had another quarter in his pocket. He went back out to the pay phone, flipping the quarter between his thumb and forefinger before dropping it in the slot and dialing.

"*Weekly Global Inquiry*," answered a perky voice. Keith asked for Roger. A minute later, he got him. "Jesus, Keith—what happened? It sounded like you got slugged and cut off."

"Good guess." His nose was starting to bleed again. He wiped the blood away and wished he'd thought to bring an extra paper towel to the phone. "Marilyn's daughter found out what I was up to and took objection to it. She's flown the coop with all my proof. I think I know where she's going, though. How do you and one of your video boys feel about a fast trip to Chicago?"

On the other end of the phone, Roger hesitated. "I can't stick my neck out on this without some kind of proof, Keith. What makes you think she won't destroy the evidence? And why should I believe this bit about getting hit and losing the evidence anyway? You're going to have to throw me a bone here, Keith."

"Don't you worry, Roger. I've still got something I think will convince you to take the risk." Keith reached into his shirt pocket. The instant picture inside was slightly crumpled, but it was still perfectly clear. The captured image of a woman walking into his apartment, a woman who was undeniably the perfect, natural likeness of Marilyn Monroe. "Better start making plans for a trip for three to Chicago. Tonight."

Remember, Fitz," McCain said to himself as he pushed through the door of the Royal Thai restaurant and into its warm, fragrant atmosphere, "this is business."

Calamity gestured to him from the back. He took a deep breath and went to her table. Just business.

Shani had taken his sudden change of plans and the need to have dinner with an informant without question. She knew him. She understood what he had to do.

"Hey, Fitz." Calamity reached out a hand in greeting. She pushed out the chair at her side.

McCain shrugged off his coat and sat. "Been waiting long?" he asked.

She gestured at the table. There was a basket of puffy shrimp chips already on it and a pitcher of beer, too. Two glasses stood beside it, one mostly full, the other still empty.

Calamity filled it for him then clinked her glass against his and said, "Bottoms up."

"Cheers."

McCain glanced around the restaurant as he took a long drink of beer. The place was maybe three-quarters full. No one had the look of a cop. Maybe Calamity really had come alone. He turned back to her just in time to catch her eyes flicking down to the basket of chips. She had been watching him.

McCain grinned and asked, "What does Gibson think of this little meeting?"

"At the moment, nothing. He's home in bed, recovering from his head-on collision with the trailer this morning. This is just you and me—like we agreed." Calamity's eyes flickered across him again. "Nice sweater, by the way."

"Thanks."

His apartment was nearby, and he'd stopped to change on the way—into the clothes laid out for his date with Shani. He was sure she would have understood that, too.

Calamity's compliment drew his eyes to her as well. Her shirt was deep blue, made out of some soft material that draped and clung to the curves of her body. There was a gold chain around her neck but the only other ornament she wore was the sun-touched gold-brown of her hair. There was an air of restless activity about her, as if at any moment she might jump up in response to a police call or whip out her gun and put him under arrest. Damn. The muscles of his stomach tensed in instinctive arousal.

McCain forced them to relax and fought against his animal instincts. This was worse than his meeting with Olivia Marquez. There were menus already on the table. He picked one up and flipped through it to cover his discomfort.

"Anything you recommend?" he asked.

"You can't go wrong with the basil beef, but if you like it hotter, try something in the red curry sauce." She sipped at

her beer again. “And there’s always the honest truth.”

“I don’t see that on the menu,” McCain said, tilting the menu on its side and giving it a puzzled look. “Is it an appetizer?”

Calamity burst out with a loud, genuine laugh. “You’re a clever one, Fitz. Good looks, a silver tongue . . .”

He flashed her a grin and resisted the urge to point out that he wasn’t the only one. “So,” he said, picking up the pitcher and topping up the detective’s beer, “what kind of a nickname is Calamity?”

She shrugged and drank some of her beer. “I got it as a little girl—my parents thought ‘Calamity James’ was cute. Then I grew and you know how tall kids are. I broke something just turning around. I was a Calamity again. I hit college and turned into the wild child.” She shrugged again. “It stuck.”

“The nickname?”

She looked at him. “That too.” One perfect eyebrow twitched suggestively.

McCain took a casual gulp of beer. At least he hoped it looked casual. Think of Shani! Shani was gorgeous. Shani was smart. Calamity was . . . Gorgeous. Smart. But Shani was sophisticated. Shani was always carefully dressed, and she always smelled like that fruity soap. Calamity was rough and reckless—McCain could see her as a living, breathing part of the Wild West.

I wonder what she smells like. The casual gulp turned into a sudden sputter.

“You okay?” Calamity asked.

“Yeah, fine.” McCain wiped beer from his face. “Something just went down the wrong way.”

Fortunately, the waiter appeared at the table to take their order at just the right moment. McCain reminded himself to give the man a big tip at the end of the meal.

“Basil beef,” he said quickly.

“Playing it safe?” asked Calamity with another smile. “*Kang ped talay*,” she told the waiter without looking at the menu, then nudged the now mostly empty pitcher of beer, “and another of these.”

They managed to avoid discussing anything of significance until the food came. By the time the waiter did return with it, however, McCain had learned too much about Calamity’s personal interests, she had learned too much about his, and they had both had too much of the second pitcher. Worse, McCain found himself thinking less and less about Shani. When his plate was in front of him, he attacked it with a voraciousness that had less to do with physical hunger than simply a need for diversion.

It was something of a mistake. He’d swallowed two mouthfuls before the deceptive flavor turned into searing heat that left him groping for his beer and Calamity shaking with laughter.

“You,” he gasped, “are an evil, evil woman.”

“Without a doubt,” agreed Calamity. She took a deep breath and got her laughter back under control. “Enough small talk. The waiter won’t be back for a while. What have you got on Renfield?”

McCain considered arguing who should go first, but decided it wasn’t worth another bout of flirtation. He took a sip of beer to cool the last flames in his mouth. “First, you have to understand that there’s some things I can’t tell you.”

Calamity nodded. “You started to say something like that this morning. I’m going to guess that one of those things is exactly who you work for.” She tilted her head and looked at him. “Not police, not military, not government, though there is something familiar about you . . .”

“I have that kind of face,” McCain said quickly. “The second thing you have to understand though, is that you are not going to believe some of what I tell you.”

“Try me.”

McCain shrugged. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

He kept the story simple. No mention of the Hoffmann Institute or the Chicago Specimen Collection by name, of course. No names for Ngan, Monty, Van, or Liam, either—they were simply his "associates." No mention of the Dark Tide or Greys or ghosts or vril, definitely nothing about clones and the Holy Grail, or any of the other things he had seen in his time with the Hoffmann Institute. Just their current assignment, the need to put Renfield back in Elgin, and their concern for the occult side of Renfield's history that the police might have overlooked. Somewhat to his surprise, Calamity showed no great surprise or disbelief.

When their food came, she ate calmly while he continued to talk. McCain decided to take a risk and told her a little bit more about what they had begun to suspect: the origin of the dust at the scenes, the similarities between the worm and Renfield's misguided summoning fifteen years before, and their fears over Renfield's search for a protector. When he was finished he watched her as she took a few more bites of food, then put her chopsticks down at the side of her plate. She reached for the pitcher and split the last mouthfuls of beer between her glass and his. He picked up his glass and drained it.

When he looked up again, Calamity was watching him. "If I hadn't seen that worm today," she said quietly, "I wouldn't have believed a word of all that and there's a good chance you'd be on your way to Elgin yourself."

"But you did see it. What do you think?"

"I think that no matter what I saw, none of that is going to go over big in a police report." Calamity squeezed her eyes closed and rubbed her forehead. "This is insane."

McCain gave her an ironic smile. "After the worm, what did you expect?"

"I was hoping for something that would make sense out of it." She sighed. "Although I suppose that does make sense—

sort of." Calamity reached down beside her chair and produced a battered leather folder. She passed it to McCain. "This is the information I have to trade. I have to take the originals back, but there are photocopies for you."

The folder was zippered around the outside. McCain unzipped it and folded back the cover. Inside were several pieces of paper torn out of a journal or notebook. They had been written on with crayon. Strange symbols. Words that might have been Latin. Other scribbles that might have been words if the scribbles had been letters. It put him in mind of the bear skull he and Jeane had shown to Ned only two days before—except that while the words and symbols on the skull had clearly been random, the words and symbols on the paper were too neat, too orderly. He flipped through the pages, absorbing what he saw and not liking it at all.

On the last two pages were sketches of the worm.

The grey of its smooth hide had been rendered in black and cornflower blue, but there was no mistaking the creature. It had been drawn small, cradled in disembodied arms like a cat. It had been drawn large, enormous mouth gaping wide. All of the pictures were ringed by symbols and arcane phrases. Across the top of one picture, though, were three English words. *I summon thee*. McCain gave a low whistle of amazement. "Where did these come from?"

"Renfield's room at Elgin. They were hidden under her mattress." Calamity reached around the case to tap the papers. "Her therapists encouraged her to start keeping a journal. These pages match her journal books, but we figured all this stuff was just more of her insanity."

"Until you saw the worm."

"And you told me the other half of Renfield's story. Put it all together and . . ."

"I know." McCain leafed back through the pages. The file mentioned nothing like this, nor had Olivia. Renfield must have been very careful with what she drew under the watchful

eyes of her therapists. This stuff would have made them suspicious—though probably not for the same reason it sent shivers up McCain’s back.

They had wondered where the creature had come from. *I summon thee*. Could Renfield have used magic to summon the worm to aid her? Ned said that magic told a story. If they could work backward from these symbols and Renfield’s summoning, they might be able to figure out more about the nature of the worm. Hopefully that knowledge would also give them a way to stop it.

McCain looked up at Calamity. “I feel like I got more out of this than you did.”

She grinned shamelessly. “If you’re feeling guilty, I can think of a way you can make up the difference.” McCain felt a hot flush creep across his face and the grin turned into a laugh. “Something besides that!” She leaned forward, her face serious for a change. “The Chicago PD may not be up to tackling supernatural worms, but when it comes to tracking *people* down, we know what we’re doing. The leads you’ve given me are going to be a big help—we hadn’t dug all the way back into Renfield’s record yet. We can do that.”

“In other words, you want us to deal with the worm while you tackle Renfield,” McCain said.

Calamity nodded, and McCain’s face wrinkled up as he considered the proposal. It certainly seemed like a good solution. The Hoffmann Institute had the resources and knowledge to look into the worm and any other occult angle, while the police could conduct a far more thorough official search than the Institute ever could . . . and he was certain that Monty would hate the idea.

“Done,” he said, “though I’m not going to envy you trying to write a report on this.”

She shook her head. “I’ll burn that bridge when I come to it. You know how TV and movie cops are always pissing about jurisdiction and who gets the collar? I don’t care about

that. I just want Renfield and that worm off the streets, no matter who takes them away.” Calamity reached around the folder again, this time to offer him an open hand. “Deal?”

“Deal.”

McCain shook her hand. Her grip was strong—he had noticed that before. What he hadn’t noticed, though, was the warm softness of her skin, the delicate length of her fingers as they brushed his. Some of that must have shown in his eyes, because Calamity gave him a gentle, naughty smile. She bent her middle and ring fingers in so that they tickled across his palm as their hands parted. McCain fought down another flush and forced back the tension that pulled his muscles into knots. Business relationship, he reminded himself desperately, this a business relationship.

“Dessert?” asked the waiter suddenly from right beside him.

The shame of his arousal made McCain jump and snatch his hand away. The instinctive secrecy that came with working for the Hoffmann Institute made him snap the leather folder closed around Renfield’s drawings. Unfortunately, Calamity tried to do exactly the same thing. Caught between them, the folder slipped sideways sharply, sending cutlery flying and striking Calamity’s beer glass. The glass—still half full—spun around, tilted, started to fall . . .

Only Calamity’s reflexes saved her from a lapful of cold beer. She caught the glass before more than a little beer had slopped onto the tablecloth. As the waiter soared into a flurry of apologies, she wiggled an eyebrow at McCain—then quite deliberately tipped the glass in close and dribbled a thin stream of beer onto her blouse. “Oops.”

McCain stared at the dark spot on her shirt. He was, abruptly, very much aware of his breathing.

The ring of the telephone was startlingly loud and shrill. McCain sat bolt upright instantly and grabbed for it, snatching up the receiver on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Michael." It was Ngan's voice, as cool and calm as always. "This is your check-in call. Did the meeting with Detective James go all right?"

McCain swallowed and tried to slow his racing heart by force of will alone. "Yes," he said. He swung his legs around and stood up, walking with the phone out into the living room of his loft. The night lights of Chicago's downtown shone through the multi-paned factory windows. "We've got trouble, though. It looks like Renfield *summoned* the worm." He described the journal pages, as well as his clandestine deal with Calamity to divide the work of the case.

"I'm not sure I like involving the police, Michael," Ngan said.

"They were already involved, Ngan. This way we won't be duplicating efforts. We may be able to get Renfield back in custody faster—that's the important thing, isn't it?"

Ngan sighed. "I think Monty said something similar to us earlier today."

"And you agreed with him then." McCain realized that he was pacing back and forth along the length of the living room. He forced himself to stop. "I think we've really got something here, Ngan. There's got to be something in these pages that will help us. Even so, I don't think we can figure it out alone. We need Ned for more than just his contact with Renfield—we need what he knows about demon summoning." He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "I know I mentioned calling Jeane. I didn't get a chance to. Do you think you could . . . ?"

"I've tried already. She's not answering her phone."

The muscles of McCain's jaw tightened involuntarily. "That doesn't sound good."

"No," Ngan agreed, "but I'm afraid we have more important things to worry about right now. I'll try again in the

morning, but we shouldn't waste what time we have. Tomorrow we can start going through Ned's books ourselves. We need to start finding answers."

"I'll meet you at his shop." McCain rubbed his eyes. "Not too early though, please. Is eleven okay?"

"It should be fine. I'll get Van there as well." Ngan paused, then asked with concern. "Are you all right, Michael? You sound disturbed."

"Me? No, I'm fine. Just tired. You caught me lying down."

"Ah. I'm sorry," apologized Ngan. "I'll see you tomorrow at eleven."

"Right. Bye." McCain hit the disconnect button. The soft rustle of cloth behind him brought his head up and made him turn around.

Calamity stood in the doorway of his bedroom, a sheet wrapped around her. "I couldn't help overhearing. One of your associates?"

"Checking in on me," McCain confessed. "In case your meeting was a set-up."

"Well, it was, wasn't it?" she asked with a lusty smile. The sheet slid to the ground with a whisper and Calamity walked across the room to twine her arms around his body.

McCain returned the embrace hungrily, but somewhere inside him, a little voice was still crying uselessly, No! No! No!

A night's sleep did not make Jeane feel better. Or rather a night spent turning over and over between the crinkly sheets of a hotel bed did not make her feel better. Images kept floating to the surface of her mind. Marilyn, of course. Bobby Kennedy. Jack Kennedy, apparently thrown in by her unconscious just for good measure. Sam Hollister as he appeared in the old lab photos, then as an old man, then

morphing into Keith begging for her to reconsider and pose for just one instant photograph. He carried a wig with him, platinum blonde, and a white dress that billowed up of its own accord. Jeane protested strenuously, but somehow found herself wearing both dress and wig anyway and staring at herself in a mirror that was also a window into a liquid-filled pod. Somewhere a phone kept ringing and ringing and she knew that on the other end of the line was a tabloid reporter waiting to question her. Then suddenly she was inside the pod, floating in the liquid, and it was utterly silent. There was no phone, but there was also no one's heartbeat to comfort her. No one's breathing. No gentle sounds from outside the womb. Jeane struggled, trying to reach the surface, but of course there was no surface to reach.

Marilyn, Bobby, and Sam Hollister were back, hanging onto her legs and dragging her down. Stan and Rose stood above, hazy images on the other side of a surface that hadn't been there a moment before, but all they could do was watch sadly. They had made a promise, hadn't they? Jeane fought to reach them again, but it was no use. The truth was uncovered, the genie out of the bottle.

She gave up and sank down until the shrill buzz of an alarm clock woke her up for a six a.m. flight from LAX to O'Hare.



chapter
15
TEEN

It had snowed overnight once again. The morning was the coldest yet that month. Ngan sat on a bench outside Ned Devromme's book shop. McCain was late. Not suspiciously so, though his tardiness was unusual. Van was already there, skimming through the extensive collection of occult books in Ned's shop. Ngan should have been inside helping him. He had excused himself, however, and come outside to enjoy the cold of the morning. The air in Chicago was not the crisp, clean, thin air of his homeland, but on a November morning, it was enough to bring back fond memories. And it helped him think.

Who within the Institute could want them to fail?

Who within the Institute might want them dead?

Who within the Institute could possibly force Lily Adler to do something against her will?

Unfortunately, his last question did leave another possibility open, one that he was loathe to consider.

Perhaps Lily wasn't being coerced at all. He grimaced. No. He knew Lily. She could as much turn on him as he could turn on her.

Just as with Renfield, they needed more answers. He didn't have the feeling they would be forthcoming.

It was noon before McCain's car appeared on the street and pulled in by the shop. McCain jumped out hastily, then did a double take on seeing Ngan waiting for him. Ngan raised an eyebrow as he looked his partner over. McCain was normally immaculate in his appearance with perfectly groomed hair and sharp, impeccable suits. Today he had an air of dishevelment about him. His hair was neat, but not perfect. He hadn't shaved. Instead of a suit, he wore simply dark pants and a deep blue shirt. There were dark rings under his eyes.

McCain caught his glance and dodged the unvoiced question. "Any luck getting in touch with Jeane?"

"Her phone was turned off this morning."

Something was wrong. Ngan could feel it. If McCain didn't feel like discussing it, though, he wouldn't push. There were much larger problems at hand. McCain handed him an envelope as they went inside. Ngan opened the envelope and shook out the photocopied pages of Renfield's notes. As McCain had described, the sketches and symbols certainly seemed occult in nature, pointing firmly toward Renfield's having summoned the worm.

Van was at the back of the shop, stacks of books piled around him. Ngan passed the pages to him. The young man looked at them and gave a low whistle. "Nasty."

"Indeed." Ngan looked around them, considering the wide range of occult and paranormal books Ned had amassed in his shop. Their search was not going to be simple. Even going through the books Van had already selected was daunting. "Van," he said, "you probably know Ned's shop the best of any of us. Is there any particular section we should start with?"

Van hesitated, then nodded. "Yes." He led them to the back of the store and a section of shelves draped with a purple curtain. "Ned keeps his best books here. Jeane has one of them. Ned says it was what helped crack the case of Bachelor's Grove."

"I'm sure he does." McCain reached to brush aside the curtain, but Van caught his hand.

"Ned's very protective of these. I'm not sure we should mess around with them."

"I'm not sure we have a choice," said Ngan. "I think Ned will understand."

He drew back the curtain. The shelves behind it were packed with an array of volumes, large and small, new and very old. Ngan glanced over them, then bent to peer across the top of one shelf. There were more books packed in behind the first row. He reverently ran a hand across the books. Van was right. These were the best books in Ned's shop. He could sense the power in them, like the sacredness of a temple. If there were answers in the shop, they would be here.

McCain groaned quietly. "This is going to take a *long* time."

"If you have an alternative, Michael," Ngan replied, "I would welcome it. The faster we can learn more about Renfield and the worm, the better. Until Ned reappears and can give us direction . . ." He slid the first book off the shelf. ". . . we catch up on our reading."

Perversely, the closer Jeane got to home, the more frightened she felt. Surrounded by strangers on the flight back to Chicago, it had been easy to pretend that there was nothing wrong, that the day before simply hadn't happened. As he had on the flight to Cleveland, Ned said next to nothing,

allowing her the isolation she wanted. For a little while, she could be just another anonymous traveler.

The minute they touched down at O'Hare that changed. She was heading back to the life she had dropped so abruptly three days before. She was back to being Jeane Meara, once of Parma, Ohio, daughter of Stan and Rose Meara, now of a Los Angeles laboratory, secret daughter of dead celebrities. It felt like that secret was just shining out of her. The feeling only grew as they walked out of the airport and caught the shuttle bus back to the parking lot where she had left her car. Jeane Meara's car. It continued to grow as she headed for downtown and Jeane Meara's apartment—along the John F. Kennedy Expressway, of course. Dear old Uncle Jack. She bit her tongue angrily at the thought.

By the time she turned onto North Avenue, her fingers were clenched white around the steering wheel. She knew the neighborhoods now, and people there knew her. How many of them had secretly wondered about her resemblance to Marilyn Monroe?

"No," she growled to herself, "I do *not* look like her."

"Jeane," murmured Ned, "that was out loud. You might want to watch that."

"Shut up, Ned," she snapped reflexively—and realized he had been sincere. "God, Ned. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Jeane." He looked over at her again. "I feel like I've been saying this a lot lately, but are you going to be all right?"

"Probably not. What the hell am I going to tell Ngan and Fitz?" She pulled off North, down into Wicker Park, then onto the street where Ned's shop and apartment were. "How am I going to live with this?"

"You'll find a way. Knowing you, I'm sure of it. You're strong. You're smart. I know you're tough. If you ever do need help, though, you can always come to me. I know something about living with secrets." He sat forward suddenly

and frowned as he looked ahead down the street. "You might have to face up to Ngan and Fitz sooner than you think though. That's Fitz's car parked outside my shop."

Jeane frowned, too. "Picking up some books?"

"Somehow I doubt it." Ned was out of the car almost before Jeane had pulled in behind Fitz's car. He leaned back in. "Do you want to come in?" he asked gently.

It sounded like a cheap come-on, but she knew what Ned was really asking, and she wasn't ready for it yet. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know how to explain all of this. She wasn't . . .

Jeane clenched her teeth and forced back her panic. "I guess I'd better," she said.

She turned off the ignition, got out of the car, and walked after Ned down to his shop door. He gave her a final glance, then opened the door, standing aside to allow her to walk through first.

The sound of Kaz's television was the first thing to greet her and her heart skipped a beat. No! A Marilyn documentary or movie was the last thing she wanted to see right now, and if Kaz was—

Her eyes focused on a rather startled looking Kaz and beyond him his little television. Not a Marilyn movie, but an episode of *The Brady Bunch*. Jeane could have hugged the lanky clerk in relief.

Ned, however, was already sweeping past her and marching straight down one of the aisles, bellowing as he went. "Would you people care to explain why you're tearing apart my store?"

Jeane went after him. McCain, Ngan, and Van were all clustered at the back of the store. Stacks of books were spread out around them, all of them taken from Ned's mysterious curtained-off stash. The three men leaped to their feet, though only Van had the decency to look embarrassed by their ransacking of the bookshelves.

“Ned! Jeane!” McCain stepped carefully over a stack of books and came bounding along the aisle to meet them. “Are we glad to see you!”

“We’ll see whether you’re glad or not when I make you put those books back on the shelf in precisely the order you took them off!” Ned roared. “What are you doing?” He glared at Van. “You know no one is supposed to touch these!”

“He told us, Ned,” Ngan said, “but it was imperative that we go through them.” His voice was as even as Jeane had ever heard it, but there was also a thin edge of urgency to it as well. Ned’s gaze flicked to him immediately. “We need information on a possible demonic entity, Ned. And on someone you once knew—Lisa Renfield.”

Ned froze, then spun on his heel and stalked back toward the door. Jeane stepped hastily out of his way. Ngan and McCain looked at each other, then hastened after him.

“Ned!” called McCain. “Wait! We need—”

At the door, Ned clicked the deadbolt closed, flipped the OPEN sign around to CLOSED, then turned back to them. His face was deadly serious. “What’s going on?” he demanded in a low, dangerous voice.

McCain told him—told both of them. By the time he was done, Ned was leaning against the counter, his eyes closed, his serious expression turned to one of pain. Everyone was quiet. Kaz had even turned off his television. Jeane stood back against one wall, stunned.

“My God . . . Fitz, Ngan,” Jeane said, “I had no idea this was happening. I would have come back.”

Ngan nodded. “I know, Jeane. The important thing is that you’ve come back now.”

Jeane nodded and braced herself for the inevitable questions. *Why did you go? Why didn’t you tell us? What did you find out?*

To her surprise, however, Ngan turned back to Ned. “I’m sorry we have to bring all of this out into the open, Ned, but you understand, don’t you?”

Ned looked terrible, ashen-faced and bent. He nodded in response to Ngan’s question. “I always hoped that Lisa would get better someday, but I guess not.” He glanced up and spread his hands. “Well, everybody knows the nasty secret of my past now, so there you go. Norm Medvede was me, of course—good guess, Van. I tried looking in on Lisa a couple of times, but seeing me only made things worse. Probably because I was the only person left who knew about the circle.”

“Do you know anything about the ritual the circle was trying to enact that last night?” Ngan asked.

“It was probably the same ritual they—we—always performed: communicating with a power from beyond in order to ask it questions. Stupid questions.” Ned looked up to the ceiling. “How can I get rich? Will I get a promotion? Like a demon is some kind of ultraterrestrial psychic hotline. The last time I was part of it someone wanted to know whether she should take a job that would mean a move to Seattle.” He smiled in bitter reminiscence. “The answer was yes, but she turned the job down anyway. The stock options would have made her a billionaire. I understand she was there that last night.”

“If Lisa had conducted the ritual before, what went wrong? What happened that night?”

Ned shrugged. “As far as I’ve been able to piece together over the years: exactly what everyone thinks. Lisa made contact with the wrong entity, one way more powerful than she could control. I’d take a stab that she asked it a question and it gave her a bigger answer than she bargained for. That’s what drove her mad. There really are some things humanity was not meant to know. But as for this bit about a protector and a test, I don’t know.” He shook his head. “It sounds like your psychiatrist friend was right. It’s just an extension of her obsession.”

“How about the worm, then?” asked McCain. “What about her strength and being able to throw cops around?”

“There’s too many possible explanations for the strength,” Ned pointed out. “I’d just remember that she’s got it and keep my distance. The worm is another story.” He stood upright, put his fingertips together, and took a couple of paces across the width of the shop as he thought. “There are legends of monstrous worms all over the world, though usually they’re more like snakes than actual worms. Of course there are more kinds of ultraterrestrials than you can shake a stick at, so it’s conceivable that it’s some species that has simply never been recorded before. It’s also conceivable that it is indeed somehow related to whatever drove Lisa mad. But there’s a problem with that.” He paused. “How could Lisa know what to summon when the initial contact was a random accident? In fact, how could she manage a summoning in a hospital room anyway?”

“I don’t know, but it looks like she did,” McCain said. He disappeared down the aisles for a moment and returned with a small sheaf of photocopied pages. “We have her notes.”

“Notes do not a ritual make.” A knock at the door interrupted him. “Go away,” he yelled without turning around. “There’s a closed sign on the window. Can’t you read?”

From where she stood, however, Jeane could see who was at the door. A big, big man in a leather coat with a nasty bruise across much of his face. A tall woman with golden-brown hair.

She grimaced. “I think we’d better let them in, Ned. They look like the cops.”

Everyone turned at once, Ngan with his inevitable calm, Ned with a grumbled curse, Van with a start, and McCain with a jump and yelp of surprise. Ned went over and unlocked the door

“Yes?” he asked, annoyed.

“Detectives Gibson and James, Chicago Police Department,” answered the man with the bruise. His gaze took in McCain,

Ngan, and Van in a decidedly unfriendly fashion. “We’re looking for Ned Devromme.”

“Well, congratulations, you’ve found him.” Ned swung the door wide to let the police in. “And just so we can get most of the details out of the way right now: yes, I do know Lisa Renfield; no, I have not seen or had contact with her for about fifteen years; and no, I don’t know what she’s doing now or her motivations for doing it.”

“Oh,” said Gibson sarcastically. “Psychic, are we?” He brushed past Ned without waiting for an answer and regarded the others. “Well, well. Fancy finding you here.”

“Or you,” McCain said, and Jeane caught the look he gave Calamity James. What had happened between them? “How exactly did you happen to find us?”

Calamity, however, let the look pass as Gibson shot back at McCain. “We’re following up on old police records from Renfield’s original arrest,” he said. “I understand we have you to thank for the idea. Ned Devromme is referred to as an associate shortly before her hospitalization. We found an address in the phone book, so we came to check on the lead.” Gibson glowered at McCain, an expression made even uglier by his bruise. “I’m also led to understand that there’s been some secret deal-making going on behind my back. If you people are supposed to be investigating this worm thing while we look for the woman, would you like to explain what you’re doing here now?”

“Ned happens to be a friend of ours,” McCain replied coolly, “and an expert on worm things.”

“And standing right here, so I’d appreciate being addressed in this conversation.” Ned stepped between Gibson and McCain. “If you two are finished with your little pissing match, I think there’s enough of me to answer everyone’s questions.” He pointed to McCain first. “You were going to show me something.”

McCain coughed suddenly and stepped back. “Uh, no.

Nothing important that is," he mumbled.

Jeane cursed quietly to herself. The papers he had must have been the copies of Renfield's notes, and he had said James had not told her partner about the planned trade of information. If Calamity had told Gibson about her deal with McCain, maybe she had told him about that trade as well, but if she hadn't and McCain whipped out the copies now . . .

Fortunately, Calamity herself moved smoothly into the gap. "If Fitz doesn't have something to show you, Mr. Devromme, then I do. These were hidden in Renfield's room at Elgin Mental Health Center." She produced a flat leather case, unzipped it, and extracted several sheets of paper. Ned's eyebrows rose as she handed them to him.

"Thank you, Detective James." He scanned the pages, then cast a glance to McCain. "Notes," he said, "for summoning a demon."

Jeane saw Gibson shudder at the words and felt sympathy for him. Her own disbelief in this sort of thing wasn't that far behind her.

McCain, however, gave Ned the slightest nod of confirmation. The psychic wandered over to the counter and spread the pages out, overlapping some of them to form a larger pattern. After a few minutes, though, he shook his head.

"No," he said. "This isn't right."

"What?" asked McCain and Gibson in unison. The two immediately gave each other nasty looks. Ned ignored them.

"Lisa knows what she's doing when it comes to working a summoning." He held up two pages of Renfield's notes. "Whoever wrote these does not. The symbols and incantations are basically right, but they're all jumbled up. It's like having perfect spelling but really abysmal grammar." He dropped the pages back onto the counter. "These are notes for a summoning, but it's a summoning that would never work. They don't tell us anything about the worm we don't

already know—less even. There's no mention of it turning people into dust. Lisa didn't write these notes."

"But we found them in her room," Calamity pointed out.

Ned shrugged. "Maybe, but she didn't write them."

"Could they have been planted?" asked Jeane with a frown. Everyone looked at her. "Think about it," she said. "What if we had found them first instead of the police? We would have started looking for the worm immediately. Instead we had to stumble across its existence."

"That doesn't make sense."

"No," said Ngan. "It does." He brought his hands up in front of his face and closed his eyes for a second, then opened them again. "We thought we'd discovered everything about the worm by accident, but at least some of what we know was no accident. It was placed for us to find. The worm's existence—though not its most dangerous ability. Renfield's connection to the disappearance of the garbage truck driver. We found out about that because of the Elgin van on the scene, but clues picked up from monitoring police communications would have drawn us there eventually anyway." He looked at Gibson and Calamity. "How exactly did the police make the link between that disappearance and Renfield?"

The two detectives glanced at each other. "We got a tip," Gibson confessed. "We're being set up?"

"*We're* being set up, Detective Gibson." Ngan glanced around at the other Hoffmann Institute agents. "Someone wanted us to know about the worm, but not about what it could do. By selectively planting information, they could misdirect our investigation. We would fail and be disgraced, or possibly even bumble into an encounter with Renfield and the worm and be caught by its unexpected power."

Van nodded. "Except that Monty got involved, I ran into Renfield on the train, and no one knew Ned had an old part

in this at all. But none of that puts us any closer to actually finding Renfield, does it?"

Ned, however, shook his head. "Not necessarily." He picked one paper off the counter. "This is a list of what would be needed for the summoning ritual."

"You said the ritual was fake."

"It doesn't matter." He tapped his finger beside one item. Everyone leaned closer for a better look. Jeane stepped forward and read *blood*. She looked at Ned. "Whoever wrote this knew a bit about ritual magic, so naturally they put blood on the list," he explained. "On its own, it's meaningless—except to me and only because of where everyone encountered Renfield. I'd forgotten about it until now, but Renfield had a contact for fresh pig's blood—what must have been the last slaughterhouse still operating in the old stockyards in 1985. I was there with her once. I remember the place. I heard it closed down not long after." He handed the paper to Ngan. "You've run into Renfield near the Stockyards twice. If that building is still standing, I'll bet you've found her hideout."

Jeane and the others just looked at him in amazement. Finally Van gasped out, "That's it? We run around after her for two days, you come back, find a . . . a grocery list, and figure out where she is?"

"Where she might be," Ned corrected him. "Basically, it all comes down to having the right person in the right place to put everything together."

Ngan nodded sagely, a distant, speculative look in his eyes. "Indeed it does," he murmured, then glanced down at the paper and back up. "Thank you, Ned," he said, his voice crisp again. "You'll show us the slaughterhouse?"

Ned bobbed his head in agreement, but Gibson howled in protest. "Woah! Police business! You can't go charging in there—this is our territory now."

"I beg your pardon, detective," Ngan corrected him, "but

this is our territory. We have greater experience in this area than you do."

Gibson looked ready to protest again but his partner cleared her throat. "Remember who gave you that full-face shiner." The big detective turned his glower on her. She smiled at him, and said sideways to Ngan, "What if we came with you? Unless you people have the power to make arrests, we're going to have to be the ones to take Renfield in."

"That seems acceptable. On condition of your silence afterward, of course."

Detective James shrugged. "Who's going to believe us?" She looked at Gibson, and after a moment, he nodded.

"Fine," he grumbled, "but how exactly do you intend to put Renfield and her wormy buddy away? Guns didn't seem to do a whole lot of good."

"But that taser did," McCain pointed out. He turned to Ngan. "I'll bet Monty has more where it came from."

"Call him," said Ngan, "and arrange for him to meet us as soon as he can." His face was grim. "We need to stop Renfield today."

As everyone began to move and get organized, Jeane took a step back and sagged against a wall. It was like getting a reprieve. No one was paying any attention to her. She didn't have to say anything—for now, anyway. She clenched her fists and fought back the anger and dread.

It all came together with a speed that left Van awestruck. A call to Monty brought a flood of complaints at the involvement of Gibson and Calamity but also a disturbing glee at the prospect of capturing the worm. The CSC would provide the necessary weapons. The truck lot where they had encountered Renfield before was chosen as a convenient rendezvous. Monty and Liam would meet them all there

and Ned would guide them to the old slaughterhouse.

Gibson and Calamity would meet the team there as well—the detectives departed in their own car. After they had left, Ned slipped back into his apartment and reappeared with a handful of strange necklaces.

“Amulets,” he said, passing them around. “They’re supposed to repel demonic forces. I can’t totally vouch for that, but they’re better than nothing.”

Van’s amulet was a lump of yellow quartz carved into a crude ring. “I thought you said you didn’t know what the worm was?”

“I don’t,” confessed Ned, “but demon is as good a guess as any, and it’s better to be safe than sorry.” He rattled his keys. “We’ll take my car. It’s the biggest.”

As they trooped out of the shop and around to the back where Ned’s car was parked, Ngan stepped up to walk beside Van. “This is going to be dangerous,” he cautioned. “Much more dangerous than facing the Madonna of Bachelor’s Grove.”

Van nodded. “I thought about that.” He glanced at Ngan. “But I notice you’re not telling me to stay behind.”

“Every agent needs a trial by fire, Van, and a coddled agent is not a good agent. I just wanted to be sure you were aware of the danger.” The old man patted him on the shoulders. “I want you to be careful. You’re not fully trained. Stay out of the way. We’ll split up once we’re there—you’ll go with Jeane and Ned. Between them, they should be able to handle anything that comes up.”

“Right.” He smiled. “Thanks, Ngan.”

In the car, he found himself wedged into the middle of the backseat with Jeane on his left and McCain on his right. Both of them were strangely silent. Van glanced from one to the other, then finally settled for staring forward in awkward silence.

Ned caught his eyes in the rearview mirror, smiled, and

shrugged. “Jeane’s place is on the way,” the big man announced to no one in particular. “We’ll stop there for a minute, then continue on to the stockyards.”

Van felt Jeane twitch a bit at Ned’s words. He looked over at her as the car pulled out onto the road and for the short ride to Jeane’s apartment. Jeane was just staring out the window, but her right hand, resting in her lap, was opening and closing as though waiting for something to squeeze.

“Is something bothering you, Jeane?” Van asked cautiously after a few moments.

“No,” she said without looking away from the window. “I’m fine.”

“How was LA?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see all that much of it. We didn’t really . . .” She sighed and turned her head a little to give him a thin smile. “I’ll tell you about it later, if you don’t mind.”

“I understand,” Van lied.

Jeane’s smile got a bit brighter and she turned back to the window as Ned pulled around a corner and onto her block. Suddenly, she stiffened. Pressed against her, Van felt the tension shoot through her and twisted reflexively to look out the window as well. They were passing a minivan parked at the side of the street. Three men sat in it. One of them stared at them just as Jeane stared at him, then he was waving excitedly to the other men and pointing at them.

Jeane dropped down. “Don’t stop!” she told Ned sharply. “That was Keith!”

chapter

G T E E N

The sudden acceleration of the car as Ned responded to Jeane's command smacked McCain's head against the window. "Ow! Hey!" He twisted around in his seat. "What gives? Who's Keith?"

In answer, Jeane, tucked down low in her seat, jerked her thumb at the back window. Van was already staring out that way. McCain followed his gaze and caught sight of a minivan pulling out from the curb right behind them. He stared at the two men in its front seat. Both of them were pushing middle age. One of them was balding. The other had a big nose and a look of artistic pretension. Neither of them looked particularly dangerous. Then a third man leaned forward between the two front seats and pointed something at them. A video camera.

"Media?" McCain sputtered. He looked down at Jeane. "Who are these guys?"

"*Weekly Global* something or other, I think."

"*Inquiry*," Ned supplied from the front seat. "Apparently our little talk with Keith wasn't persuasion enough, Jeane. How did he find us?"

Jeane swore. "He knew our names and I'm pretty sure I mentioned Chicago. I imagine he figured it out from there."

"Jeane," Ngan said politely, "this is really a very bad time for us to receive media coverage. Is there something we should know?"

"No," replied Jeane instantly. She gave a terrible, bleak grimace, then added, "Yes. Just not right now, okay?" She sat up a little bit. "Can you lose them, Ned?"

"I can try. Hold on!"

He spun the wheel sharply and took a sudden turn at an intersection. McCain's head smacked against the window again. He stifled a curse and looked back for the minivan again. It was still on their tail.

Ned grunted. "How long until we're supposed to meet everybody?"

"Not long enough for a detour," Jeane said. "Can you do something to whammy them?"

"Fresh out of cheeseburgers, and not while I'm driving."

For a moment there was silence in the car as everyone looked at him. Ned shook his head. "Long story."

"Just do your best to lose them, Ned," advised Ngan. "We can hear the story later."

Unfortunately, the mysterious minivan was nothing if not tenacious. Ned tore south through Chicago as fast as he dared, but the daytime streets were busy. Some heart-stoppingly aggressive driving—pulling sharply around turning traffic, making a couple of illegal turns, and burning through amber lights—put several cars between them and the minivan. It seemed like luck was against them though. For every amber light they ran, a red light stopped them completely. For every turning car that they pulled around, another would

suddenly change its mind, forcing Ned to slam on the breaks. And of course every illegal turn they made took them farther from their destination. Jeane stayed low the whole time. Much to McCain's surprise, she also wore an expression he didn't think he had ever seen on her before: real, helpless fear.

A bridge across the Chicago River put them into the narrow streets of the Bridgeport neighborhood with the minivan about half a block behind. Ned glanced in the rearview mirror and set his lips in a tight line.

"All right, people," he said. "This is it."

He spun the steering wheel hard and sent them skidding around a corner to the right—then immediately reversed the wheel to bring them left around an unexpected dogleg in the road and onto another new street. A dead-end.

"Good going, Ned!" McCain snapped.

"I know what I'm doing," Ned said grimly. "Just watch for that minivan." He drove down to the end of the block where a tall chain-link fence ran across the back of some parking lot. Old houses and tall shade trees ran the entire length of the block, right up to the fence. Almost.

On the left side of the street, a narrow lane opened up like magic. McCain blinked and looked again. The last house on the left and a cluster of tall bushes on the edge of its property combined to hide the lane until they were almost on top of it. Ned pulled in carefully and the street disappeared behind them.

He stopped the car and asked, "Any sign of the minivan before we pulled in here?"

"No," Van said. He turned forward from the window. "Jeez, Ned. How did you know this was here?"

Ned pointed to a big brick building across the parking lot beyond the fence. "Community center. Believe it or not, Kaz belongs to a science fiction club that meets here. I give him a ride sometimes. Keep an eye open for the minivan. They could still find us again."

He started the car forward, creeping along the lane until they reached a wider street that in turn spat them out on Halsted Street near Comiskey Park. There was still no sign of the minivan. Ned turned south for the Old Union Stockyards and their truck lot rendezvous.

McCain looked over at Jeane, still crouched down below the window and asked, "So do you want to tell us what that was about now?" She closed her eyes and shook her head. He stared at her in disbelief. "After all that?"

"Fitz," said Ned sharply. McCain glanced up. The big man was watching him in the rearview mirror. "Leave her alone."

McCain almost snapped back at him, then caught his tongue and flushed.

"I'm sorry, Jeane," he apologized. "I'm kind of tense today."

"I know what that feels like." Jeane sighed and sat upright. "I'll tell you what's going on when I can."

"That will be fine, Jeane," said Ngan. "In the meantime, do you feel up to confronting Renfield? If you don't—"

Jeane cut him off. "I'm up to it."

"And your friends from the *Weekly Global Inquiry*?" asked McCain.

"They're interested in me. That's it. They don't know about anything else. Kind of like your detectives."

"Kind of," McCain replied, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Facing himself—and the shame of having given in to the temptation offered by Calamity—had been bad enough. To have her show up on Ned's doorstep was worse. He didn't believe her story about old records for a second. Having to face off against Renfield and the worm with her there as well was just the icing on the cake. He almost wished Ned and Jeane hadn't come back. It would have given him the time he needed to confront Calamity in private, maybe work things out with her.

God knows I don't want to be angry with her, he thought. He bit down hard. No, he didn't want to be angry with her, but that was because he didn't want to have anything to do with her. It all started with Olivia Marquez and had just gotten worse from there.

Too bad Ngan wasn't about to offer him the same out he had given Jeane. McCain didn't think he would have turned it down.

"Fitz?" said Van, nudging him. "You still with us?"

McCain looked up. Truck trailers filled a familiar fenced-off lot. Calamity and Gibson's car was parked just ahead, Monty's car just beyond that. They had reached the rendezvous. He opened his door and got out with a sense of dread.

"You're late," said Monty. He stood beside his car along with Liam. Calamity and Gibson had remained with their own car, keeping themselves apart from the Hoffmann Institute agents.

"We ran into some trouble," said Ngan. He introduced Ned and Jeane to Liam and Monty. "Have you brought weapons?"

Monty sniffed in disdain. "Of course."

He nodded to Liam. His assistant opened the trunk of their car and drew back a thick piece of felt to reveal several carefully arranged trays. Everyone, even Gibson and Calamity, crowded around to look as Monty began discretely passing the weapons around.

"Tasers," he said. "Bear in mind they are good for one shot each. There are stun prods for close-up work if you need them. Hopefully you won't."

Gibson glared at the taser in his hand. "This is ridiculous. I've got a shotgun in the car. I'm bringing that with me. I'd like to see the monster shrug that off."

Monty looked aghast.

"Alive, Detective Gibson," he choked. "We want the worm alive."

"You're kidding," growled Gibson. Monty, pale-faced, shook his head. Gibson groaned. "Damn."

"With all of us working together, it may not be that difficult, Detective Gibson," Ngan reassured him. He raised his voice, addressing them all. "We're not sure if the slaughterhouse is still there, but if it is, we want to surprise Renfield, so we're going to organize ourselves now. There will be three teams: Myself, Monty, and Liam. Jeane, Ned, and Van. Michael, and Detectives James and Gibson."

"What?" croaked McCain, but Ngan ignored him.

"Ned will lead us in the cars to the slaughterhouse. Obviously, if it's not there, nothing happens. If it is there, we will be going in." Ngan held up a radio headset. "Monty brought three of these, one for each team. We'll use them to stay in touch as we sweep the building. If any team encounters Renfield or the worm, we'll all converge on their location. Any questions?"

"Yes," McCain started to say, but Jeane beat him out.

"If this place is still there," Jeane said, "we don't have any idea of what the layout inside is, do we?"

Ngan looked to Ned, who shook his head. "I didn't see that much of it when I was there. All I remember is big, smelly, nasty, and noisy. I doubt if it will be noisy anymore."

"Thank heaven for small mercies," muttered Jeane.

Ngan nodded. "If that's everything, let's go."

Everyone split up and went for their respective cars. McCain lunged forward and grabbed Ngan's arm before he could climb into Monty's. "Ngan, can we swap teams? I don't want to work with . . ." He caught himself before he said Calamity's name. ". . . the detectives."

"Why not?" Ngan raised an eyebrow. "You'd rather work with Monty?"

McCain took a deep breath. "Yes." Ngan looked at him quizzically. "I'd rather not go into it, but I have issues with them."

“Michael,” Ngan said, “this will hopefully be a very short operation. It is also a very important operation. There is no room for issues. The team assignments were not arbitrary. Detectives Gibson and James are professionals. I believe you will be most effective with them. Monty, on the other hand is not the field operative he would like to pretend he is. I can best control his excesses.” He put one of the headsets in McCain’s hand. “You can deal with your issues afterward if it’s necessary.”

He climbed into Monty’s car, leaving McCain standing alone, staring at the headset. “Son of a bitch,” he muttered.

“Fitz . . .”

McCain spun around. Calamity stood behind him.

“Speaking of bitches,” he said darkly, “you’ve been pretty damn quiet today.”

Calamity gave him a hard look. “If I didn’t know you had the wrong idea, you’d be walking away with your balls knocked up into your ribcage for that. I wanted to set things straight.” She nodded toward Ngan in Monty’s car. “I heard what you said to him. I know what you’re thinking, and I’ve been waiting to get a chance alone with you to talk about it.”

He spread his hands wide. “Hey, you’ve got it.”

“Gibson was telling the truth earlier,” she said bluntly. “We really were looking for Ned because of a police record. I didn’t put your phone call last night and the name together until we got up to the door of the store and I saw you standing inside. I felt like dirt, and I couldn’t say anything about it because as far as Gibson knows all we did last night was have dinner.” Calamity crossed her arms. “Is that enough to make you stop sulking? If you want me to, I can stab you in the back for real.”

McCain just stared at her, letting his hands drop down to his sides. What did you say when your anger had just had a big hole punched in it? He swallowed.

“That . . . I guess that pretty much covers it,” he confessed.

Somewhere inside, a part of him prodded. There was something else he needed to deal with. “Calamity,” he said slowly. “I’m sorry, but I—”

The honk of a horn interrupted him. Gibson leaned out his car window. “Will you two hurry up?”

Calamity cheerfully gave her partner the finger and smiled at McCain.

“Sorry’s good enough, Fitz. I probably would have thought the same thing.” She gave him a push toward the car, winking as she did. “You can show me how sorry you are later.”

That’s not what I was trying to say! McCain wanted to shout. Shameful anticipation kept him quiet. He followed Calamity to her car and climbed into the back seat.

Gibson glanced back at him. “Amateurs,” he muttered.

“Stick it, bub,” McCain grumbled at him as he slipped on the headset and adjusted it.

Ned’s car pulled up past them, taking the lead through the stockyards. Monty followed, with Gibson bringing up the rear. Their little caravan felt more than bizarre to McCain. Armed to the teeth, primed for fighting, ready for a confrontation with a monster worm . . . and driving with slow deliberation through the heart of a thriving industrial park. Warehouse workers, office managers, secretaries, executives all buzzing around, working hard, coming back from a late lunch, slipping away early on a Friday afternoon. Chatting, McCain imagined, about the Bulls’ win the night before, or some movie they just saw, or the cold of the day and whether the heavy grey clouds that had swept in since the morning would bring another dusting of snow. All totally oblivious to the secret hunters moving along the street outside.

Then the bright, well-cared for engines of industry slipped away behind them as they followed Ned into an older part of the yards. The buildings here were worn. Many

looked to have been given up on—faded “For Lease” signs lurked behind filthy, sometimes broken windows. Here and there, some small plants and warehouses still operated. A graffiti-smearred cube van pulled out of a driveway, lurching across potholes that could have swallowed a small child. The driver didn’t even seem to notice.

Ahead of them, Ned took another corner. Gibson turned after him—and stopped. “Damn,” he murmured.

McCain leaned forward against the front seat and stared.

The slaughterhouse was still standing. Behind a rusting, half-collapsed fence, it lurked against the leaden sky like a notched and blunted cleaver blade. The exterior, probably once proudly whitewashed, was faded and peeling, streaked with dirt and rust stains from protruding pipes and vents. The roof was oddly angled. Perhaps something inside was in the process of slowly collapsing. Perhaps the building had been constructed that way. At one end of it, the remains of a stout, fenced ramp formed the stump of the cleaver’s haft. A swinging arm equipped with block and tackle stuck out high above like a wicked splinter. McCain could see doors and the odd window, but most of them were boarded over. A small access door beside a loading dock looked open though, as did a door high at the top of an exterior flight of badly weathered wooden steps. The only clear windows were in a narrow line way up in the roof.

McCain’s headset crackled. “Flashlights?” asked Jeane in his ear.

There was a moment’s hesitation, then Monty’s voice replied. “Uh . . . no.”

Jeane cursed as McCain repeated her request to Gibson and Calamity. Gibson grumbled again, but held up two fingers.

“We have two,” McCain whispered into the headset’s tiny microphone.

“Ned has one, too,” said Jeane.

Monty hesitated again before responding, though McCain suspected the hesitation was not the researcher’s idea. Faint as a ghost signal on a radio, he could hear Ngan in the background. His partner didn’t sound impressed.

“Right, then,” Monty said finally. “We’re set. On my mark, we’ll move. My team and Mr. McCain’s will take the door on the stairs—bring your flashlights for distribution, please. Ms. Meara’s team will take the door at the loading dock. Is that clear?”

McCain passed along the information, then whispered, “Clear.”

“Clear,” said Jeane.

“Right,” said Monty, “let’s go.”

“Go,” McCain repeated out loud, “go!”

Car doors opened. They all got out in unison and dashed across the road, scrambling through gaps in the old fence. For the first time, McCain realized what a motley crew they really were. Monty in his tweed jacket, Jeane in the same clothes she had worn on the airplane. Ngan gliding gracefully through the fence, Ned lumbering. Van almost tripped over some stray fencing. Liam caught him, steadied him, then moved on in a low scuttling crouch. Maybe Gibson was right. Maybe in some ways they were amateurs.

But they were also all there was.

His team and Ngan’s were pounding up the shuddering stairs, and Jeane’s was almost at the loading dock when the minivan came around the corner and squealed to a stop right behind their cars. The three men inside jumped out instantly, the cameraman with his camera already playing across them.

“Damn!” snarled Jeane loudly across the headsets, at the same moment Monty squeaked, “Who are *they*?”

“Old friends,” Ngan said. He pushed Monty up toward the door and threw a glance back at McCain. “Michael?”

“I’m on it.” He turned and started back down the stairs. “Jeane,” he said into the microphone, “I’m going to

run interference with these guys. You keep . . .”

“No,” Jeane responded firmly. “I’ll take care of them. I’m the one they want—they’ll follow me. You keep going.”

McCain stopped. “You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

Her voice was grim, and McCain felt suddenly sorry for the men from the minivan. “All right. Good luck.” He turned again, sprinting up after the others and through into the shadows of the slaughterhouse. Gibson was passing a flashlight over to Monty. Calamity was already playing the other about.

They stood in a room that might once have been an office. An old bulletin board was still fixed to one wall, faded notices stirring limply upon it. There were doorways leading from the room to either side, but the obvious exit was straight ahead: a heavy door had been jammed open with a concrete block. McCain stepped up to it and peered through. There was a stairwell beyond with flights both up and down. Stale air stank of mold, mouse and bird droppings, wood smoke—and an old pervasive smell of blood and raw meat. Even after so many years of abandonment, a charnel stench still clung to the slaughterhouse. McCain almost choked, then clamped down on his rising stomach.

“The smoke smells fresh at least,” he told the others. “I’d say someone’s been trying to stay warm.”

“Up or down?” asked Ngan.

“Can’t tell.”

“You go up then. We’ll take down.”

McCain nodded and the teams split up. Monty, Ngan, and Liam carefully started down, while he, Gibson, and Calamity began climbing. McCain tried to take the lead, but Gibson cut him off and went first, taser at the ready. Calamity slipped in behind her partner, flashlight shining over his shoulder. That left McCain in the rear, staring up at Calamity’s . . . He ground his teeth together and tore his gaze away.

The bottom of the stairwell was a litter of old papers and bits of crumbled masonry. Paint had peeled from the walls in great, irregular patches. In the beam of the flashlight, the exposed concrete shone slick with moisture. Something rustled, and Monty immediately twitched the flashlight down to the litter-strewn floor.

“Mice?” he asked hopefully.

“I don’t think so.” Ngan took the researcher’s arm and steered the light up on to the walls and ceiling. A patchwork of furry bodies hung there, leathery wings folded to make them look like dry leaves. “Bats.”

Monty shuddered, then tried to cover it up by pulling his arm away. “I’ll thank you to remember who is in charge here!”

“Of course, Monty,” Ngan said as blandly as he could manage. He fashioned his frustration into an imaginary bat and allowed it to flap away into the darkness. It did very little good.

He had hoped that perhaps this expedition into the slaughterhouse might encourage Monty to recognize his weaknesses and stop trying to organize every aspect of their activities. He had clearly been wrong. Monty had blamed him for not anticipating that the slaughterhouse would be dark. Fair enough—none of them had, of course. But Monty had also begun to seethe the moment that Jeane had taken charge of dealing with their pursuers in the minivan. He had burned when a few words between Ngan and McCain had decided which party would go down on the stairs and which up. He had appropriated both the headset and the flashlight, and now insisted on splashing the light everywhere but where it was needed. Liam had almost fallen from stepping on the crumbling edge of a badly worn step.

Ngan prayed that Ned was right and they would find

Renfield. They needed to stop her—and he, selfishly, needed to end this assignment to get away from Monty.

Liam, it seemed, was also losing patience with his superior. He caught the arm Monty had just freed and steadied it so that the light shone down onto the floor once more.

“Someone has been through here,” Liam said.

Ngan inspected the litter. Liam was correct. The papers and masonry were disturbed, some knocked aside, others flattened as if someone walked upon them frequently. A sort of trail curved from the bottom of the stairs and around the hall at their side. At the end of the hall was a doorway.

“That way,” Ngan said quietly.

“Hold on,” Monty protested. “I say where we—”

Ngan turned a weary, frustrated eye on the researcher. “You say what, Monty? Is there somewhere else?”

“I . . .” Monty straightened himself, trying to recover his dignity. “I say we go through there,” he ordered.

“Excellent thinking,” Ngan muttered.

The litter on the floor was not conducive to moving in total silence, but then neither was Monty’s presence. They slipped up the hallway as best they could and stopped by the edge of the doorway. Ngan’s nose twitched. The smell of wood smoke was stronger there, almost covering up the old stench of the slaughterhouse. Ngan frowned and readied both his stun prod and his taser, then glanced back at Monty and Liam. He held up three fingers, then flipped down the first. *One . . .*

Monty shook his head immediately and tapped a fist against his own chest. Him first. Ngan furrowed his brow in frustration and dropped a second finger. *Two . . .*

Monty glared. Ngan ignored him, flipped down his third finger, and stepped around the corner of the doorway.

The room on the other side was large. Big windows had once looked from it out onto some other dark space beyond, but the glass had long since been smashed and knocked

away. Maybe the room had been a cafeteria or lunch room of some kind. Now it appeared to be someone’s crude living quarters. There was more litter there, mostly up against the walls. The center of the room was dominated by a big metal drum. The dim red of a dying fire shone through holes in its sides, but not from the top—the drum’s cover had been set across its mouth. There was a nest of blankets close to it, and a small pile of groceries, as well. Ngan remembered the bags Van had seen Renfield carrying.

Behind him, Monty and Liam entered. Monty’s flashlight swept the room. “She’s not here.”

“But she was,” Ngan said softly. “She capped the fire to dim the light.”

“Anyone could have done that. We could be chasing frightened squatters.”

“If there were squatters here,” murmured Liam, “they’re gone. Look.” The flashlight swung around. It caught the young man in stark relief against the wall. It also caught what he was pointing at: a pile of powdery grey dust.

“I didn’t think Renfield would be the type to share quarters,” observed Ngan.

He moved across the room to the broken windows and an open doorway that stood beside them. Renfield hadn’t passed them coming up the stairs. If she had just left this room, the space beyond the windows was the only other place she could have gone.

“Monty, you’d best warn Jeane and Michael,” Ngan said. “Renfield is out there somewhere.”

“Keith,” Roger said, “I don’t like this. Something is going on here. That Jeane woman has friends. Whoever was driving that car was good—it’s sheer luck we spotted them again.”

“And it looked like they were coming in here armed,” chimed in the cameraman. “This might be some kind of undercover raid.”

“What kind of undercover raid hits a place like this?” Keith asked.

He looked around. They stood in a narrow aisle of dim daylight, just inside the loading dock door. The space beyond was big and, from what he could make out of it, empty. Jeane had come this way, though, he was sure of it. He wasn’t going to let her get away now.

He looked back at Roger and asked, “You’re not going to let this story go just because you’re a little worried, are you?”

“The risk is getting bigger all the time, Keith.”

“So are the stakes, Rog. What do you think is going on here? Maybe this is some kind of cover-up to keep her hidden. You could bust it wide open.” Keith glanced at the cameraman. “You got a light on your camera?”

The man nodded. A small but intense light flashed on. Keith gestured and the cameraman began panning the light around the room.

At the mouth of a hallway, there was a flicker of movement as someone ducked back. Keith pointed and said, “There!”

They all ran. From the mouth of the hallway, the light caught more of the figure turning another corner. Keith felt a surge of triumph. He sprinted down the hall, Roger and the cameraman hot on his heels, and swung around the corner.

It was a big, old-fashioned freight elevator. At the back of it, hanging on empty air, was a long coat. Even as he stared at it, the coat crumpled to the floor. There were quick footsteps behind them and a loud rattle as the elevator gate was drawn shut. Keith spun around to see Jeane latching the gate securely. She was glaring at him.

“What did I tell you in LA, Keith?” she snarled.

“You . . .” He charged the gate.

Quick as a thought, Jeane whipped up the stun prod and thrust it precisely through the holes in the gate. The end of it caught Keith just above his left hip. The impact alone would have hurt, but there was also an audible crack as the prod’s shock hit him. Keith staggered and fell, the muscles of his leg and side jerking. Seeing it made Jeane feel a little better. The throbbing that had first developed in LA had returned to her head with a vengeance.

She turned her glare on the cameraman. “Give me the camera.” she ordered. He hugged it possessively. The throbbing increased. “I don’t have time for this. Ned?”

Ned stepped out of the alcove where they had all hidden and glanced into the elevator. The camera flew from its owner’s arms. In mid-air, it flipped onto its side and slid smoothly through a narrow gap at the top of the elevator gate. Ned caught it, then glanced again. Keith ducked as the coat from the back of the elevator whipped past his head. It too squeezed over the top of the gate and into the big man’s arms.

He offered it to Jeane and asked, “What do you want me to do with the camera?”

“Leave it here for now.”

Jeane threw the coat over her shoulder and regarded her prisoners coldly. The cameraman and the balding man Keith had called Roger were both pale. Keith was climbing awkwardly to his feet again, his face red with anger.

She jabbed a finger at him and said, “Didn’t I say you’d regret seeing me?”

She raised the stun prod again and brought it down hard, jamming it sideways between the folding frame of the gate and the latch. Sparks arced for a moment, then died.

“When I get back,” she warned the men in the elevator, “we’re going to have a talk.”

She turned on her heel and walked away. The throbbing in her head, her mingled anger and fear, was white hot.

At her side, Ned gave a look of concern. "Jeane . . ."

"Don't say anything, Ned," she said.

"Jeane!" Van darted out of the alcove with the headset pressed over his ears. He tore it off and shoved it at her. "Monty and Ngan have found Renfield's hideout. She's in here somewhere."

"Good," Jeane muttered. She pulled the headset on. "The media is secure," she reported. "Where are you, Monty?"

"In a big room," Monty said quickly. "There's an even bigger room beyond it."

"That's helpful," she spat, but Ned was tugging on her arm and pointing toward an immense set of partly open double-doors just down the hall. "Never mind. I think we may be close."

"We're close, too," McCain whispered into his microphone. "I think."

The stairs had led up and up until they ended in a small landing with one door. That door had opened onto a long catwalk suspended across the width of the building just under its roof. Up that high, they were close to the narrow windows that had been visible from outside. Dull light filtered through the dirty glass, making a haze of illumination that fell down into the open space beneath—at least three full stories' worth of open space. Time and neglect had turned the walk into little more than rusty planks with fragile hand rails and only a little more substance than a spider's web. McCain stepped cautiously past Gibson and Calamity and out onto it. He looked very carefully over the edge and through the gloom toward the floor.

"Can you shine your flashlight out into the bigger room, Monty?" he asked.

Sure enough, a beam of light briefly stabbed the shadows far below. "Okay," McCain said, "we're on a catwalk way up above you. We're coming down."

"Wait!" Monty urged. "You can be our spotters. Look around from up there. Can you see Renfield anywhere?"

McCain gritted his teeth and started to lean a little farther, then thought better of it. He dropped to his belly on the catwalk and stuck his head out over the edge to scan the room below.

"Nothing," he said. "I can't—"

If he hadn't been lying belly down against the catwalk, he probably never would have caught the slight vibration of footsteps against it. He turned his head and looked up.

Renfield was about a third of the way along the catwalk from its other end and coming closer. She held the worm, in its shrunken form, in her hands. Behind her was an open door identical to the one he had just come through himself—a second stairway up to the catwalk.

"Gibson!" he shouted in warning, then into his microphone, "She's up here! She's up here!"

He started to scramble to his feet.

"No!" yelled Gibson. "Stay down, Fitz!"

McCain twisted around. Gibson was running—*running*—out onto the catwalk and every step was shaking the fragile structure.

"No!" McCain gasped, but Gibson was already on him.

McCain dropped back down onto the catwalk and felt rather than saw Gibson take a careful running jump over him. The entire catwalk shuddered as he landed, but miraculously it held. McCain twisted back around the other way to watch. Gibson was pulling his taser out. He stopped, aimed, and fired at Renfield—

—who was tumbling back with unbelievable speed. The fine needles and wires of the taser passed over her completely, sparkling in the dim light from the windows. Renfield

came back to her knees and held out the worm. She squeezed it hard and the thing made a horrible mewling noise, then vomited an unbelievable torrent of sticky blue acid.

Gibson yelped and scrambled back, but he wasn't her target.

The spray splashed all across the catwalk. It splashed two of the rusty old pipes that suspended the walk from the ceiling and the sockets that anchored them. Wood and metal smoked. The suspensions groaned. Renfield shrieked with laughter as she stepped carefully back from the spreading, dripping acid.

"Dead!" she screamed. "You're all dead!"

"God damn!" howled Gibson. He turned and sprinted back along the catwalk.

"Stop!" McCain shouted "You're going to—"

Too late. Eaten away by the worm's acid, the suspension pipes squealed and parted. Corroded, crumbling wood, shaken by Gibson's heavy footfalls, broke, and two-thirds of the catwalk was swinging free. The added weight set the other suspensions trembling. It was too much for the old structure. Four more suspensions tore free or broke, and a scant heartbeat later, all of them let go. The planks ripped away from their anchors on the wall. McCain caught one brief glimpse of Gibson grabbing uselessly at the hand rails and another of Calamity staring in shock from the safety of the stairwell doorway. Then he and Gibson and the catwalk were plunging down to the floor.



chapter
7 T E E N

Just inside the tall double-doors, Jeane froze. For a moment, everyone seemed to freeze: Van at her side, Monty and Liam in a doorway further up one side of the room, Ngan caught in the act of running out of the same doorway. Even the collapsing catwalk with McCain and Gibson aboard seemed to pause for a split second. Small chunks of the roof were coming down with it and streams of outdoor light were stabbing down into the dark chamber. Everyone, everything, was frozen.

Except for Ned. He was shoving past her, planting his feet and thrusting out his hands. The plunging catwalk shook—and slowed. Ned gasped and groaned in agony.

The catwalk still hit the floor hard enough to raise a cloud of dust. It didn't, however, hit with the bone-shattering, flesh-rending crash that Jeane had dreaded. She started at Ned in awe. The psychic was

drenched in sweat and panting like he'd just run a marathon. She took a step toward him, but he shook his head and waved weakly at the fallen catwalk.

"Fitz," he gasped.

She nodded and ran, leaving Van to help him.

McCain was already sitting up atop the broken remains of the catwalk and staring about in stunned amazement when she reached him. A little blood and a lot of dust made a sticky mess across his face.

"What the hell . . . ?" he choked.

"Ned caught you," she said tersely. Between the confrontation with Keith and McCain's close call, the churning tension in her head was beginning to spread through her entire body. She was trembling with fury and hatred and near-panic. She needed this to be over. She needed time to stop before she blew apart.

McCain, of course, didn't catch any of that. "Gibson?"

"Not as lucky as you." Ngan hurried over. "He slipped under. He's pinned and I think his leg is broken—if nothing else. Where's Detective James?"

"She was still on the stairs. She's fine." McCain stood up, grabbing at Jeane's arm for support. She almost threw him aside out of sheer reflex. That McCain caught. He snatched his hand away. "Jeane, are you okay?"

"No." She pulled her taser from its holster. "Where did Renfield go? You said she was up there with you."

"Jeane . . ." said Ngan gently.

"Renfield!" she snapped back. "Where is she?"

"There was another door at the other end of the catwalk." Ngan gestured at the wall opposite them. "There must be another stairwell, too."

Jeane scanned the wall. There were several doors on it. Only one stood open. She tightened her grip on her taser. "I'm going in."

"We need a plan," Ngan said. "We need a minute to reorganize."

"We don't have a minute," she said. "We don't know what other parts of the building those stairs connect to. I don't want to lose her."

She gave Ngan a sharp glance. He hesitated for a moment, then stepped out of her way. McCain didn't even try to stop her. Someone had set down their flashlight. She snatched it up and strode through the open doorway.

As she had guessed, it was the stairwell. It had been an emergency exit at some point, too, but that doorway had been filled in with cement blocks. Jeane paused on the bottom stair, listening intently. The stairwell was silent. The only sounds filtered in from the big room outside. Jeane pressed the head of the flashlight against her leg, smothering the light as she looked up into the darkness, searching for any sign of movement. After a long moment, she raised the flashlight and directed its beam up the well.

A pale, wild-eyed face stared at her from a second floor landing not twenty-five feet away. Something made a mewling sound like a tortured animal.

Jeane pushed herself backward, throwing up her coat to protect her face. She slammed up hard against a wall, but a spattering sound on the concrete where she had been standing and the nose-burning smell of acid made her glad of the pain.

No, damn it, she was glad of the pain anyway. It was sharp. It was real. There was no uncertainty about it. Jeane sucked it in and opened her eyes. Renfield was coming down the stairs toward her. Jeane brought up the taser. Renfield spat when she saw it.

"I'm not going to let you stop me," she hissed. "There's too much at stake. You don't know what it's like to die."

"Maybe not," Jeane snarled back, "but you don't know what it's like never to have been born."

She squeezed the trigger on the taser.

Renfield hurled the worm at her.

It started growing in mid-air, swelling up just as McCain had described. Its expanding bulk intercepted the taser darts. Jeane didn't stand still to see if anything happened to the creature, just squeezed the second trigger and got the hell out of the way. She caught a brief whiff of burned meat and a screech of pain behind her—but that was it. The worm hit the wall and twisted around, its terrifying slit of a mouth gnashing relentlessly. Jeane turned and sprinted for the big room.

"Worm!" she shouted. "Get your tasers out!"

She threw herself to the ground as she came through the doorway and rolled clear. The worm came surging through almost on her heels.

Keith hurled himself against the elevator gate again, and finally the stun prod popped free, dropping to the ground with a clatter.

"Yes!" he crowed, and reached through the gate to unlatch it. He glanced back over his shoulder to Roger and the cameraman huddled at the back of the elevator. "We're out!"

"Oh, thank God!" Roger shook himself free of the cameraman and helped Keith push back the gate. "I think we can get out of here before they come back."

"No way." Keith darted out of the elevator and snatched up the abandoned camera.

Roger stared at him with bulging eyes. "Are you insane? You heard that crash—it sounds like the whole place is falling apart. I don't know what the hell is going on, but I don't want any part of it!"

"You run now and I'm taking the story somewhere else."

"Be my guest! I'm getting on the next plane back to LA and pretending this never happened."

Roger ran for the loading dock. The cameraman hesitated a moment, staring at the camera in Keith's hands, then shook his head and followed his boss.

"Not even worth fighting you for that, man," he called back. "Good luck!"

"Cowards!" Keith spat after them. "This is going to be big!"

He checked the camera and raced in the direction Jeane and Ned had gone, the direction from which he could still hear voices.

He stepped through the tall double-doors just in time to catch Jeane rolling out of a doorway. Then he saw what followed her. His heart almost stopped in excitement.

Big? He raised the camera and zoomed in. This was going to be enormous!

"Worm! Get your tasers out!"

Ngan spun around on Jeane's cry, his hand already grabbing for his weapon. The others barely had time to look up. Liam and Van were heaving at the collapsed catwalk while Monty and McCain tried to slide a barely conscious Gibson free. Ned, badly winded, was only just reaching them. They made a nice compact group—an easy target for the worm.

"Scatter!" Ngan ordered.

He brought his taser up just as Jeane cleared the doorway, dropped, and rolled.

The worm was right behind her. Thick grey hide rippling obscenely, it charged the door. For a moment, Ngan wondered if it would get through. The doorway was smaller than it was. That didn't stop the worm, though. It simply rammed straight into the doorway, scattering bricks and dust and splinters of old wood everywhere. Its bulk hurtled on, barely slowed at all by the impact.

The darts of Ngan's taser met it and sank into its flesh. Ngan squeezed the charge trigger and hit the worm with all of the taser's power.

It might as well have been a beaded curtain hung across the now demolished doorway for all the good it did. The worm squealed and darted directly toward him, its mouth gaping wide in frenzy.

Ngan almost choked. A taser had stopped the creature before!

Hardly thinking, he hurled the spent taser at the worm. In the moment that it took for the beast to snap at it, he gathered himself, found his balance, and threw himself to the side. His head and torso snapped down as he leaped, his legs and hips pushing up and tumbling over in a natural windmill of momentum. The worm passed so close he could smell its dry, dusty odor. As soon as his feet touched the ground again, he jumped forward in a long, smooth, liquid dive that brought him into a crouch beside Jeane.

"My taser didn't work."

"Mine neither," Jeane said.

"Of course not!" Renfield stood in the ruined doorway like a queen or some unholy mystic, eyes wide and bright. "It's the power of decay! It's entropy! Everything dies! Everything ends!"

"Shut up!" snapped Jeane, lashing out at the mad woman.

Renfield just danced away.

The worm, meanwhile, had recovered and come back around. Its hideous head and tiny, eerie eyes swung between Ngan—and the knot of men still clustered around the catwalk. Monty had obeyed Ngan's order to scatter, but Van, Liam, and McCain still remained, struggling to pull Gibson from harm's way.

"No!" Ngan shouted.

"Yes!" laughed Renfield. "Test them! That one, and that one." Her finger jabbed at Van and McCain. "And—"

The end of the catwalk jerked out of Van and Liam's hands, rising up by a foot. McCain fell back in surprise, but his final haul on Gibson's body brought the detective slithering free just before the broken walkway fell back to the ground. Renfield gasped and swung around. Her finger pointed straight at Ned. The psychic's face was pale with exertion and he looked ready to teeter over.

"Hello, Lisa," he said weakly. "Long time."

Renfield's face went as pale as his. "You!" she howled. "You . . ." Color flooded back into her face like a spreading fire. "Test him!" she screamed at the worm. Spittle flew from her mouth. "Test *him!*"

The worm turned, keening as if delighted at the orders.

Beside the ruined catwalk, McCain, Liam, and Van had Gibson between them, trying to drag him away. Liam twisted around, then released the detective and took three long, quick steps back and away from the others. On the first he pulled out his taser. On the second he raised it and wrapped both hands around the grip. On the third, he dropped to one knee, aimed, and fired.

The darts struck the worm high on its back. A split second later, the worm thrashed sharply, its keen turning into another dreadful screech of pain—followed by a roar of anger. Maybe Liam's shot had found some especially sensitive spot. Ngan couldn't guess. He didn't have time.

The worm turned. No, it rolled, spinning down around its length and coming up again faster than Ngan would have thought possible. The motion wrapped the wires of the taser around its body, yanking them taut. With both hands holding tight to the taser, Liam was jerked forward and flat onto his chest as the worm reared back.

"Liam!" yelled Van.

He dropped Gibson, sending McCain staggering, and threw himself back to grab for Liam—who was already thrusting himself aside and rolling to safety. Van went sprawling where

Monty's assistant had been. The worm, still roaring, snapped its body forward.

The underside of its bulk hit the floor with a sound somewhere between a thunderous slap and a colossal rasp. The worm reared back again with another roar.

There was nothing under it but pale, grey dust.

Ngan's breath fled from his body. No one moved.

Then Renfield laughed again. Jeane gave a feral, wordless shriek of fury and leaped at her.

McCain's stomach rose in shock, but his chest clamped tight and refused to let anything out. His throat burned with bile. His tongue felt like sandpaper had been rubbed across it. Gibson hung off of him, groaning with his own pain, but all McCain could do was stare at the dust that had been Van. When Jeane shrieked and hurled herself at Renfield, he almost joined her. His grasp on Gibson weakened and the detective started to slip.

Suddenly, though, Calamity was there. "Oh God, Fitz!" she gasped. Her eyes were wide with horror, but she got one shoulder under Gibson's arm and helped prop him up. "What—"

"Help me get Gibson clear," McCain told her thickly.

The worm was still roaring, but now that roar was punctuated with short squeals as Liam and Ngan moved in on the creature in deadly silence. Both men wore pale, determined looks, and both had their stun prods out now. With unspoken coordination, they took turns lunging in and thrusting, then dodging back again as the worm twisted this way and that. It looked like they were trying to prick it to death for all the good they were doing. McCain's own stun prod still hung at his side, along with his taser. Fat lot of good those had done!

They dragged Gibson to the nearest shelter they could

find—the far end of the catwalk, buckled up on its side in the fall. Monty already cowered there.

"Why aren't the tasers working?" McCain snapped. He helped Calamity lower Gibson to the ground, then tugged his stun prod free.

Monty shook his head. "I don't know. I must have set the charges too low."

"You must have *what*?" McCain rounded on him.

"It seemed like the shock yesterday was almost too much," Monty squeaked. "With everyone having tasers now, we might have overdone it and electrocuted the worm. I adjusted the taser charges so they wouldn't—"

McCain jabbed his stun prod into Monty's fat, tweed-shrouded side. Monty gasped, stiffened, and started to shake. McCain bent down and pulled the trembling researcher's taser from its holster, dropping his stun prod to take his own taser in his other hand. He glanced at Calamity. She already had her taser ready.

She met his gaze with a vicious smile. "Bet you fried worm tastes like chicken."

McCain leaned over and kissed her savagely. "Let's do this," he snarled.

Renfield's mocking laugh was the final straw. Jeane's life was in shreds. Everything she had believed about who she was and where she came from had been blown away. Comfortable lies had been replaced by secrets sharp like a whole forest of thorn bushes. No nice, normal parents—not even a normal mother forced to give her up. Not even a mother at all, just a piece of lab equipment! Tabloids and TV shows waiting to hound her. She was a living conspiracy. She was a freak!

And now Van was dead. More than dead.

The pressure that had throbbed in Jeane's head for two days—sometimes ebbing for a while, but always coming back worse than ever—exploded. Fury. Hate. Hate for Renfield. Hate for Marilyn. Hate for Bobby. Hate for Keith Hollister, hate for Sam Hollister, hate for Stan Meara, hate for Dale or Shelley or whatever her name was. Hate for herself. Jeane screamed her hate, and the fear that grew with it and threw herself at Renfield, punching and kicking and tearing and raking.

Renfield laughed again and stepped aside with unbelievable speed. "It's the end," she babbled. "It's waiting for you, too. You can't stop it!" She dropped under another wild swing, then punched forward herself. Her fist took Jeane hard in the stomach.

The pain only drove Jeane harder. The pain was real. There was no mystery to it. It was honest. Jeane swallowed it and caught Renfield with a hard punch to the jaw that twisted her whole head around.

Renfield's laugh turned into a shocked, indignant howl and she hurled herself all the way into the fight.

God, she was strong! Jeane just took the first few blows, standing up to them in her rage and spending all of her time pummeling back. Renfield was as fast as she was strong, though. She twisted away from Jeane's punches, then struck herself, slamming a fist or the edge of her hand into the underside of Jeane's arms or legs. The pain wasn't just real and honest—it was real and it *hurt*, penetrating all the way through her hate. There was blood in her mouth, Jeane realized, and a sharp pain in her side. She took a step back. Then another. And another.

The hate that had driven her so far was finally beginning to fade out. Underneath, there was nothing left. Nothing but the thin water of fear. Maybe the same kind of fear that Marilyn had felt when she had put her feet up in the stirrups on Sam Hollister's surgical table. Or the same fear that she had

felt when she talked about giving in, the fear that would finally drive her to open the bottles of little pills one last time.

Maybe it had been that same kind of fear that had left Marilyn the hollow image that so many men desired and that Jeane had shunned her whole life. She had worked hard to be everything the immortal, untouchable Marilyn was not. Strong where Marilyn was weak. Smart where Marilyn played dumb. Brave where Marilyn was scared. Jeane was everything Marilyn could never . . . *would* never be. Marilyn had been afraid. Marilyn had given up.

Jeane wasn't afraid. Jeane didn't give up. Jeane didn't lose fights.

She blocked Renfield's next punch. It hurt, but not as much as it might have. She blocked the punch after that and it hurt, too. She twisted around a brutal kick. Marilyn, she was sure, had never learned how to fight like this. Jeane started studying Renfield's movements, watching for a weakness. It took only one more exchange of blows. The woman was fantastically strong and fast, but she didn't really know what she was doing. She didn't have training. Jeane did.

Jeane started fighting for real.

Now it was Renfield who was forced back, giving way before precise, disciplined strikes. When she overextended herself, Jeane stepped in, twisted sharply, and put her down on the ground.

Renfield still somehow managed to fetch her a blow to the head that made Jeane's ears ring and gave the mad woman a chance to squirm back to her feet. Jeane clenched her aching jaw and lunged again. What the hell was it going to take to put Renfield down for good?

"Ngan!" shouted McCain, "Liam! Get clear! Now!"
Ngan struck once more, thrusting his stun prod into the

worm with cold fury, then spared a glance over his shoulder as he danced backward. McCain and Calamity stood about thirty feet away. Calamity had her taser out while McCain held one in each hand, aimed and ready to fire. Liam was already sprinting away from the worm. Ngan flung his stung prod at the thing for one last jolt, then jumped clear as well. He spun around just in time to glimpse the silver flicker of darts and wires as McCain and Calamity fired in tandem.

The worm screeched, like steel drawn across concrete, and convulsed. Once. Ngan froze, ready to leap farther away, but the worm started thrashing madly. A terrible stench of burned flesh filled the air. Suddenly the worm was shrinking again, collapsing in on itself as it wriggled.

Unbelievably, though, it *kept* squirming! Not merely quivering from the combined shock of the tasers, but actually moving and trying to crawl away.

“Holy shit,” snarled Liam. “How do we kill it?”

He raised his foot and stomped on it, but the creature’s rubbery body just compressed under his boot and sprang back. The worm squealed and hissed, whipping around angrily. Liam jumped back. The worm shuddered and Ngan could have sworn it was bigger again than it had been a moment before.

Someone grabbed him. Ngan lashed out—then pulled his blow back as he realized it was Ned. The psychic was almost staggering. Ngan grabbed him and held him up. Ned shook him away weakly.

“It’s not a demon,” he gasped. “It’s not magic. It’s psychic.”

Ngan blinked. “What?”

“When it took Van, I felt it.” Ned touched his head. “We’ve been wrong all along. It’s a *psychic* creature.”

And if it was psychic, then the power of whatever passed for its mind might have been what was keeping the worm alive. Ngan turned away from Ned, back to the worm. It *was*

bigger now, the size of a dog rather than a cat. He drew a long, deep breath, settling his body back into a careful, perfect martial posture . . .

. . . and his mind into the higher state of awareness that he had learned so long ago. He almost went too far, freeing his mind entirely. The walls of the ancient cavern that was his special place of refuge wavered around him, threatening to overwhelm the physical world. Ngan stepped away from them regretfully. They promised a place of safety and healing, and he badly wanted both, but not while the worm still lived. In his mind, Ngan turned, bringing his spirit into synchronization with his body.

He didn’t enjoy fighting like this. It was a desecration of the peace of his cavern. Sometimes, though, it was necessary. He focused himself. He could sense the worm, a strange split presence that was both small and large at the same time.

Spirit and body acting as one, Ngan brought his right hand around, then thrust it forward in a sharp, controlled blow.

Fifteen feet away, the worm shook and collapsed. Its presence faded a little in his mind, but it was still struggling. Ngan slashed with his left arm, striking out again. The worm rolled over and mewled in pain. Its presence was fading fast. Ngan took a step forward, balancing himself again, and raised his hands high, ready for the final blow.

He froze at the same moment as Ned gasped loudly. There was another presence overlapping with the worm. It was a bright presence, and strong, and for a scant heartbeat filled with such power that it shattered Ngan’s tranquility, snapped him back into the physical world, and left him gasping alongside Ned.

The world was grey, yet somehow there was light. Van hung in space. There was no ground, but stuff floated all around him. Clouds of grey dust—*familiar* grey dust. And corpses with terrified expressions. He recognized the jogger from the day before. Another woman. A garbage man. Men dressed in medical uniforms. A young homeless man. The worm's victims.

Him.

Van opened his mouth to scream, but there was no air, just that awful dust, boiling in from God knew where like a tremendous grey storm. It washed over the corpses, hiding them, but that was the farthest thing from Van's mind. He was drowning in the dust. He choked, spewing it out of his lungs, then desperately clamped his mouth shut before he could inhale more.

Where was he? What was this place? Out—he needed to get out! He kicked and struggled, but there was no way to move and nowhere to go. His vision was filling up with dark, hazy spots. There was nothing left to do but reach out and—

—he was in that still, quiet place he had sought for so long in his training sessions with Ned. Out, he realized, I needed to focus *out* all along, not in.

If there had been any air in his lungs, Van would have laughed as his power finally manifested. He burst out of the grey space and through his still place in a single, glorious heartbeat.

The worm blew apart in a shower of grey hide, dark guts, and dust.

Jeane had Renfield in a completely ineffective chokehold and saw it happen over her shoulder. One moment the worm was there and the next it was simply gone. In its place was Van, sprawled on the floor, choking, sucking in air—and

laughing his head off as everyone stared at him. Including Renfield.

"He survived!" she gasped. "He passed the test!" Renfield thrust Jeane away as if she were nothing more than a rag doll and dashed over to kneel beside the young man. "Save me!" she begged him. "Make it stop! You can protect me. You can pull me out of the river!" She held out her hands.

Still alternating between laughing and choking, Van reached up and took them.

"Yes!" screamed Renfield. She leaped to her feet. "I'm free!"

"Enjoy it while it lasts," snarled Jeane.

A long, thick chunk of wood had broken away from the catwalk when it fell. Jeane snatched it up and swung it with all her strength, slamming it into Renfield's gut hard enough to fold her up around it, lift her off her feet, and send her flying backward.

And this time, Renfield stayed down. Jeane leaned on the long chunk of wood, her head aching, but clear. Thank you, Marilyn.

"Happy birthday, Mr. President," she slurred, and spat a mouthful of blood onto the dusty ground.

coming home

Jeane ached all over. Twenty-four hours after the confrontation with Renfield, her body was one enormous bruise, but she knew from experience that meant the worst of the pain would soon be over.

The worst of another kind of pain, however, was already past and the wound was healing.

She stood tall and proud at the end of the conference table in the Hoffmann Institute branch office. The whole team, official and unofficial, sat around her: Ngan, McCain, Van, and Ned. Aside from a big bandage on McCain's forehead and Ned's lingering exhaustion, they had come through the fight okay. The same couldn't be said for Gibson—the big detective was in the hospital. At least he wasn't in a funeral home.

Renfield was back in Elgin, this time in a maximum security ward. Calamity had taken her in, spin-

ning a simple story of the capture that put herself and Gibson in the roles of heroes surprised by Renfield as they investigated reports of a sighting. The collapsing catwalk had been a trap rigged up by Renfield, but even with her partner incapacitated, Calamity had managed to take Renfield down.

There was no mention of the worm, of course, or the Hoffmann Institute agents—which unfortunately also meant that while the police had Renfield, there was no information concerning what had really happened to her victims. In the end, Jeane suspected, answers would appear, if only to stop people from looking further. There was already a report that morning that badly burned remains had been located not far from Elgin and identified using dental records as the missing doctor and orderlies. Jeane didn't believe that was true. Ngan and McCain had told her of the Hoffmann Institute's hand in the suppression of Renfield's initial breakdown. It wasn't hard to guess where the Institute had its hand now. Jeane didn't really like the thought of that, but she'd had more than enough of cover-ups for the time being.

The first thing she had done that morning as the team gathered around the conference table had been stand and tell everyone what had happened to her over the past three days. All of it. Every last speck of the truth.

It felt good. Unbelievably weird, but good. And whatever she had thought in the depths of her despair, Jeane knew there was no way she could not have done it. It didn't matter what everyone else thought of her story. She had accepted it and she was the one who mattered.

Ned had been right: if there was one thing her friends knew, it was weird.

Van gaped at her, then broke out into a huge smile. "You're kidding!"

Jeane shook her head. "Nope," she said with a smile herself. "Real deal."

She dropped the photographs of Hollister's lab on the table and sat down as she pushed them over to the young man. Down at the end of the table, McCain and Ngan were exchanging startled looks.

"Well?" she asked them.

"It's incredible," McCain confessed, then he smiled as well. "Congratulations on finding your birth mother—again. I can see why you wanted to take care of Keith on your own at the slaughterhouse."

"Don't remind me," Jeane said with a grimace. After everything was over with Renfield, they had gone back to the freight elevator only to find Keith and his friends long gone. "I'm still not sure what I'm going to do about him."

"We'll help, Jeane," Ngan reassured her. "The Hoffmann Institute has a certain amount of experience in this area, and I have favors I can call in."

"Why don't I doubt that?" asked Jeane. "And why does it sound vaguely disturbing?"

Ngan shook his head. "There's nothing drastic involved. In order for a story to be taken seriously, it has to be backed up by a certain reliability. You would be surprised at how easily reliability can be compromised." He accepted the photographs from Van and glanced at them briefly. "Before we contemplate that, however, there is another assignment to finish." He turned to Ned. "How was Van able to survive the worm's attack?"

"It's called psychoportation," Ned explained, "the ability to move instantly between points in space." He smiled at Van rather proudly. "It's one of the rarest psychic talents. I have no experience with it at all. That's why it took so long to draw out. Apparently I was teaching Van all the wrong things."

"Is it the same thing as teleportation?" McCain asked. "Like a transporter on *Star Trek*?"

Ned rocked his head back and forth. "Yes and no.

Teleportation is an aspect of psychoportation. Based on what Van says he saw when he was 'inside' the worm, though, I'd say we're looking at a different aspect, one that's even more rare—an ability to move sideways through space and enter other dimensions. The most common name I've heard for it is 'dimension walking.' "

Ngan's eyebrows rose. "Like a diabolist summoning a demon, but in reverse?"

"That's a reasonable analogy," agreed Ned. "Not totally accurate, but good enough." He folded his hands across his belly and regarded Van. "I'd say the worm possessed a variant of the same power. Anything it 'ate' was transported to some kind of extra-dimensional space. During the transport, some of that dust you saw slipped the other way. Since Monty's tests showed the dust was organic, my guess would be that it's not unlike a lot of the dust in a human house—mostly dead skin particles."

Van gagged and coughed suddenly. "I was breathing dead worm skin? You didn't tell me that!"

Ned shrugged. "I didn't want to freak you out." He turned back to the others. "There isn't a lot known about dimension walking, but it is thought that the psychic does have a slight instinct for how to get home. When Van's ability kicked in under stress, so did that instinct. He reappeared right where he left from."

"Inside the worm's mouth," said Ngan, nodding. "And since Michael and Calamity had forced it back to its smaller size and I had kept it there . . ."

"*Splat!*" grinned Van.

"Incredible."

"And handy when I want to go somewhere on spring break!"

Ned leaned forward and swatted Van sharply. "Don't even think that. Rare talents are usually rare because they have a tendency to get stupid psychics killed. You're lucky you

made it back here at all. Remember that the next time you start daydreaming about Florida.”

“You know,” Jeane pointed out, “this might also answer the question of what connected Renfield’s victims—the ones she went after deliberately anyway. Only a psychic with this dimension walking talent could have survived the worm and passed her ‘test.’ And look at who she told the worm to attack at the end.”

“Me,” said McCain. “Van. Ned.” He narrowed his eyes. “The first time we ran into her, the worm went after Ngan.”

Ned sucked air through his teeth. “Do you have that information on her other victims?”

McCain passed a file to him and he flipped through it. Ned paused on the picture of the middle-aged woman Renfield had attacked on the north side. His eyes went hard. “I knew her. She was a customer in my shop, always buying books on clairvoyance. I always wondered if she might be a latent psychic.” He clapped the file shut and looked up. “I’ll bet the other two victims were, too.”

“So Renfield was attacking people with psychic ability,” Ngan said quietly. He steepled his fingers together and frowned over the top of them. “That would explain why the attacks were so irregular. Until she got us all in one place she would have had to hunt the city for potential victims.” He glanced at Ned. “Could she have an ability to sense the presence of psychics as you do? Could she have been specifically hunting for someone who could dimension walk?”

“The last time I saw her,” Ned said slowly, “I wouldn’t have said she had any psychic potential at all.”

“And now?”

Ned shrugged. “I don’t know. And even so, the worm seems like a pretty lethal way to find someone with a talent as rare as dimension walking. It’s like trying to find someone with an immunity to arsenic by poisoning everyone you meet.”

“What about the worm then?” asked Jeane. “Was it a demon summoned by Renfield?”

This time, Ned hesitated. “I don’t think so,” he said finally. “Its abilities fit Lisa’s madness perfectly, but I still say there’s no way she could have summoned a demon herself. I don’t know where the worm came from. I don’t know what it was.”

“You might be about to find out,” Emma cut in. She was just opening the office door. “Monty’s here from the CSC. Lily wants to see you all in her office on the double.”

McCain caught Ngan’s arm and held him back as the others dashed off for Lily’s office.

“Michael?”

There were too many questions. McCain led with the easiest: “Do you think Monty’s told Lily about the incident with the stun prod?”

“I doubt it.” Ngan drew McCain after the others. “I had a brief conversation with Monty before we left the scene yesterday. I told him that if he didn’t report your accidental fumble with the stun prod, I wouldn’t report his endangering the lives of the team by secretly reducing the power of the tasers.” He smiled. “Monty was not impressed, but he did agree.”

“Good.” McCain grimaced. “Now what about this thing with Jeane?”

Ngan’s smile faded. “Say nothing, Michael.”

“Ngan, she’s like my niece now!”

“Only in genetic terms.” Ngan fell silent for a moment, then said, “You saw Jeane yesterday. She seems to have reached an acceptance with herself today. How do you think she would react to discovering that not only are you a clone, but a clone of her biological uncle?”

McCain sighed. He knew how he had taken the first part of that discovery himself, and even with a year to get used to *that*, Jeane's news was still a shocker.

"'Not well' would be an understatement," said McCain.

"Exactly. Tell Jeane when she needs to know. I think it will be easier on both of you." He paused outside the door of Lily's office and looked at him. "Was there something else?"

McCain blinked. "No. Should there be?"

"You seem . . . distracted."

"Just tired," McCain lied and walked into Lily's office.

Sure. Tired because part of the previous evening had been spent with Shani—beautiful, intelligent Shani—before she had to go to work at the hospital. Tired because the rest of the night had been spent with Calamity—wild, unpredictable Calamity.

McCain hated himself.

You seem distracted. Ngan was amazed by his own gall in suggesting that McCain should be distracted when his own thoughts were leaping like fleas on a drowning rat. He barely managed to follow McCain into Lily's office. Ignoring Monty's cold glare, Ngan took a seat beside Lily.

"Good morning," he murmured.

"Good morning, Ngan," she replied just as quietly, then gave him a quick glance. "I'm glad the assignment was a success."

Her voice was warm, her concern for the team abated now that the danger of the assignment was past.

Ngan returned her glance. "As am I," he replied. "Though I've had news of an old friend."

He slid one of Jeane's photographs, surreptitiously removed from the stack, out of his jacket and passed it to her under the table. Lily glanced down at it. One of her eyebrows

twitched. Ngan could guess at the kind of control she was exerting. He had been forced to exert it as well the first time Jeane had mentioned Sam Hollister. The comment in Marilyn's letter that Hollister described the artificial womb as only part of a bigger project was an understatement. The womb, eventually abandoned in favor of live surrogate mothers, had been only a small aspect of Hollister's true area of research—cloning.

And the government wasn't the only agency Hollister had done work for. Posed beside Hollister in the purloined photograph was a pretty young Hoffmann Institute agent named Betty West, the Institute's first contact with Hollister. Seven years after that photograph was taken, Hollister would be working with Betty again, this time on a secret project for the Institute. Betty herself would be the proud bride of another Hoffmann Institute agent—Richard McCain. In a way, Michael McCain and Jeane Meara had closer connections than either of them knew.

"I see," said Lily.

"I'd also like to talk about McCain's aunt and her problem with changing weather again sometime. I believe I have an idea what's bothering her," Ngan whispered. Lily glanced at him again. "Ned gave me a clue. So did Van." He reached up and tapped his temple.

The answer had hit him as soon as they made the connection between Renfield's targets—all of Renfield's targets—and the irregularity of her attacks. *Until she got us all in one place*, he had said himself, *she would have had to hunt the city for potential victims.*

He knew of no other team of agents in Chicago that boasted two members with psychic ability of whatever form and that could be relied on in cases involving the supernatural to approach a third, full-fledged psychic. And that had a fourth, if latent, psychic waiting in the wings, ready to be summoned onto the stage.

Ngan watched his old friend's eyes narrow and the set of her mouth turn grim as she put the clues together, too. "Listen to Monty, Ngan," she said after a moment. "I think you'll find this interesting." She nodded to Monty. "Go ahead."

"Thank you," said the researcher. "This won't take long. Essentially, the news is that Liam and I have finished an analysis of samples taken from the worm." He glanced around the table. "It's not a creature of terrestrial origin."

"Wow," commented McCain, "I'm completely floored."

Monty gave him a harsh look. "Do you know what teroic pseudonucleic acid is, Mr. McCain? It's analogous to deoxyribonucleic acid—DNA. TPA is an alternative carrier of genetic information, one that lends itself especially well to genetic manipulation and bioengineering. All TPA-based creatures we know of come from one source—almost literally."

He hit a button on a laptop computer by his side. A monitor on Lily's wall flashed to life with a sketch of the worm.

"All TPA-based creatures so far encountered tend to have a similar appearance: grey, hairless, smooth, and with large, dark, oval eyes." Monty stood to gesture at the sketch of the worm. "As we saw, the eyes on the worm were vestigial. This, however, is another TPA-based creature encountered by the CSC."

He reached back and hit another button. The sketch of the worm was joined by a photograph of another slick, grey creature, though this one had four strong legs with claws and a distinct, if alien, head.

Alien . . .

Ngan caught the motion as McCain sat forward sharply. So did Monty.

"Ah!" he said. "I see the sarcastic Mr. McCain has figured it out. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you a being known for its mastery of both genetic manipulation and psychic abilities." Monty hit a key and a third creature joined the two already

on the screen. The third creature stood erect on two legs and had two long, delicate arms. Its hairless skull was broad and entirely dominated by two dark, oval eyes.

A Grey.

The room was silent.

Renfield opened her eyes. The room was new, but the place was familiar. She was back at Elgin, strapped down to a bed. The woman hovering over her was familiar, too. Renfield smiled.

"Hello, Doctor Olivia."

"Hello, Lisa."

"I'm safe now. He passed the test. He protected me."

"That's good, Lisa."

Doctor Olivia was poking and prodding at her. Even the most gentle touch hurt her bruised body. Renfield yelped at a particularly sharp pain. Olivia stepped back.

"Sorry," she apologized. "That must have been quite a fight. How did you do?"

Renfield laughed. "Great! I almost beat her."

"Why didn't you?"

She blinked. "Because he passed the test."

"Ah," said Olivia.

Renfield grinned. She liked Olivia, partly because the doctor understood everything so clearly. She had understood the river of decay more easily than anyone else, understood that it had all really happened. Finding a protector had been Olivia's idea, too. It had been a great idea. Renfield's smile faltered.

"Olivia," she said hesitantly, "I have some bad news."

"The worm?" Olivia patted her shoulder. "I already know."

"Can I have another one?"

Olivia shook her head. "I'm sorry, Lisa. There was only one."

"Damn."

"You shouldn't have left Elgin." Olivia looked at her seriously. "You know that was a bad thing. We would have taken you out if you had only waited."

"I know. I'm sorry. But I had to find him. I just couldn't wait anymore." Renfield turned her head away and found herself looking at the little cart that Doctor Olivia sometimes brought with her. "Is it time for more pills?"

"Just something for the bruises tonight, Lisa. I don't think you need anything else. Your fight proved that."

Olivia opened a drawer of her cart and took out a little vial of white and red capsules, then helped Renfield hold up her head so that she could swallow two of the pills.

"Thanks, Olivia."

"You're welcome." Olivia smiled. "Now get yourself some rest. You'll have a long day tomorrow. We've got a lot of questions to ask you about your time away."

The drugs were already taking effect as Olivia took her little cart out of the room, but Renfield could still hear her talking into the tiny black recorder she always carried with her.

"Subject expresses remorse for loss of companion beast and initial conversations indicate an adequate level of heightened physical ability. Although unscheduled, I think this escape will provide important field test information on the progress of the project . . ."

Keith Hollister paced across the wretched little hotel room, paused at the window, and paced back to stare at the videotape lying on the rumpled bedspread. All the money he could ever want, locked up in that black plastic shell. No

more staying in dumps like this. No more living in a roach motel like his apartment.

All he had to do was convince someone to buy the tape.

If he could convince someone to look at it first.

Five calls to Roger hadn't brought any results. Of course he had no idea where Roger was at the moment. By the time Jeane and her friends—what the hell were they, some kind of secret paramilitary group?—had taken down the monster worm and he had fled, Roger and the rented minivan were long gone. Keith had been forced to hike out of the industrial park, always watching over his shoulder for Jeane coming after him.

He might have called Roger a coward for not holding on to the story, but that didn't mean Keith wanted to face off with Jeane again any time soon. By the time he did see her again, her story—worm, Marilyn, and all—was going to be headline news. And not necessarily just on *Weekly Global Inquiry*. Roger still had a stab at the story, but he didn't have an exclusive anymore. Keith had lines out to the big boys. CNN had promised to call back. MSNBC had taken his message. ABC, CBS, NBC, somebody at the Chicago Tribune even. The follow-up calls should start rolling in any time now.

He stared at the telephone. It didn't ring.

This would be so much easier if he was back in LA. He knew people there. Unfortunately, the return tickets had been in the minivan. Where the hell was Roger?

Keith grabbed the silent telephone and dialed once more the number of the place where they had rented the minivan. When the clerk answered, he cut off the friendly greeting.

"Hi, this is Keith Hollister again. I'm trying to find some friends of mine who rented a minivan from you. Can you tell me if they've returned it yet?"

"A green minivan, rented to Weekly Global Media, Inc., right?"

Keith started. "That's the one. Have they returned it?"
 "Not as such." The clerk's voice was consoling. "It just got taken off our system. They had an accident or something. It's totaled. They're dead."

Jeane, Keith thought immediately. Jeane got to them.

"When?" he asked the clerk.

"Sometime last night, I think. It happened on the—"

Keith hung up and started pacing again. "Oh, shit," he babbled to himself, "Oh, shit."

There was a knock on the door. "Housekeeping!"

"Go away!" Keith screamed. "I'm busy!"

The knock came again. "Housekeeping!"

He froze. It was a woman's voice and accented, but it could be Jeane. And now she knew he was in the room. Damn! He might have to make a break for it. He tucked the video tape into his waistband and looked around for something heavy. The best thing he could find was the stolen video camera. He picked it up.

"Come back later. I don't need housekeeping," he yelled from across the room, then slunk up close to the door.

"Please sir," said a plaintive voice from the other side. "I have to make up room now."

Naturally there was no peephole. Cheap ass hotel. Keith braced the door with one foot, quietly slid off the chain and deadbolt, then carefully turned the knob.

The door slammed open under a massive kick, throwing him halfway across the room. The video camera flew out of his hand and went crashing into the TV set.

Two men in sunglasses and dark suits stood over him. One sneered and said in a woman's accented voice, "What a mess! You better tip good."

Keith tried to scream, but the second man jammed a rag in his mouth, then lifted him casually up from the floor. The first one snatched up the video camera and ripped the tape out of his waistband. Together they hustled him out of

the room and down the closest set of service stairs.

They didn't see anybody on the way. At the bottom of the stairs, an emergency door opened into the parking lot behind the hotel. A vintage navy blue Lincoln Continental Mark V was parked there. One of the men opened the rear door. The other ripped the rag out of his mouth and stuffed him onto the back seat.

A third man sat inside. The interior of the car was dim and for a moment Keith couldn't see very well, though he could tell the third man was younger than the other two and slighter. He was smoking.

"I understand," he said, "that you have a videotape for sale."

The third man turned to look directly at him. He had a thin face, a goatee, and a distinctive hatchet nose.

Keith shrieked in shock.

"Oh, for God's sake," the third man said. He rolled his eyes, leaned over, and shoved Keith back out of the car door. "Knock him out and put him in the trunk," he ordered, "then get us back to Elgin."

"Yes sir, Dr. Hollister."



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