VOICES FROM THE DEAD SIDE

Written By Ria Kennedy

Art By F Comin

An original publication by Ria Kennedy.

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Voices From The Dead Side

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Author's Note

Voices Of The Dead is a stand-alone anthology that can be enjoyed entirely on its own. For more information on this and future books, author's website: www.riakennedy.us

Dedicated

To F Comin

…Who encouraged me to keep trying.

The Stone Bearer

Frank looked at his watch as he walked over the creaky boards in the floor. It said 9:58 PM. Jill still wasn't home.

The mocha skinned FBI guy cleared his throat. "Would you like something to drink? I could make some coffee," Special Agent Gaynes said.

Frank nodded, scratching his chin under his light brown goatee. "Yah, all right."

The man left to go into the kitchen.

"And you're sure she didn't have plans to be somewhere else? Maybe meet someone?" The female officer, Special Agent McShane, regarded him coldly. Her pale face seemed perpetually twisted into a scowl.

"I told you, we're engaged. We were supposed to go and pick out wedding cake: cherry walnut or black torte. Something's wrong." Frank took

off his prescription glasses and rubbed his eyes. To an onlooker, this might look like he was feeling sentimental; in actuality, he felt frustrated.

"Well, there's no need to jump to conclusions," McShane said, "Maybe she had car trouble."

"Then why didn't she call me?" Frank put on his glasses again and walked over to the window. He flicked the curtain back to look down on Connecticut Avenue. Aside from the usual weeknight traffic, nothing seemed out of place. There was no sign of Jill.

"Does she have a computer?" The woman said, yawning.

"Yes, we both use it. It's in the corner," Frank pointed.

McShane stood and moved over to it. She turned it on. "Maybe she has something in an online appointment book. We'll have a look and it will probably clear all this up."

"Look, I'm telling you. Something is wrong."

The other agent came in. "She probably called to tell you that she would be late, but the message hasn't been delivered yet. That happens with cell phones sometimes."

"Look, you're the FBI and she's an intern for a Senator! Aren't you supposed to give a shit if she goes missing?"

"I would hardly call not showing up for a few hours missing. I need you to put in the password," the woman said, starting at him with a knowing look.

Frank wondered why the woman was looking at him like that. Then he realized: it was a look of suspicion. He was stunned. All of a sudden it became clear: if something had happened to Jill, they were going to blame him!

He stood there for a minute, a chill going up his spine. It was a nightmare, a total nightmare. His vision seemed to tunnel as the weight of what could be happening settled on him like a suffocating asbestos blanket.

"Mr. Canino? Sir," Gaynes snapped his fingers in front of Frank's eyes.

Frank shook his head. "Sorry," he muttered.

"That's all right, I can see you're worried," the man said gruffly, his brown eyes sympathetic. "And if more time goes by, we'll see if there's a greater risk. If it makes you feel better, we'll alert the DC Metropolitan Police to keep an eye out for her. But seriously, it's probably just a misunderstanding."

"But what about all those other missing women? What if…" Frank let his voice trail off.

"It's not just women; it is people, male and female. We're looking into it, but there's no sense getting so worked up this early. It's probably nothing." The guy handed Frank a full cup of coffee.

"Your password Mr. Canino," the woman said impatiently.

"Yah," Frank said. What if Jill had met someone and that someone had disappeared her? Maybe there was a record, and they could get a hold of that person and get Jill home. "I'm coming."

Frank jabbed in the password, having to enter it three times because he couldn't concentrate. He noticed his hands were shaking. A few more clicks of the mouse, and he brought up Jill's day-log.

"Here," he said, "That's her agenda."

"All right," the woman said, "Well it says right here that she was meeting with her history class at The Edelweiss Coffee-Bar at 3 PM. Did she tell you about that?"

"No, we weren't planning to meet until 7 PM, at the hotel, for the cake tasting."

"Well, if you had looked at this planner before, you might have saved yourself a lot of worry and us a lot of bother. She's probably there right now, or she went back to somebody's house to visit. Lot's of brides get cold feet."

"And what if something happened to her?"

His phone rang, and he snapped it open in urgent haste. "Yes?" he yelled into the phone. He watched as the female agent's fingers quickly ordered the machine to print out Jill's address book and daily calendar.

"Oh, hi," he said. He watched as McShane wrote something down.

"No, she hasn't shown up," he said into the phone, "Has she called you? Oh."

The female agent walked over to Gaynes and they talked together in low voices.

"Yes, we're very worried. I'll call you back as soon as I know something. OK, thanks for checking back. OK, bye." He hung up.

"Wedding planner," he said to the agents.

"All right, Mr. Canino, we're going to go down to the Coffee-bar and see what we can find out. Why don't you stay put in case Jill gets home. Call us," McShane gave him her business card, "And let us know."

"It'll be all right, man," Gaynes said in a quiet voice, "Hang in there."

The two agents walked out. He watched from the window as they came out of the apartment building. They got into a couple of sleek sedans and drove off.

Frank looked at the computer. No help there. But he saw that Jill had planned to leave the meeting at 6:00 PM to meet with him across town.

He restrained the urge to go out and look for her on his own. He ran to the window when he heard a police car burp its siren, but it was just the officers corralling some youths who were in the process of spraying a large middle finger on the sidewalk across the street. Normally he would crow to Jill over the young hoodlums getting busted. Now he felt uncommonly tired and at the same time keyed up almost beyond containment.

Hours passed. Once, Gaynes called and asked if Jill had come home. Slowly, it quieted down outside and eventually street traffic slowed to a dead stop.

Eventually, Gaynes came back, and asked more questions. He didn't answer any, stalling expertly and turning the conversation. It seemed to get very distant and surreal to Frank. Some more people came, and started taking pictures of the apartment. To try to pin it on him maybe, if Jill really was missing. A part of him hoped for the best, but deep down, he knew something was wrong.

The agent's cell phone rang. He answered politely. "Agent Gaynes."

There was a pause. And then Frank heard him say, "Yah? You did? Well, all right then. Yah, I'll bring him."

Gaynes slid the phone into his pocket and looked at Frank. "Mr. Canino, they found your fiancée. They're taking her to the hospital to get checked out, but we don't have all the facts. Get your things together and let's go; we'll go see her."

The agent was kind but unhelpful, not answering a single one of Frank's questions. They got to Saint Mark's Hospital and headed in. Gaynes looked stern-faced and deadly serious.

Frank saw the head bitch FBI Agent that had been so cold earlier, and went over to her. She looked at him with her frosty eyes.

"Ms. Hennessey was found wandering in Oak Hill Cemetery, naked. They found her clothes, torn and singed. There were no marks on her, but it's standard procedure to do a rape kit in this kind of case."

Frank choked on the vomit that spewed into the back of his throat at the thought of Jill being violated. And the woman just kept looking at him, unblinking, as if this were somehow *his* fault. He felt a red rage coming up on him, and he wanted to choke her.

"Hey, listen man," the nice male FBI Agent said, "Does Jill drink a lot?"

"No, some wine, but just a bit."

"Well, it's over twelve hours since she was in the Coffee-bar, so there's no alcohol test we can give her now to verify how much she had to drink earlier." The female agent pointed out, bending a stick of gum into her mouth. She fussily put the pack away.

"She doesn't remember how she got into the cemetery and it doesn't make much sense that she would still be there, because the gates are locked at 4 PM. She may have been there since early afternoon yesterday," Gaynes said.

"Did she meet with her class?" Frank asked, "Maybe they went there together."

"It's possible, but she doesn't remember it, or even details about who she met with. The staff at the Coffee-bar wasn't much help either. There was a large crowd at the time, lots of tourists, so no one really stands out to them."

They stopped talking as a bushy-haired doctor walked out and beckoned to the female FBI Agent. She went over. As they watched the doctor and her talk together, she nodded and her demeanor seemed to relax. She came back over to them.

"Well, Mr. Canino, Ms. Hennessey wasn't harmed in any way. She wasn't raped. They want to do a cat-scan and keep her overnight in case she bumped her head, but otherwise, everything seems fine. Maybe she got a little carried away and decided to go dancing naked through the gravestones."

"No, Jill wouldn't do that," Franks aid. He should know. That was one of the reasons he had agreed to marry her. Jill was sensible, upwardly mobile and the very image of social consciousness. She was everything he wanted in a mate.

"Mr. Canino, does Jill have a family history of mental illness?" McShane said in a tone which suggested she had already concluded this was the case.

"No, nothing like that." Frank shuddered at the idea. God, he hoped it was nothing like that.

"Then, she probably had a little too much to drink and got carried away. You were lucky, Mr. Canino. Let's hope you never have to call us again. You can talk to the doctor there, and make any arrangements you need. It's been a pleasure." McShane walked off.

"Great that we got her back to you, man. Hopefully it all works out. And congratulations on the wedding," Gaynes said, pressing his card into Frank's hand. Then the agent nodded and turned, striding out towards the breaking dawn.

Frank guessed he'd have to get a taxi to get home, since his ride had just left. It had been a hell of a night. The ER was busy with a lot of drunks and patients complaining of chest pains. He sat down, blinking back tears.

He said a quick prayer of thanks, and asked that Jill be all right. Then he recollected himself. Looking at his watch, he saw it was five in the morning. He hadn't slept. Yawning tiredly and cracking his neck muscles, he went over to the doctor who was filling out papers at a central desk.

"Yes?" The flushed older man looked up.

"I'm Jill Hennessey's fiancé. Can I see her?"

"Dr. Forster."

They shook hands.

"Your fiancée is having memory problems, so we want to do a thorough check-up, although on the surface, there isn't anything wrong with her. You can see her in room three. We're going to get a scan and then set her up in a hospital room."

"Thanks, Doctor," Frank said.

The doctor nodded and moved off energetically.

Frank went in. Jill was sleeping. He leaned down to kiss her, and noticed that there wasn't even the faintest smell of alcohol on her. That chilled him. What had happened tonight? He sat with her until they took her out for the tests, and then waited for her to get taken to her hospital room. She woke up and said hi, but drifted off again quickly. Finally, Frank was overcome with a need for sleep himself. He went home, letting the office know he wouldn't be in that day.

Jill was released that afternoon, and immediately went into the bedroom and slept. She slept for two days.

On the morning of the third day, Frank awoke to find that Jill was cooking breakfast in the midst of the expensive bouquets her office had sent her. The senator had sent a huge arrangement of tiger lilies and hyacinths with a noncommittal note ordering her to "Get Well!" Jill seemed oblivious.

"Hi, Frank," she said in a chipper voice.

Frank hugged her.

"Don't, the eggs will burn. You want eggs don't you? I'm so starved."

She briskly set out the plates and some juice and coffee. A piece of toast shot out of the toaster and she caught it, tossing it onto a plate and placing a few more pieces on it.

"Here, put that on the table," she said to Frank.

Frank felt a weight lift off of him. For days, he had worried Jill would never be the same. But here she was, like nothing had happened. She didn't seem to want to talk about it, and Frank didn't want to ruin the mood, so he let it go. They ate breakfast, with Jill doing most of the talking. She looked at her watch suddenly, and said she had to go to work.

"Don't you want to take a day off, you know, to get back to normal? You've been asleep for forty-eight hours." Frank asked apprehensively.

"No, I need to get things back to normal *now*. I can't wait. I'll see you." She gave Frank a kiss on the cheek.

Frank had to suppress the bile that rose in his throat. He felt angry and panicked. The last time Jill had gone to work, she hadn't come home.

He managed to get himself dressed and went into the office. The PR spread he was doing for the firm's client really couldn't wait, and he couldn't just sit around worrying. Throughout the day he felt uneasy even though he was sure everything was fine.

When he got home, there were several messages. The wedding planner was happy to hear that Jill was fine, and she said she was eager to get the wedding back on track. And there was a message from Dr. Forster that he would like to talk to Jill about something he had found on the scan.

Frank let Jill know when she came in, and she nodded, but apparently seemed bemused by something. She cracked him a wide smile and went into the bedroom, locking the door behind her. They ate dinner that night, but when Frank asked what the doctor had wanted, Jill said he had been out when she'd called.

Over the next week, Jill flitted about like a little bird. She was always up to something, and Frank saw very little of her. Usually, she was on the computer, typing and typing. Sometimes she was out late with friends. As time passed, Jill seemed to sleep less and less.

Frank let himself into the apartment one evening and hollered for Jill. She wasn't in. It was Jill's birthday in a few days. He carefully hid the gaily wrapped gift he had gotten her in his athletic closet. She had been desperate to get the china and wood jewelry box he had gotten her. At the store, when she'd asked after it, they had been out of stock. He had special ordered it and now it had finally arrived. He couldn't wait to see her face.

But first, he had to keep it a secret. He was always hard-pressed to give her the gift on the day of the party. Usually when she found out he had brought the present into the house, she would demand he give it to her right away, and he, well, he always caved in and did. This time, it looked like he would get away with hiding it until he could surprise her.

He walked into the living room after a shower and saw that the computer was in sleep mode. He stared at the machine a moment as he thought of checking what Jill was writing. Well, he shouldn't look, but she really hadn't been herself lately. What was the harm? At least that's what he

told himself, but his pulse sped up and his hands started sweating as he jostled the mouse.

He entered the password and sat down, quickly opening up the sports scores and minimizing it so that if Jill came in, she wouldn't suspect he was snooping on her. He was surprised to find that the majority of Jill's files seemed to pertain not to her work, but to her history class. He opened several files, and found some pretty dull stuff on early colonial days. He was patriotic and all, but there was only so much history he could stand.

He hit one file called "The Arcane Writings" and strange script like nothing he had ever seen before flashed onto the screen. It was unfathomable writing, and the foreign letters seemed to gray and blacken and then white out entirely as his head filled with a rushing sound and a monstrous headache hit him so hard and fast he groaned. Quickly he closed the file and rubbed his eyes.

He heard the key in the lock, and hurriedly opened the sports scores. He stretched, and tried to look relaxed. Jill wandered by, and he reminded her to kiss him. That was funny; he was doing that a lot lately. Jill was getting more and more absent-minded.

Jill sucked on his lip, bringing it into her mouth and nibbling. Frank felt a flash of heat as lust roared through his veins. They hadn't been intimate since before the night Jill was found in the cemetery. Soon, they tumbled into bed, straining to disrobe and come into each other's arms.

Jill was like a hellcat, and he found himself getting incredibly aroused. He wasn't prepared for it when she flipped him onto his back and mounted him, but he didn't mind.

And when she twisted them into a different shape, he asked in amazement, "Jill, what has come over you? Have you been reading naughty books?"

Jill laughed and dug her nails in, before biting his ear.

"Hey, ow!" Frank yelled, but Jill was moving under him and he forgot as passion overtook all sense.

He slept, waking because the headache was back. He found he was sore as he went into the bathroom for some pain pills. He noticed his back, neck and ear were marked with traces of blood. He wondered what had come over Jill. He was glad she was more into him than she had been lately, but she needed to be a little gentler.

He would have to bring it up the next morning. Then he realized as his heart stammered to a stop that Jill wasn't in the bedroom. He felt panic well up, before he figured out that she was probably on the computer in the living room.

He headed out, but although the house lights were on, all the rooms were empty. Jill wasn't in. He looked at the clock. It was 3 AM. He thought he would be sick as he reached for his wallet to call Gaynes, the male FBI agent.

He stopped and looked up as the front door unlocked and Jill came in.

"Jill!" Frank exclaimed, "Where have you been?"

"I went out for a walk."

"It's after midnight, are you insane? You could have been hurt!"

"Well, I wasn't, lover," Jill said. "Hungry…" She wandered into the kitchen and started cooking some steak and eggs as if it was the most ordinary thing to do in the middle of the night.

Several nights later, Frank came home and the house smelt like burnt plastic. He ran into the living room, and saw Jill was burning papers in the fireplace.

"Oh, hello, lover," she said, smiling at him.

"Jill, what is that stench?"

"Oh, some old fax paper, you know, the thermal paper kind. I'm destroying some files from the office – confidential stuff. Why don't you open a window?"

"Couldn't you just use a shredder like modern day people?" he asked querulously.

Jill laughed. "I'm going out with the girls tonight," she said as she fed a manila folder into the fireplace.

Frank was distracted. "What? I thought we'd eat in. I haven't seen much of you."

"Sorry, I haven't seen the girls for a while, so we're going to get together and have a little visit." Standing, she wiped off the back of her slacks.

She came over to him, playing with her little golden unicorn necklace. "That's all right, isn't it?" she asked in a husky voice.

Frank tried not to pout, but he wasn't happy about it.

"Lover? Please?" Jill said close to his mouth so her breath played across his lips.

Frank sighed and she kissed him.

"Thank you, lover," she said, giggling, "Gotta go."

She grabbed her coat and left without a backwards glance.

Frank went out for a sandwich and did some work at home, since the computer was free. Jill still hadn't come home by midnight. She answered her cell phone when he called, so he knew everything was OK. Finally, shutting off the TV, he went to bed.

A sound awoke him, and he went into the hall. He saw light coming from the living room and went over to the door. Frank stared as Jill's fingers nimbly played across the keys. It was 3 AM, and she was still playing with the computer. Inexplicably, he found himself wondering again what had happened that night in the cemetery.

"Jill?" he said.

"Just a minute."

He waited. The only sound was the clicking of keys. He was about to call out to her again when she turned.

"Yes Frank?"

"Jill, it's late, aren't you going to come to bed?"

"I have to get caught up at work."

"But you need sleep, too."

"I'll get all the sleep I need when I'm dead," she said gaily.

"Jill, what did Dr. Forster want?"

"Oh, that, it was nothing. He said that the film had gotten fogged and he wanted to retake it. Everything is fine." She turned back to the keyboard.

"Jill, I think you might have some unresolved issues about that night. Maybe you should see someone."

He paused.

"Like a psychiatrist."

"OK," Jill chirped, not looking away from the screen, "I'll look for one now."

For some reason, the relief that Frank expected to feel turned into a cold stone of dread low in his belly.

Turning, he went into the bedroom and climbed into bed. Sleep finally came, but he dreamt of dark things with claws and teeth.

He realized Jill had finally come to bed, and he pulled her into his arms. She coiled around him and murmured something unintelligible. He smelled the sweet lotion scent of her and held her tightly. Finally, as the sun rose, he slept.

In the morning, the bed and room were empty. He found Jill on the computer. She didn't answer when he called out to her. He walked up behind and looked over her shoulder. He didn't care if it was an invasion of privacy. He wanted to know what compelled her to constantly type-type-type.

He was surprised to see that Jill was sending out email to a bunch of people, list after list. He noticed she was adding an attachment. He squinted to make out the title and felt a nameless dread when he saw that the attachment said "The Arcane Writings".

He started when she talked.

"Yes Frank?" she asked as if she had been watching him for a while.

Frank didn't stutter or confess to snooping on her; he artfully masked his curiosity by changing the subject.

"How's the wedding planning going?"

Jill's smile fell and she looked confused, almost as if she was trying to remember something.

Then she smiled brightly and said, "Fine, fine. Actually, I'll meet up with the planner later this week; thanks for reminding me. Bye!"

She got up, grabbed her briefcase and headed out of the house. She had forgotten to kiss him good-bye.

Something was definitely wrong. It wasn't just the rough sex, but a few weeks ago, all that Jill could talk about was the wedding, and now it was as if she had completely forgotten about it. She hadn't mentioned the wedding once in days.

Frank called work and told them he would be late. He couldn't seem to get rid of the tension in his chest. He went through all the computer files and discovered that Jill was corresponding with more than one-hundred people. They talked in a weird foreign language that he couldn't find a translation for. The page of arcane scribbles gave him a headache when he looked at it.

Finally, he found something useful: the address of the online school that Jill attended, run by one Charlene Grendell, over in Park View, DC. Apparently the whole school's focus was on history. He tried to be relieved, telling himself that Jill was maybe getting ready for exams or something.

He knew he was over-stepping the acceptable bounds of curiosity, be he had to know if Jill was all right. He called Dr. Forster's office. A brusque, unfriendly woman answered the phone.

"Yes?" she demanded rudely.

"Yes, Dr. Forster, please."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Forster has died. He was in a car accident."

Frank gripped his hand into a fist. "You're kidding."

"No," the woman said with no inflection in her voice.

Frank sighed. "Look, maybe you can help me. My – wife," he said, thinking fast. He was afraid if he said they weren't married that he wouldn't get the help he needed, "Jill Hennessey, was a patient of Dr. Forster's. They were discussing some films –"

The woman cut him off, "Just a minute."

The phone switched to muzac.

Frank waited for a few minutes. Then the almost robotic sounding voice came back on.

"Mr. Hennessey?"

Frank didn't correct her and continued to let her think that Hennessey was his name. "Yes?"

"There is no file for a Jill Hennessey. I'm sorry, but we have no records on her. Are you sure she was seeing Dr. Forster?"

"Yes."

"You must have the wrong Dr. Forster. Look in the phone book and call the correct office." Click.

"Hello? Hello?" Frank yelled into the phone, but it was no use. The line had disconnected.

Frank hung up and went to work, but his mind was scattered and he had difficulty concentrating. A trickle of unease accompanied him through every conversation he had that day. Again and again, his thoughts turned to Jill.

When he got home that night, Jill wasn't there. He was about ready to call the FBI again, when Jill returned with about twelve people.

"My history class," Jill said brightly.

"Oh. Hi," Frank said.

The class nodded to him indifferently, and not one person said a word.

"We'll be in the living room. I've already eaten," Jill said.

Frank felt irked. Before she had left that morning Jill had not mentioned to him that they would have company.

The silent group traipsed into the living room and slid the doors closed. Frank decided to listen and see what they talked about, but suddenly the stereo came on really loud. He couldn't hear a thing. The doors were locked when he tried them.

Frank ate a TV dinner and watched sports on the little kitchen TV. The meeting lasted long into the night, and after, Jill wanted to have sex. He asked her to be gentle with him, and even had to hold her down.

When she started laughing and laughing, he couldn't concentrate and rolled onto his back. Undaunted, Jill mounted him and began to get him

excited. He felt confused and angry when it was over. What had happened to the Jill he knew?

The next day, Frank was bringing home the birthday meal fixings. As he walked, a teary-eyed woman stopped him and asked if he'd seen a white Scottish terrier. He said no. As he made his way, he noticed that there were actually a lot of missing pet fliers up. He thought people should be more careful with their animals.

He made a special meal to celebrate the special occasion, set out the candles, and put out the present in its fuchsia, orange and pink tissue paper. Jill didn't even show up and he ate alone. When she came in, she went by as if he wasn't even there.

"Jill!" he yelled, walking into the living room where she was switching on the computer.

"Yes?" she said, not turning as she single-mindedly typed in her password.

"Where have you been?"

"Out."

"And you couldn't call?"

"I was busy."

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Wednesday."

"No, beyond that, have you completely taken leave of your senses? It's your fuckin' birthday!"

Jill shrugged and pushed the enter key.

"Jill, are you even listening to me?"

"Yes, Frank."

"Well, you can't keep doing this! This has got to stop!"

Jill turned and looked at him. "You're being over-reactionary."

Frank sputtered before he found his voice. "I'm what? I'm being over-reactionary? You have a lot of nerve–"

Jill cut him off. "You don't own me." She turned back to the computer screen.

Frank went out of the house, slamming the door behind him. He wasn't sure how much more of this he could take.

Jill was vacuuming the next day when he got up. He watched the news on the small set in the kitchen, turning the volume up high so he could hear it. There was a report that over three-hundred dogs were missing, cats were dying of mysterious tumors that were filling their bodies and birds were disappearing mysteriously. The current speculation was that it was caused by global warming.

He went to kiss Jill goodbye, but she just held her cheek up, otherwise ignoring him. She hadn't said a word to him since last night, and she seemed even more distant. As he walked out, he saw with a dull stomach-ache that she hadn't even opened her birthday present. He felt crushed as well as a great deal of anxiety. What was going on?

That afternoon, he went to Jill's psychiatrist's office.

The small dapper man, Dr. Avery, gazed at Frank almost like a small child who was intent on pulling the legs off an insect.

"Yes, I see Jill on a professional basis."

"What is going on with her doctor, something is wrong, I know it."

"I can't discuss my patients with you," the man said haughtily.

"Look, doctor, you've got to help!"

"If you have something on your mind, you're more than welcome to make an appointment. But as I told you, I can't discuss my patients with you or anyone else. Now, when is good for you?"

Incensed, Frank stormed out, slamming the door behind him before he said or did something he really regretted.

Frank went back to work out of habit, but he couldn't concentrate. He left early that day, and drove the Mini over to Professor Charlene Grendell's school. He needed to find out more about that writing and try to figure out why Jill was acting so funny.

He was disappointed. The "school" was a duplex row house covered with faux brick siding. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't a proper school at all. He rang the door bell, and a paunchy middle-aged woman with stringy brown and gray hair came to the door.

"Yes?" she asked, peering at him through thick glasses.

"Yes, I'm Frank Canino." Frank held out his hand.

The woman shook it absent-mindedly. "Frank Canino?" she echoed, cocking her head to one side.

"I'm Jill's fiancée. Jill Hennessey?"

"Of course, Frank, Jill's told me all about you. Please, come in. I'm Charlene Grendell, I teach history at Anacostia University." The woman tittered about, muttering unintelligibly as if she was talking to herself.

Charlene Grendell's house was filled with afghan blankets of every color and the begrimed windows looked like they hadn't been washed for thirty years or more. In spite of the blanket's lurid brightness, they could not mask the sagging depressions in her tired mustard colored couch and only seemed to add to the crude appearance of her home.

"How is Jill?" she put out iced tea, spilling the sugar as she put it on a rickety wooden table.

"Well, Ms. Grendell, not too good. She seems distracted, not herself."

"Oh, call me Charlene. Oh, that's too bad, because Jill is sooooo nice!"

"How has she seemed with you?" Frank asked, sipping the tea. It seemed to have no taste and did little to ease the parched feeling in his throat.

"Oh, everything seems fine. Maybe Jill is having cold feet because of the wedding?" Charlene sipped her tea, eyeing him brightly.

"Well, I know she has been looking at some weird writing, it–"

"The writing? *This* writing?" Charlene shoved some papers in front of his face.

"Yes, argh!" Frank squeezed the bridge of his nose as another headache hit him. "What *is* that?"

"These are old writings of historical interest. We're studying how early people lived in America."

"What, is it Native American?" Frank asked, relieved when she moved away.

"Maybe. It's a very old belief system."

"What, like writing from Atlantis?" he quipped.

Charlene smiled and said, "No one knows."

Frank sighed. Charlene Grendell was obviously a total kook. He didn't think there would be much help here. He talked to her about macramé for a while, and left as soon as he could make his excuses.

The thought of going directly home made him sick to his stomach, so he drove around for a while. Later, he got gas and then crossed the street to eat at the diner there. He ordered a turkey melt and watched the news. He noticed that there had been a rash of thirteen homicides and twenty-seven disappearances that day.

The news said that the homicides were unsolved and looked like stranger killings, and the police were trying to figure out if they were related. On the disappearances, it looked like the missing just took off on their own. Frank wondered about that. It sounded a lot like Jill and her wanderings.

When he got home, Jill wasn't there, but there was a message on the answering machine. It was from Dr. Avery.

"Mr. Canino? Dr. Avery here. I thought I'd let you know that Jill is exhibiting some strange tendencies and–" The message caught the sound of something in the background, before it beeped and shut off.

Frank looked. It was 7:45 PM. He called Avery's office phone and left a message, but it was too late to get in touch with the man himself. He

wondered what the man had been going to say. What a time for the doctor's phone to cut out!

He heard the key turn in the lock and Jill came in. He marveled that even though she seemed to get less and less sleep, she'd never looked better. She didn't acknowledge him, walking resolutely over to the computer and switching it on.

"How was the meeting with Dr. Avery?" he asked.

"Good," Jill replied, typing her password in.

"Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine. I'm a little upset though, Dr. Avery died. He tripped and fell down the stairs."

"What?" Frank's mind whirled. "Dr. Avery is dead?"

"That's what I just said. Apparently he was talking on his cell phone and wasn't watching where he was going."

Frank looked back at the answering machine, chilled. That's what that thumping sound must have been.

"Do you mind? I have to get this paper done by tomorrow, and I already wasted enough time talking to the police."

"You were there?"

"I tried to help him, but it was too late."

"I'm sorry, Jill, are you all right?"

"The paper, Frank," she said tapping the screen, "I have to get to work."

"What paper?" Frank asked, stunned that Jill was so composed even in the face of tragedy.

"I don't have time to visit now, maybe later." Jill began to type.

Frank went to The Edelweiss Coffee-bar. One half of the establishment was pure bar, the other half was pure café. It was the best of both worlds, for drinkers and non-drinkers alike to socialize and escape the travails of the day.

Usually, the polished copper and rough red bricks relaxed him, but today, they made him feel depressed, alone and old. He drank a couple of mochas and ate a huge muffin. He lingered for over an hour, dragging his feet. It was nice to get out of the house.

Finally, he decided to go back home. Whatever had happened with Jill, he needed to get to the bottom of it. And frankly, he was beginning to worry for both their sanity – his, because he was constantly worried, and hers because she hadn't been the same since that night in the cemetery.

There were people in his apartment, officious looking people; suits with guns. He panicked.

"Where's Jill?"

One of the men frisked him and checked his ID.

"Look, I live here, where's Jill?"

The man held his finger to his left ear.

It took Frank a moment, but he realized these were Secret Service Agents. In his house! He marveled, and then he wondered. What were they doing here?

"Look, my fiancée, Jill Hennessey, is everything OK? We live here together. Is she all right? What's going on?"

No one answered him. Frank noticed quite a few Secret Service Agents, but no sign of Jill.

Frank heard a door open, and looked. He saw the President of the United States coming down the hall.

Frank gasped.

The President nodded, and bent to put his shoes and socks on.

Frank wondered why his shoes and socks had been off in the first place. He looked down the hall. All that was down there were the bathroom and bedroom. He looked back at the President.

"She's sleeping," the man said, tying a neat bow in his shoelace.

Frank could see a few scratches on his neck when the President bent over to tie his shoe. The last time Frank had seen scratches like that was when he and Jill made love. His mouth dropped open as he realized what this meant.

He turned and ran. Someone moved to stop him.

The President said, "No, let him go."

Frank ran to the Coffee-bar, where he usually only had coffee. Tonight he drank hard liquor, but it didn't seem to dull the pain he felt inside. Jill's betrayal was shocking. His mind reeled with it.

Suddenly, birds, dozens of them, began flying into the windows, beating themselves against the panes until the glass was spattered with blood. The staff called animal control, but the line was busy. They closed the doors and latched the windows as the onslaught of birds continued to beat themselves to death on the glass.

Some people started crying and one woman started screaming and wouldn't stop. So much for Frank's relaxing evening. His nerves were pushed to the limit, and he stood, screaming at the birds to stop. Amazingly, they did: the furious thumping suddenly ended.

He sat, ignoring his shaking hands, and ordered another scotch. Aside from the quiet sobs and hiss of the cappuccino machine, it was silent as a few people grimly began to go home. Little by little, people started talking about what had happened. The TV news was reporting that the same thing had happened all over DC.

Frank stepped over the frail bodies of the avian creatures heaped by the door and headed out. He was almost home when he noticed Jill come out of the apartment building.

He decided to follow her. She went to Dupont Circle, which seemed deserted. He hid behind a tree and watched. Jill seemed to be waiting for someone. A man in uniform walked up. He had five stars on his epaulet. A general?

Frank sighed rather drunkenly. He frowned as Jill reached up on her toes to kiss the general. The old fart seemed really into it, and he kissed her back. Suddenly, some kind of darkness poured out of Jill's eyes and went into the general's eyes. The general struggled, and then seemed to balloon. His clothes tore and a little smoke drifted out of his mouth when he staggered back.

Frank must have made some kind of sound, because Jill turned and looked toward him. He tore off running, hoping she didn't see him.

He jumped into his red Mini and drove, although he couldn't keep his mind on the road, and swerved all over, coming around corners sloppily. It was a wonder he didn't kill anyone. He pulled up in front of a bed and breakfast in the Mount Pleasant district of DC, and staggered up the uneven concrete stairs that led to the front of the place. He rang the bell, holding his finger on the buzzer until someone answered the door.

An old man answered, and he looked angry. "What?"

"I need a room," Frank said, trying not to slur.

"Are you drunk?" the man demanded.

"Breaking up with my fiancée. Don't usually drink." Frank sighed, suddenly feeling sorry for himself. "I have money." He dragged out his wallet and handed it to the guy.

"Oh, Martin, let him stay. We can't send him off like this," a woman said from behind the man. She stepped forward and pulled the door open.

"I can always call the police and let them take care of it." The old man said.

"Come in, come in," the kind old lady said, "My name is Betty. We have a room you can use, but be quiet, because you're not the only guest here."

They took him to a room, and Frank fell asleep with the lights on. The booze had finally knocked him out.

Frank spent a few days at the bed and breakfast, mostly just keeping to himself and whiling away the hours in his room. Betty brought him his food and told how she was there if he needed to talk to anyone.

Frank kept thinking that someone would come after him, maybe The Secret Service, The FBI or the police. In really paranoid moments, he

thought the military might come after him. Finally, he worked up the nerve to go home. The place was deserted. A suitcase was gone. Jill wasn't there.

Frank called her cell phone, but found it still recharging when it rang in the kitchen. He had no idea where she had gone or if she was coming back. Next he called her office. Someone there said Jill had taken a vacation and would be back in a month. And then the thought came that Jill wouldn't be alone. She would be with someone.

Frank came apart. He saw her birthday present sitting there, and fell on it, ripping it and hurling it against the wall and then stomping it. The little china and gold leafed carousel jewelry box powdered and splintered. Seeing the destruction sent him off into another spasm of rage, and he smashed her cell phone and all the dishes.

He noticed that the computer was on when he went into the living room. That strange writing appeared on the screen when he moved the mouse. Looking at it, he got a headache so severe, his nose bled. Enraged, he yanked the keyboard off the desk and drove it into the monitor. It died with a popping sound. Then he smashed the keyboard on the edge of the desk until keys exploded off it like popcorn.

Too tired to break anything any more, he staggered back and collapsed on the tweed sofa. He sat that way for a while, as late morning turned into early afternoon. He suddenly snapped out of it and decided to go and confront Charlene Grendell. He needed to know where she had gotten The Arcane Writings from. And more importantly, what they meant.

He scoured the house, finally coming up with a printout of that file, in the bedroom of all places. Good thing, too, as he had completely destroyed the computer, which was the only other place he had seen it.

He drove over to Charlene's but she wasn't home. He waited in his car. She finally came home after dark, driving up in an old yellow Volvo. She gathered a bag of groceries out of the passenger seat, picking up oranges where they had spilled under the dashboard.

The woman was a complete incompetent. “Come on, come on!” He sighed in frustration, drumming his thumbs on the steering wheel.

Finally she stood, locking the car door. She moved dreamily up the walk, stopping once and cocking her head, almost as if she could hear spectral music that the sane could not. Frank could see now that she was not only incompetent, but she was crazy as well. He waited until she had the door open and then barged in.

“Frank!” Charlene said cheerfully, as if every day someone barged into her home. “What an unexpected pleasure!”

Frank grabbed a piece of paper out of the folder and held it toward her without looking at it. “What’s this?”

“I told you, it’s in ancient script. It’s about the ascension of man.” She went into the kitchen, put the bag down and started to put things away in the fridge. “There’s a book about it on the table.”

Frank walked over and picked up the book, opening it. He was looking at it when something hit him on the back of the head.

He found himself sprawled on the ground. Charlene was standing over him with a glass jug of apple cider. Grimacing, she brought it over her head.

Desperately, Frank grabbed one of the brown and white dinette chairs and held it legs up to defend himself as she bent to dash his brains in with her makeshift bludgeon.

Fortunately, the floor protector on the sharp metal leg had come off, so the chair went into her like a spear. Charlene reared back, yanking the chair out of her with a scream and throwing it. The chair hit the top of the stove, and broke something, because Frank thought he could hear the sound of gas hissing out.

He struggled to his feet, steadying himself with the counter, when he noticed something grey flail out of the hole in Charlene's abdomen. A second later, another strange string-like appendage appeared. He was arrested momentarily as he realized what those were. They were tentacles.

He began yelling and running as the third tentacle appeared. He had to dodge past Charlene, and he leapt toward the door, barely missing a wave of darkness that poured from her mouth. Her features seemed to be sagging, like a wax figure exposed to heat.

He ran through the living room, and grabbed the door open, slamming it to slow her down. A moment later, the door popped open again as it was blown off its hinges from a gas explosion.

Frank found himself weightless for an instant, and then he was scraping his hands and cheek as he fell on the driveway. He started to get up when the world abruptly went black.

He must not have been out of it long, because there were no sirens. The fire was good and hot, and it was burning the duplex next door, as well. He looked around, and saw a part of the book Charlene had told him to read. Frank stood, this time wondering why there were no sirens and why no one had come to offer help. It was at least eight o'clock at night, lots of people would usually be home.

For the first time, he noticed the windows in the adjacent buildings were dark and not lit as they should be after night fall. All that he could see in them was the reflected fire. Frank freaked out, wondering if people were watching him with invisible eyes.

He staggered into his Mini and drove away as fast as possible. He noticed there were very few people out on the road. He glanced through the passenger window as he stopped at one intersection, and he saw a pack of dogs yanking on a pile of rags. As he watched, a white Scottish terrier ran around and pushed through the other dogs to get in on his own end of the canine indulgence.

By Ria Kennedy

Frank drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and then stiffened. A white Scottish terrier! Like the woman who was hanging posters had asked if he had seen. Could this be her dog?

The dog stopped and cocked its head, then turned and began staring at him intently. Some of the light from the Mini's headlights shone on the dog and Frank saw that there was fresh blood on the muzzle. Frank's gaze turned to the pile of rags the dogs were busy chewing on. Was that an arm they were gnawing?

The terrier woofed, and started running at him. The rest of the dogs followed suit. He gunned the engine and squealed the tires as he jammed the Mini around the corner. Screw that! What the hell was wrong with the animals lately? First the birds crashing into the windows at the Coffee-bar and now this!

At the bed and breakfast, Betty was kind but a little nosy as she served him the dinner she'd kept warm for him. She wanted to know what had happened to his face.

Frank didn't say much, which seemed to really get her goat. He didn't know what to say, really, he felt kind of dazed and his head was killing him. Martin was engaged in watching the news. He came over when Betty told him desert was ready, but his eyes were on the TV as he ate.

The other guests had left, some without paying their bills, Betty told him. Betty complained mightily about the younger generation's contempt for honest business people like her and her husband. Frank excused himself after dinner. It really wasn't his fault some people were deadbeats.

He took a shower and looked at the book. Its title was *Accounts of Hell Towne*. It was apparently about some place named Gastonberg. He'd never heard of it before. Exhausted and sore, he drifted off to sleep.

After a night of unpleasant dreams, everything he'd seen came rushing forward out of his memory. In a moment of clarity, he realized he had been in denial. He also realized that Jill might not be Jill anymore. He held his face in his hands at the idea that his fiancée was infected and might

have tentacles in her like Charlene Grendell had. He leapt off the bed and ran into the bathroom. He vomited into the toilet.

Almost in a daze, he went to the window and looked out. Betty was watering the garden. As he turned and saw the bed, he thought of Jill. Was Jill still in her body and mind somewhere? Had he been having sex with that *thing* or with Jill?

He went to pick up the half-book and staggered back as he became conscious of a very nasty possibility: that Jill had infected the President when those two had sex. Frank wracked his brain to put all the pieces together. And what about that general he'd seen her with?

He was sure the crazy writing had something to do with it. Jill had been sending out email for weeks, perhaps to expose people to the writing. Was the writing some kind of "mind tenderizer", something that prepared a person's brain to receive the darkness he had seen Jill spew into the general?

Speaking of the general, his clothes had been torn and singed when Jill contaminated him. That would be why she needed to get the President naked: The Secret Service would suspect something was wrong if the President's clothes were charred and ripped. Having found The Arcane Writings in the bedroom, Frank had no choice but to suspect that Jill had shown it to the President and infected him. Everyone could be at risk.

He noticed he had the shakes. What he'd seen, those tentacles in Charlene, having sex with Jill when she might be some *thing* like Charlene – he got cold thinking about it and had a really hot shower, but the ice seemed to go down to the very core of him where it wouldn't warm and melt. He still felt frozen after he got out and dressed.

Finally, he went downstairs. He ate the food Betty gave him, but scarcely noticed her banter. He noticed that Martin was glued to the news, and seemed to have a double-barreled shotgun on the large coffee table in the handsomely appointed living room. Seeing the shotgun, Frank knew what he had to do. He had to go to The Secret Service, and let them know security had been compromised.

He was directed to an office in The Secret Service Building and recognized the man from his house that had had Frank frisked and investigated on the night the President had come to see Jill. Frank quelled an intense dislike of the man and tried not to let his rage choke him. They went into a little cell-like room and the man introduced himself.

"I'm Agent Novak. What seems to be the problem?"

"I- I'm afraid there's *something* wrong with the President."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, I think my fiancée, Jill, might have harmed him some how."

"Harmed? How?"

"Well, she may be infectious, some kind of infection."

"Oh? Like Herpes?"

"Look, it's not Herpes. I'm afraid she was contaminated by *something* and it changed her. It made her different, dangerous. And the same thing that got into her may have gotten into the President."

"How?"

"Some kind of darkness, it would go out of her into him, infecting him."

"And exactly what should we be looking for?"

"It sounds crazy, but actually, tentacles. Maybe you'll see something on a brain scan."

"You want us to check the President for tentacles? Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?"

"Yes, but I'm sure if you give him a scan, you'll find out that something is wrong with him. You have a duty to the nation to make sure he's OK."

"Where's your proof? Can we check your fiancée?"

"Well, she's left town."

"Do you have medical records to back-up your wild claims?"

"No, but it can't hurt to check and make sure the President is OK."

"So, you came in here, all wild eyed and crazy-minded with some fantastic story of tentacle energy monsters and you expect me to take it on faith?"

"Please, the fate of the world is at stake."

"Come closer, I don't want to say this more than once."

Frank leaned closer.

"Listen."

And darkness poured out of The Secret Service guy's mouth towards Frank, engulfing him. Frank's eyes started burning, and he fell to the ground, bleeding from the nose.

The Secret Service man watched as Frank writhed on the ground.

Frank blinked, trying to speak. Agent Novak just smiled, an all American smile. Frank could imagine Novak's chiseled *GQ* good looks on a recruitment poster for the military. Then the world went black.

Novak walked to the door and went out. He spoke to a buff tanned agent. "Looks like this guy had an episode. He must have had a seizure. Roberto, take care of him."

"Yes, sir."

Outside, the weather announcers warned that a bad storm was imminent, and to stay indoors. Inside, computers were on in almost every house as photographs of lost dogs got wet in the rain on the missing pet posters that peppered almost every pole in the city.

The Soaking Man

Tricia and James Hewitt tasted the meat sauce in their new home. Their young daughter, Carla, was at the dining room table, coloring beautiful carousel horses in her new book. She intended to cut out all the colored horses and put them around the upper part of her walls, just like a border, so she was being super careful to stay in the lines.

"I don't know, do you think this old Victorian is going to hold up in the rain?" Tricia asked James after flipping her African micro braids behind her shoulder. She carefully carried the whole wheat spaghetti over to the sink and poured it into her grandmother's old copper colander. The antique kitchen utensil fit in perfectly with the ambience of the historic house.

"Well," James said, "My brother is handy with his tools, and I used to work construction in the summer to get through law school, so I'm sure if it isn't we'll be able to fix it."

"Well let's hope it's sound, because we have a lot to do. We have to buy the Christmas presents, get ready for Kwanzaa and New Years, go to

Shondra's wedding and we still have to unpack about half of everything – Oh!" she exclaimed, putting a hand on her stomach.

"What?" James asked concernedly.

"I think I just gave myself indigestion!" she said, laughing.

"It's OK, puddin', we'll get through," James said, "We just need to prioritize and work a little hard. But it'll all get done."

Tricia plated the spaghetti and then put the sauce on. "All right Carla, it's time for dinner. You can color before your bath."

"All right, mama," Carla said, "I want a lot because I'm starved."

"You're a growing girl," James told her, "You must have grown an extra head since I last saw you this morning."

"Daddy, an extra head? You're silly!" Carla exclaimed, giggling.

"OK, maybe you grew another foot, not a head," James laughed, putting spaghetti onto her plate.

"I only have two feet and one head!" Carla stood up to show them.

"Carla, don't stand on your chair!" Tricia scolded.

"OK, but dad's silly!" Carla said with a big smile.

As they were eating, there was a knock at the door. Tricia opened the door and saw a delivery man there. She signed for the package and noticed it was from her publisher. Her book had arrived!

Excitedly, she ripped it open and looked. “The Princess Frog”, her children’s book, was now fully illustrated and bound, ready for distribution. There was an impromptu party, with a few friends stopping by to celebrate and then they sent everyone home. James had a big case tomorrow, and Carla had to go to bed.

“I want to read your new book, mamma,” Carla said when she was asked what she wanted to read before going to sleep.

Tricia was so happy to have her child read from her book. She brought it over and handed it to her daughter. Carla read aloud in her big girl voice the story of the frog princess who went out and saved her watery kingdom to win the respect of the boy frog who said she couldn’t because she was just a girl.

“The End,” Carla said. “Mommy, that was the perfect story, I loved it!” Carla gave her a big hug and kiss.

‘Thank you,” Tricia said, “I based the frog princess off of you.”

“Mama, I’m not a frog!” Carla laughed.

“I know, you’re a very clever little girl, and it’s already past your bed time. It’s time to lie down and go to sleep now. Say your prayers.”

“‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray my soul the Lord to keep.’ Mama, what’s a soul?”

“Carla, quit stalling. We can talk about this another time.”

“Does the frog princess have a soul?”

“Yes,” Tricia said. She and James exchanged an amused glance over Carla’s head.

"Does that mean the cow we ate for dinner has a soul?" Carla asked in a worried voice.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," James said, "But for now, say your blessings and say good night."

"God bless mommy, and daddy, grandma Tate, that mean boy Tommy even though he doesn't have a soul, the frog princess and the cow we ate for dinner."

"Very nice," Tricia said, "Now hop under the covers."

Carla grimaced and did. Then she asked for water, a stuffed toy, the window to be opened, the window to be closed and finally the hall light to be left on. Even she seemed to have run out of excuses to put off going to bed, and she yawned deeply as she struggled to avoid sleep.

"See you tomorrow, hon," James said, kissing her, "Don't let the bed bugs bite."

"Good night, sleep tight," Tricia said.

"Good night, I love you," Carla said.

"We love you too. Now go to sleep," James said sternly.

They looked back as their lovely daughter slept on her pale pink pillow, with her hair around her face like a silky black cloud.

That night when Tricia and James finally turned in after unpacking some boxes, a terrible wind began to howl under the eaves. The wind chimes on the front porch danced fiercely creating a merry tune.

"Good God," James said, "You never heard that in an apartment building."

"Come over here and warm me up, it makes me feel cold just listening to it."

James scooted over and pulled her into his arms. They kissed sweetly and it grew into something hotter. Then they heard the squeak of the door opening. Looking over, they saw Carla standing there with her pink bunny.

"Mama, I'm scared because of the noise, and I'm cold. Can I sleep in here? Please?"

James and Tricia sighed.

"OK, hon, but just for tonight," Tricia said pulling back the covers.

Carla ran over and climbed into bed, squeezing in between them. They had just settled down, when something hit the window, and then the wall next to the window, and then the window again.

"What on earth?" James asked, leaping out of bed and dashing over to the glass. As he looked, something dark and rectangular flipped into view. "A shutter has come loose, and it's going to break this window if I don't fix it. Tricia, can you go get me my tool box?"

"Where is it?" she asked as James opened the window and reached out to steady the shutter. She hopped out of bed and Carla pulled the comforter back up.

"In the basement."

"It's cold!" Carla complained.

"Well, you stay in bed snug as a bug and we'll get this fixed in a jiffy," Tricia heard James say to their daughter.

Tricia ran downstairs and then down into the basement through the door off the kitchen. The bulb down there was old and dim, maybe 30 watts at the most, and it hardly gave off any light at all. There were a lot of boxes down here from the movers, and as she read the box contents listed on the outside, she thought she heard something in one corner, a kind of sloshing, squishy, dripping sound.

When she went over to look and see what it was, there was nothing there. Thank goodness, she didn't need a leak in their new house! Especially with so much stuff in cardboard boxes, their possessions would be ruined. But she still felt uneasy down here, almost as if someone was watching her. Cold and twitchy with nerves, she finally found the tool box and grabbed it to take to James.

As she went upstairs it was as if something passed really fast off to her left along the wall leading up to the kitchen. But when she looked, there was nothing. She felt it was really creepy in the basement and it was making her breathe a little harder.

As she entered into the kitchen; she could have sworn that she saw someone in the backyard through the back door window. She looked out, but saw no one. Her nerves were really causing her to breathe shallowly now.

"Tricia, did you find it?" James called down.

Tricia jumped, and the tool box fell out of her grip, hitting the floor with a metallic crash.

"Yes, I got it," Tricia yelled back, "I'm coming."

She looked again out into the yard to make sure there was nothing to worry about. That was the other thing about living on the sixth floor of an apartment building. It was tougher for intruders to break in and steal your stuff. Tricia made sure the locks were secure on the back door, and then ran upstairs. She didn't need any excuse to get back to the rest of the family; it seemed eerie to be down on the ground level all alone.

She ran upstairs, and together, she and James managed to stick the shutter more or less in place and nail it down safely.

"High five, partner," James said.

They high-fived. Then James kissed her. "Thank you," he whispered softly.

"Thank *you*," Tricia whispered softly back.

Carla was asleep in the bed, her pink bunny held in such a way as to look at them with its flat black button eyes. Somehow in the flash from the lightening outside, it made the bunny seem kind of sinister, like it was looking at them.

It was quite a while before Tricia fell asleep. She kept hearing sounds, but she wasn't sure she was hearing anything unusual. Once she thought she heard a sort of grunting yelp from somewhere, but then the heater kicked on drowning out any other noise, so she couldn't pin down where she'd heard the other sound come from. Finally the pitter patter of rain soothed her nerves and she drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, a lot of branches had fallen out of the trees, and were scattered over the yard. As Tricia went down to get the newspaper, she had to dodge around the detritus. She bent down to get the paper, and she was startled to see someone sitting on the curb.

"Oh, you scared me!" she said, hand to her chest.

There was no reply.

"Sir, are you all right?" Tricia asked noticing how stiffly the figure sat.

No answer.

She went around to the front of him, and saw that the man, apparently a vagrant, was dead. Could he have been the one she saw in her backyard last night? Had he called for help and she hadn't helped him? She felt terrible at the very idea.

What really unnerved her, as if she wasn't unnerved enough with a dead man sitting in front of her house, was the fact that he seemed to be looking up over her shoulder as if someone was standing directly behind her. Quickly Tricia looked over her shoulder, but saw no one. Hands suddenly nerveless, she dropped the paper and ran into the house.

James was making Carla some waffles. "No paper today?" he asked seeing her empty hands.

"Keep Carla busy, will you? I have to call the police."

"What is it?" James asked in a low voice.

"There's a dead man in front of the house," Tricia said in a whisper.

"What are you guys talking about?" Carla said, "It's impolite to whisper. Daddy, you're burning the waffles!"

Tricia ran into her office to use the phone as James dealt with the catastrophe going on in the kitchen.

The police, the coroner and reporters descended on the house like ants on a Twinkie. Tricia kept Carla home, because she didn't want her going out past the corpse, and she made sure her daughter stayed in the back of the house, far away from the bustle going on the front, nice and safe and protected from the darker side of life. She was busy coloring and could care less what else was going on.

James rushed off to court, anxious about whether he should leave Tricia to deal with the tragedy, but really they both knew he had no choice because he was the trial attorney and couldn't miss it.

Tricia had just watched the last of the police officers drive off, when Carla screamed. "Mommy, mommy, there's a man in here!"

Tricia ran to the back of the house, where Carla was standing back from where her coloring book and colored pencils lay on the floor. Her book looked soaked.

"Mama, he ruined my book, he *ruined* it!"

"Where is he Carla, where did he go?"

"I don't know, he was just there and then he was gone."

"Carla, you come with me, we're going to get in the car."

They ran out and got in the car and sat there a moment.

"Naturally, I forgot my cell phone," Tricia said feeling her pocket, "I should go in and get it."

"Use the neighbor's phone, mama, in case he's still in there."

"You're right baby, how'd you get to be so smart?"

"I was born that way," Carla said with a smile.

The next door neighbor, Mrs. Rogers, was very nice and she put on tea and chamber music 'to help their frayed nerves' she said. Over the course of the hour that it took for the police to come out, Tricia discovered that Mrs. Rogers was very pleasant, but a little lonely. She seemed to dote on Carla.

Finally the police finished checking Tricia's house and told her it was OK. Tricia thanked Mrs. Rogers, and readily agreed when the kindly older lady asked to speak to her. Tricia was surprised when she insisted that they go into a side room 'so they could speak privately'. She was even more surprised by what Mrs. Rogers said.

"Mrs. Hewitt, you have got to move out of that house, because it's purely evil. No one can stand to live there for long."

"What do you mean, ma'am?" Tricia asked.

"Well, at least seven families have come and gone from that place, usually, running out like they'd seen a ghost in the middle of the night. Please, you seem like a nice family, and you have a sweet little girl. I wouldn't want anything to happen to her, or any of you."

"Are you saying that our house is haunted?"

"Well, I don't know about that. But I do know some cult used to live there in the 1960s. Who knows what kinds of trouble they stirred up."

"I'll keep it in mind, Mrs. Rogers," Tricia said, "But I don't think we can just leave, we have everything invested in that property."

Mrs. Rogers seemed frustrated, as if she wished she could convince Tricia, but didn't know how. Finally, just an instant before the pause became uncomfortable, she said, "Well, let me know if I can help with anything else, or if you want me to watch Carla some time. I'm retired now, so I'm usually around."

"Thank you Mrs. Rogers, we might take you up on your offer." She heard a car pull up next door and looked out beneath the lace curtain of the little room they were in. "Oh, there's James. Well, we need to get home. I'm sure he won't be able to wait to hear about this."

"You take care, Mrs. Hewitt, and think of what I said. And you're welcome here any time."

"Thanks Mrs. Rogers."

James was astonished to hear that some man had been in their house, and he suggested they eat dinner out, to get away from the source of stress, and to make sure that Carla could relax from her ordeal. Tricia had to agree that it sounded like a good idea.

They went out to a steak house, and in no time flat, Carla had charmed the staff. One waiter brought her a piece of cheesecake at the end of her meal saying it was because she was such a friendly little girl.

"Thanks," Carla, said, "Wow, we should come here all the time!"

The waiter saluted her.

"You going to eat all of that?" Tricia asked.

"Mmm-hmmm." Carla said digging in with glee.

"Well, that looks pretty good, I'm going to have one," James said.

"Me too," Tricia said.

After they had eaten the dessert, and then finished their wine, they were astonished to find that the bill was about twenty dollars higher than they had expected. They looked, and saw that the two slices of cheesecake they had ordered each cost nine dollars.

"Do you get the feeling we've been had?" James asked pulling out his credit card. "That they gave cheesecake to *her* to entice us to order some of our own?"

"Oh yah, but it's OK, James, we deserved it."

"You're right, as long as everyone is well fed and happy." He kissed her and then Carla.

They sang some Sunday school songs on the way home, and then Carla went straight to bed. This time she laid down willingly, exhausted because it was two hours past her bed time.

Tricia had a bath, while James checked to make sure all the windows and doors were locked. They came together in bed, just to cuddle and reassure each other. It had been a terrible shock to find the body outside and then to find out there was an intruder in the house right on the heels of that. It was a long time before Tricia fell asleep, and it was only James' arms around her that made her feel safe enough to finally close her eyes and rest.

The holiday season came and went and it seemed as if the nasty business was behind them, when one night in January, a water main in the street broke and emptied into their basement. When they pumped the water out, they were astonished to find one wall collapsed. Looking into the recess behind it, James and Tricia were horrified to see a nest of grinning children's skeletons looking up at them from their watery bed.

The police came for a third time, and after, the Hewitts went to a hotel, because the forensics people and detectives would be there for some time. A couple of weeks later, they went back home, but not until after some very heated discussions about whether or not they should do as their neighbor recommended: sell and get out. Finally it came down to the simple fact that very few people were going to buy a property where eleven skeletons had been found behind a fake wall in the basement.

"So, my neighbor told me that some cult used to live here from the 60s. Is this something *they* did?" Tricia asked the detective.

"No ma'am, this was from the 70s. A man, Dane Sherman, used to live here, and he was suspected in the disappearance of eleven children. One day, he up and disappeared, never to be seen again. We're pretty sure these are his victims."

"My gosh, did you ever catch him?"

"No, and we may never do so. He was about thirty eight when he escaped, so he may be dead or living under an assumed name. It's highly unlikely that he's still killing."

"So, if he should show up here, what do we do?"

"Ma'am, if he shows up here, presume he's dangerous. Lock the doors and call us right away." He gave her his card.

"Thank you. Are you done here?"

"There might be a few things in the future, and the court may need to bring the jurors here to see things for themselves, but more or less, yes ma'am."

"Thank you, detective."

One day soon after, Tricia set down a plate of cookies and went in to get James and Carla. When they came back into the kitchen, the plate was gone.

"It was right here," she said, aggravated.

"Mamma, are you losing your memory?"

"No, I could swear. And that's my favorite plate from my Aunt Betty."

"Maybe the ghost got it," James said. His tone was jovial, but a chill seemed to descend on the room. Everyone got really quiet. Tricia could tell they were all wondering if it was true.

No matter where they looked, they never saw that plate or those cookies again. Tricia thought about reminding James of what Mrs. Rogers had said about moving out, about the house being cursed, or haunted or whatever, but things had been so stressful lately she thought it would cause more problems than it would solve.

James was so logical, he would just say Mrs. Rogers was a crazy old lady, and to forget it. And she didn't want to have the argument about whether they should stay or go all over again, just so that everyone would get all upset. She didn't want to distress Carla, either. It seemed like her daughter was withdrawing into herself. So Tricia chose not to say anything and to try to put it behind her gracefully.

But that was just the start of the disappearances. The next thing that went missing was Tricia's flat iron. And then it was James' car keys. And finally it was Carla's cherry red coloring pencil. Little by little, more and more stuff started disappearing or getting moved around, but everyone swore that it was not moved by them or that they didn't know where it was. Tempers grew short. They started looking over their shoulders. They started blaming. Carla refused to sleep alone and frequently had nightmares that caused her to wake up screaming.

One day, as Tricia was cleaning some potatoes for dinner, the light went out. Reaching up, she tapped it, and it came back on and then went out again. She played around with it some more, and realized it had come unscrewed.

Eventually, other light bulbs would seemingly unscrew themselves. Sometimes the door bell would ring and there would be no one there. And it often sounded as if dishes were readjusting themselves in the cabinets.

"Probably just heavy traffic on the street, causing the house to shift," James would say when she mentioned any of these things.

He seemed to not want to talk about it, and always changed the subject to news or gossip. They always talked about unimportant stuff now, and avoided talking about anything significant.

One day the electrical bill came and it was about a hundred and fifty dollars more than they thought it should be. James told Tricia that she should do her writing in a coffee shop or something so that she didn't waste so much electricity working from home. Tricia decided to ignore him. She told herself that it was just the stress, but she was considering her options.

She was seriously starting to wonder if it was over between her and James. She wondered if she should just take her child and go. But a part of her thought it was a terrible idea, and she held out hope for a reconciliation with James and that he would come around to seeing things her way.

One day, Tricia had to go downstairs to the basement to get an old box with some story ideas in it. Even though they had replaced the wan light bulb down there with a fluorescent light, the cellar still seemed fitfully dark.

It sounded as if the corners of the room were filled with running water. As she looked to find out what was causing the sound, it seemed in one spot as though the shadows had a certain density as if someone was standing there.

Hurriedly, she grabbed the battered banker's box and ran up the stairs toward the kitchen. Tricia swore she heard a creak on the stairs behind her, but it stopped when she turned to look. Rushing up the last few stairs, she slammed the door closed.

All of these things unnerved Tricia, and made her worry about Carla. When she told James what she had experienced, he told her to ignore it. It was just the house settling, and she should have more sense and control her imagination. She and James had a long bitter argument about whether they should move or not, and that night James moved his things into the guest bedroom.

Shondra, Tricia's best friend, suggested that they have some family therapy. Shondra had read that little girls could cause poltergeists or something like that, and that it was possible Carla was upset about something and so was actually causing the problems herself.

What was implied but not said was that maybe their *family* had a problem, something that had nothing to do with ghosts. Like maybe they had started imagining things since all the dead kids had been found on their property. And Tricia had to admit, maybe Shondra was right. But she didn't believe it.

Therapy was the opposite of helpful. The bland scholarly professional seemed to say things just to start an argument. A visit with her actually started a *major* fight, where James stormed out of the house. Petrified of remaining in the house alone, Tricia took Carla over to the Rogers' and stayed until she knew James had come home.

She went up to bed as he stayed in the living room watching TV. She brought Carla into her room with her, because she didn't want either of them to be alone. Carla lay on the floor coloring sloppily, as if she was too weary to try to keep inside the lines. Tricia watched the shadows on the walls from the tall trees outside. She wondered why they had ever moved here. It had destroyed her whole family and security in life.

A few days later, Mrs. Rogers came over to talk to Tricia over the back fence, but Tricia wouldn't have it. She invited Mrs. Rogers in for some of her raspberry cheesecake. The thin faced woman looked thrilled.

"This cheesecake is divine," she said after sampling her first bite slowly. Then she proceeded to eat it, one large bite at a time.

When Tricia tried to ask her what she wanted to talk about, Mrs. Rogers refused, saying that she didn't want to talk when she was experiencing poetry. Tricia definitely felt a warm glow when the lady said that, and patiently waited for her neighbor to finish her treat.

Finally, Mrs. Rogers sat back after a sip of coffee, wiping her mouth delicately. "My dear, I just wanted to let you know something. My son knows a reporter, who's been looking into your house. Naturally, I'm a nosy old thing, and I'm sure you're worried, so I got as much information as I could out of him."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Tricia said, "What did you learn?"

"Mrs. Hewitt, this house has a bad history, and it stretches out as long as I've lived here, from back in '78. I thought the most terrible thing was that people came running out of here at all hours of the night, like they were fleeing the devil himself. But it's much worse. All the people who ever lived here since the 70s who moved out died or disappeared later."

"Oh no, what do you mean?"

"Well, I have a list right here. Let's see," Mrs. Rogers said pulling out a long skinny piece of paper that said 'Groceries' at the top.

She began to read from it. "The first family got divorced. He later died of a heart attack and she and the kid died in a car accident. In the second family, the little boy went missing. In the third, the daughter got cancer." Mrs. Rogers put the list down and shook her hands as if she was trying to remove some noxious liquid that was clinging to her fingers.

"Oh, Mrs. Hewitt, it's so terrible, need I go on?"

"Yes, Mrs. Rogers, I need to hear it all." Tricia said it, because she felt obligated to, but she didn't want to hear it. Not really. Inside she felt a dread that left her almost paralyzed.

Mrs. Rogers sighed and rubbed her glasses off on her shirt. Then she continued. "In the next family, the child had some kind of problem and tried to kill his parents, so he's in a special jail now. Another family simply disappeared. Their car was running in the driveway, but there was no sign of them…"

Mrs. Rogers let the hand holding the list drop and removed her glasses and put them on the table. Then she rubbed her eyes. Her hands were trembling.

Finally, she recovered. She read with her chin down and shoulders hunched as if she were expecting a blow. Her voice was low and grim, her words rapid fire and intense as if she was forcing them out. "In another

family, everyone including the dog was murdered. And in the seventh family, the father killed everyone and then himself."

Mrs. Rogers dropped the list and sat back, shaking her head. She took a couple of deep breaths as if she had just run a fast race. Tricia felt numb. She rose on feet she couldn't feel to clear the table. She had to move or she would pass out.

"I find it so distressing," Mrs. Rogers said in an apologetic tone, "I had no idea, or I wouldn't have let anyone buy this place. It's unconscionable that a house could have such a bad history and still get sold for such a high price!"

"No," Tricia said, clearing the table and willing her fingers not to shake. They did anyhow, but Mrs. Rogers didn't see that Tricia was upset; she seemed lost in her own distress.

"That's what it costs to live in the Bay Area." Tricia said in a thick voice. She took a deep breath as she rinsed the suds off the desert plates. "Those people were probably just trying to get their money back."

Tricia turned abruptly. Mrs. Rogers was standing by the table as if she didn't quite know what to do. "Mrs. Rogers, James would never hurt us. Never, so what happened to those people, that wouldn't happen to us."

"Those people stayed here a long time, years, some of them. And of course James would never hurt any of you, your family is very close and loving. But *please*, Mrs. Hewitt," Mrs. Rogers said coming over and taking Tricia's wet hands.

"You folks just have got to move out, to a safer place. Please dear, I understand money is the problem, and I talked to Art about it. Since we don't have kids of our own, we'd be happy to help out, say give you your down payment. We just don't want anything like what happened to the other owners to happen to you. So think about our offer, and also, I want to add, you can stay with us any time if you need to."

"Mrs. Rogers, I don't know what to say. That's awfully generous. It might take some time to repay you – if, *if* we took you up on your offer."

"Mrs. Hewitt, your health and safety is most important, and we'd like to make sure you have the option to move out at least, and we'd be happy to help you if it comes to that. It may not be the perfect solution, but it'd give you some leeway."

Mrs. Rogers suddenly looked worried and looked at her watch. "Well," she said hurriedly, "I have to go, my soaps just started."

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Rogers. And here, take the rest of this cheesecake with you, James prefers the plain style."

"Oh, I couldn't," Mrs. Rogers said eagerly reaching for it. "Oh thank you, but I must go." She stopped and looked back at Tricia, as if she wanted her to move out immediately.

"I must go," she said almost to herself. She walked down the porch stairs, and walked to her house with a limping dignity. She stopped once and looked back at the house as if she was trying to see what caused its terrible history. She looked baffled. Finally she went into her own house. What a sweet lady.

Tricia prayed that there would be some sort of solution. That James would be more flexible and cooperative, that he would at least listen. Tricia made his favorite meal, and some way, some how, things went well and after weeks of living as strangers under the same house, that night, Tricia and James called a truce.

They were in the master bedroom, piled into the big bed with Carla. When Tricia told him that people had sometimes fled in the night for some unknown reason, he looked thoughtful.

"What?" Tricia asked.

"It's probably nothing," he said sheepishly, as if he wanted to say what was on his mind, but was embarrassed to.

"*What*?" Tricia said in a persuasive tone.

"Well, when I was sleeping in the guest bedroom, it had felt like someone was standing over me. I don't want to sleep in there anymore."

"Oh, James, why didn't you say anything?" Tricia said. "You should've told me."

"I didn't want to cause problems; I was trying to solve problems. I thought it would stir up trouble if I said anything."

"And mama, I want a haircut," Carla said in a very serious tone.

"I thought you loved longer hair!" Tricia was shocked.

"I do, but The Soaking Man keeps pulling it. I want a very short natural."

"The Soaking Man?" James said in a grave voice.

"Un-hun. He's this old guy that sometimes follows me around, and he's always wet like he's raining. He's the one that ruined my coloring book! And I don't want him grabbing my hair any more," Carla said as a tear trickled down her cheek.

Sensing an opportunity to convince James that they should leave, Tricia told James and Carla that they now had an option. They could stay next door while they looked for a new place, and their neighbors would help them relocate.

"Why would they do that?" James asked, puzzled.

"I think they're just nice people. Either they have too much money and don't know what to do with it, or they are very worried about us staying here any longer."

"Dad, let's go, I don't *want* to stay here any more. It's scary."

"Well, my dad always said, don't look a gift horse in the mouth," James said thoughtfully, "I think we need to take them up on their offer, but we're going to pay them back with interest."

"Oh, James, thank you!" Tricia leaned forward and kissed him.

"Can we go now? *Please*? We can hug and kiss later," Carla said impatiently.

As they made their way toward the stairs, the lights seemed to dim throughout the house. Then as Tricia put her foot out go down the steps, the staircase sheered off and dropped down to the first floor. James grabbed her and pulled her back.

"We're stranded!" she yelled.

Before they could come up with a plan, a lamp ripped out of the wall and almost hit James in the head. It would have if he hadn't ducked so fast.

"Back into the master bedroom!" James hollered, picking up Carla.

They ran in and shut the door as things began to pelt it from the other side. It was as if something was trying to break through, and the wood split as they watched, but mercifully, it held.

The lights remained dim, as if something had turned the luminance down to twenty-five watts. They pulsed and then dimmed into blackness.

They heard a thumping in the closet. James fumbled around until he found the flashlight and turned it on before standing. Water was sliding out from under the closet door in sheets like ocean surf at the beach.

"What are you doing?" Tricia asked worriedly.

"I'm going to see what's in that closet and I'm going to hit it with this Maglite," James said.

Tricia stayed back with Carla, where they cowered together by the bed.

"Daddy, no!" Carla screeched in a thin voice.

James wrenched the closet door open. A leathery looking skeleton stood there, in gray slacks and a moldering navy blue blazer, gray skin shrunken and shriveled, eyes like white cataracted black pebbles in deep sockets. He was soaking wet and water dripped off him and rolled across the floor. He reached out as James yelled and fell back, slipping in the liquid and falling.

"Tricia, run! Run, get out!" he yelled as he quickly regained his feet.

Tricia and Carla ran for the door and ran out into the hall, with James close behind.

A table skidded out from the wall and tried to block their passage, and they had to squeeze past it as they were pummeled by candle sticks.

When they reached where the staircase should be, James jumped to the lower floor and Tricia handed Carla down to him, before sliding her legs over the side of the edge where the stairs used to be. As she watched, gray soaking legs and black loafers walked toward her. Frightened, she let go, coming down hard on her ankle.

"Ow!" she called out in pain and fear.

"Hold on to me!" James said, sliding an arm around her to help her take the load off her sore ankle.

"OK, let's go," Tricia said, aware of the shadowy figure staring after them with foggy black eyes.

Leaning on James, they hurried for the door as furniture and decorations banged into them and cut at them. When they finally managed to open the front door, there was a sound like a great wind and some clatter, and then it all fell silent. Tricia risked a look back. The house was pristine, as if nothing had happened. Only the sound of the chimes on the front porch could be heard.

"No one's going to believe us," Tricia said in shock. She looked at their battered bodies. It was the only evidence they had of what had happened.

"I know," James said. "But I love you."

"And I saw what happened mama, so it's OK. We'll always know," Carla chimed in.

"Then that's what's important," Tricia said.

Hand in hand, they limped over to the Rogers' next door. The old couple welcomed them and made them feel safe, and gave them back their hope.

Tricia and James heavily discounted the price for the Victorian, and made sure the buyer had no young kids. They thought little Carla had gotten the attention of The Soaking Man and been the catalyst for the attacks. Also, they disclosed the history of the house so they could live with themselves knowing that no one had been lied to or misled about its history. They didn't think the buyer believed them, and they hoped he never would.

Some weeks later, the Hewitts were in their new home on the outskirts of Seattle. It wasn't as fancy as the Victorian had been, just a nice redwood Ranch house with space to run around in and a big yard.

They had all deemed it necessary to move to a new State and start fresh. And they thought by moving so far away they could avoid the bad luck that had come to pass with the other families that had lived in their old house.

Carla had a new coloring book, this time with ballerinas, and she was busy coloring in the den while her mother and father were setting the table for Saint Patrick's Day dinner.

"Is it nice?" Carla heard her mother say.

"Actually, yes," her father said, "I love the law offices and I get on well with the other attorneys. This was the right move."

"I'm so glad," Tricia said, "I hope Carla likes school. We'll ask her at dinner."

Something came into view. Carla looked up from the pink tutu she was coloring. Black shoed feet – sodden gray legs with the skin hanging down around the ankles like a pair of old socks – it was The Soaking Man. Carla began screaming as the monstrous figure reached down.

Vindication

It was a gray day, the kind of gray that is only dismal and holds no water. The monotonous view was surrounded by a frame of aluminum inset into a wall of oatmeal colored paper. Dismal? Drab, depressing and dreary were more appropriate words to describe the leaden and oppressive scene.

His boss had a little green banker's lamp on his gray desk and was busily making marks on Chad's proposal. Once in a while, the boss would make a "tsk-tsk" sound or groan a little. Chad wanted to leave, but he knew his boss would throw a hissy-fit, so he stayed.

Finally his boss sat back and removed his gold rimmed glasses. He rubbed his forehead as if it was all too much.

"When did you get so mediocre?" his boss asked putting his glasses back on, "You used to be someone with potential."

"Sir?" Chad asked.

"This has no flair, no balls, it's run of the mill, middle of the road – safe. Utterly conventional and I don't want it associated with my department."

"Tell me, what would you like me to fix?" Chad said, "I'll make any changes you want." Inwardly, he wanted to slap the boss upside the head and then force his head down to reexamine the proposal. Chad was sick to death of him and his omnipresent horse-shit.

"Well if I have to tell you, you're not doing your job. You should know this stuff by now. I'll give you another chance, but I'm not going to carry you. You better put some spurs on and kick yourself in the ass. Now get out of here."

"Yes, sir," Chad said. He walked out into the hall and threw the proposal into the nearest trash.

He took a drink of water from the water dispenser, and then saw that Imelda Simpson was going into the boss's office with *her* proposal. She wore a cute beige suit with a pleat sewn on the mini-skirt and her dark thighs moved together with silken flesh gleaming over well-formed muscle. Urgently, he wanted to have sex with her, but angrily, to punish her. He knew the old man would give her the raise. Simpson always won the proposal. He hated her.

At night, he got home. His mother expected him to call. She was angry that her cat had scratched her and he had to soothe her fury that he had moved out and she was living alone now. For the millionth time, he reminded her to get some friends her own age.

As she launched into the bi-weekly version of how he had betrayed her, deserted her, and abandoned her, he waited for her speech to wind down. When she had gotten it out of her system, he said he had to go. Bitterly, she relented, but told him she would call tomorrow.

He took a shower. He took a shower and tried to unclench his hands. Tried to unclench his jaw. Tried to take a deep breath. What had he ever done

to deserve this? Why him? With a strong desire to cry, he punched the tile. Better to hit it out than to become a blubbering baby. Finally, the shower got so hot he had to turn it off.

He came out of the bathroom and heard the buzzer to the front door. He tightened the towel around his waist and hurried over to the door intercom.

"Yes?" he asked, depressing the button and then releasing it.

"Chad? It's me. Let me in!"

It was Callie. She sounded upset. Maybe she was drunk. But he knew one thing. The last time he'd seen her, she'd been playing gopher hunt with some red haired guy in Chad's bed. There was no way he was going to let her in.

"Piss off, Callie," he said into the intercom.

"No, please Chad, help me! It's my boyfriend! He's going to kill me, let me in!"

"Probably because of something you did, now get out of here."

"Chad, please," Callie was crying now.

He yanked open the door, almost spilling her onto the floor. He put out his hand, grabbed her shoulder and shoved her away.

"Get the fuck out of here! I mean it Callie!" He slammed the door and locked it. Dumb bitch deserved it, he told himself and went in to dry his hair.

He went about his business, secretly hoping that Callie would call again so he could say a few choice words to her and hang up. A few days

later, he had a few people over to watch football, and then sat back to finish the chips and dip and watch the news.

A woman had been found, horribly mutilated, but they had identified the body. One Camilla Peters. Callie. Callie was dead. He was stunned. *Had* her boyfriend killed her? And Chad had sent her away.

He wasn't sure what he thought about that. Relieved he didn't end up like her, perhaps. Angry at her for having such bad taste in men. Maybe a little sad. He cleared his throat and went over to his Bowflex and worked out until that sentiment passed.

But the next morning, he decided to go to the police and implicate her boyfriend as a suspect. He couldn't forget Callie. She was a lying whore, but she didn't deserve to get chopped into pieces.

The station was a mess, with stern faced cops ordering people to stand in this line or that, and desperate or angry people calling out questions or damning the police. He elbowed his way up to the Sergeant's desk and was told to sit and wait; someone would call him. He leaned. He wasn't sure where these benches had been, but he saw one prostitute wasn't wearing underwear and he wasn't about to catch Hepatitis – or worse – if he could help it.

"Chad Markam?" A pasty faced woman yelled over the din.

Chad walked over to her. "I'm Chad," he said. He went through the metal detector and was brought inside to an interrogation room.

"What do have to say about the Harris case?" the woman asked in a distracted way as she searched for her pen.

"Callie was killed by her boyfriend," he said.

"Oh? You have proof?" the woman asked in a completely disinterested way.

"No, but Callie came to me a few days ago and said her boyfriend was going to kill her."

"And what'd you do?"

"I sent her away; Callie cheated on me and I didn't want anything to do with her. I didn't think she was serious."

"And now you do?"

"Well, what, she shows up a couple of days later dead, you don't think there's a connection?"

"No, actually, Mr. Markam, I don't. Ms. Peters' boyfriend has a very strong alibi, and we have verified it. He couldn't have killed anyone when Callie Peters was supposed to have died."

"Well, where was he?"

"That's privileged information," the cop said. "There are other cases that match Ms. Peters' case and for all of these, her boyfriend has an airtight alibi. You're way off base with these accusations, and I have to suspect your motive for implicating him."

"What, you're saying I have an axe to grind so sour grapes brought me down here to "bother" you?" Chad was incredulous.

"I didn't say it, Mr. Markahm," the cop said as she straightened her papers and began to close Callie's folder.

Quickly Chad scanned the page on top. Callie's boyfriend's name was Andrew Pike, over on 4th and Broadway.

"If there's anything else, just call us," the woman said handing him a card and standing up with a very angry and impatient demeanor, as if he had wasted her time. No, as if he had *lied* to her. What a fucking bitch.

He went over to the boyfriend's and ate his Singapore Rice Noodles as he glared at the red brick townhouse from inside his Toyota Camry. Pike was obviously loaded if he could afford one of these places.

Chad sat up with interest as he saw two men walk up to the bay window inside. Both of them looked like the guy he had caught in bed with Callie. They looked identical. A moment later, they were joined by a third, who also looked like the other two.

Now he knew for sure that Andrew Pike's alibi was a wash; anyone would have sworn up and down that Andrew Pike was at a certain place and time, but his brother or whatever could have stood in for him.

He thought of calling the police, but the idea of that bitch getting on his case again burned him up. Fuck her. He'd check this himself. After a while, one of the men left. Another two hours after that another left. And finally, the third one went out. It was like they were trying to keep the fact they were triplets on the down-low. That proved they were hiding something, he was more sure than ever that Andrew Pike had killed Callie. Now he just needed to prove it.

He waffled for almost half an hour. It wasn't that he was chicken, it was that all these places were row houses and there was no way for him to break into the back door without going through other people's back yards. He had to break in through the front or he had to call it quits.

Finally he screwed up his courage. He got out of the car and walked briskly up to the porch stairs. Before someone could see him or he lost his nerve, he broke the window next to the front door, and reached in and unlocked it before going in.

Right off the bat, he could see why Callie would go for a guy like this; she'd always wanted money. The place was nice, ritzy even. Antiques, that sort of thing.

He looked around, and impulsively tossed the place, broke some shit. It was satisfying, but he couldn't find anything to nail Pike. It looked like a wash, but he felt a small measure of satisfaction in having thrashed Pike's shit.

He was headed toward the front door, when he heard voices on the stoop.

"Someone's in there," a man said.

"Not for long," a second voice, which sounded just like the first, said.

Chad ducked into a little side door in the hall. It was pitch black in here, but groping around on the wall, he found a light switch and flipped it. Light came on, and he saw he was on a little metal circular stair that went down. Ah, this must be the basement. Quickly, he hurried down.

He was surprised to see a large hole in a wall, and to hear what sounded like the subway train. Could this basement back into the subway system?

"He's down there, I can smell him," an excited sounding voice said from above him at the top of the stairs.

"Well, not for long," the other one said, and howled like a wolf.

An instant later, more howling sounded from somewhere else in the darkness off to his side. They had friends! Chad wasn't sure where to go.

Chad saw the two red-haired men from the house jump off the balcony and land behind him. They'd just cleared a twenty foot drop! Shit! He ran.

He got through the opening, and it seemed like more red-headed men appeared, all identical. What the hell was this? There were at least ten. He ran as fast as could while maintaining a low profile.

"I smell him, brother, and he smells scared," one said another.

"He doesn't just smell scared, he smells delicious," the second one said.

Chad had been right: the subway was outside the hole in the wall. He quickly made his way to the train platform as several of the men closed on him, climbing the stairs rapidly to join him. He shoved his way into the train and the doors closed as one of the red heads banged on it in frustration.

He didn't go straight home. He went to the church. His pastor, Reverend Bradley could help. He would know what to do. He went in, but the pastor wasn't there; the pastor's assistant informed him that the pastor had been called to the bedside of some congregation member who was dying.

He tossed a five dollar bill into the donation box and wondered what the fuck he should do now. Should he go to the cops? Should he go back and get proof? How could there be so many people who looked identical? Why were they so aggressive and how the fuck could they smell him and discern his state of mind from his sweat? Or were they just screwing with his head?

Finally, it came to him in a blinding flash. They were hiding something in those tunnels. Something they didn't want anyone to know about, something that they were protecting. He decided it was his mission to go and find out what the red-haired men were up to.

He snuck back, and took the train down, getting out close to the platform near Andrew Pike's house. Then he went down into the tunnel. He wandered down the track and tried doors that he came across. Eventually, he found that a door was open when he checked the knob, and he went in there. It led to another door, and that led deeper into the underground system.

He walked as quietly as he could, and followed the tunnel. Eventually, he heard some noises. It sounded like people talking in a room off to the side.

Chad risked a look. A large eight-legged thing with a human face sat on a dais, looking down on about twenty of the red-haired men. Several large clear egg sacks contained what looked like more of the Andrew Pike men.

Chad's mouth gaped open as his jaw went slack in surprise.

"Sons, you must find this man and stop him from talking. We are at risk if word gets out," the spider thing spoke in a woman's voice.

"Yes, mother," the red-haired men intoned.

"We will find him, mother," shouted one.

What the hell *was* this? Chad reeled back. Hurriedly, Chad slunk away before they could come after him. He hoped the pastor was back; he couldn't wait to tell him what he'd seen. He rushed back to the church, and was thrilled to see the man of the cloth.

He embraced the pastor happily. "Reverend Bradley," Chad said, "I'm so glad to see you."

"And me you, what can I do for you?" the priest asked, stepping back as if he was uncomfortable with Chad hugging him.

Quickly, Chad laid out what had happened and what he'd seen in the tunnels.

"This is a joke, right?" the priest said, laughing, "I've got to tell you, I didn't think you had it in you!" he said, slapping his knee.

"Reverend Bradley, I'm serious," Chad said. This was not what he had expected from the pastor.

Reverend Bradley laughed until he had to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye. "Boy, that is a tall tale. Monsters in the subway!"

"Look, you don't have to believe me, I can show you. Come with me, and I'll show you."

The priest leaned back and looked at him. "So you're not joshing me?"

"No sir, I'm telling you god's honest truth."

"Mm-hmmm." The priest said. Then he took out a little notebook and wrote something down. "I think you should see this man, he's a doctor, and he can help you with your confusion."

Chad took the paper. "A psychiatrist? You want me to see a shrink?"

"Chad, I think you have some things to work through and it's a little out of my league. Why don't you call him and make an appointment. Now, I have things to see to, and I have to go. But rest assured, I'll pray for you." With that, the priest stood up and walked away. Chad stormed out.

He went to a bar, and drank some beer. He was furious that the priest had mocked him. What did Reverend Bradley know, anyways? Chad had trusted the pastor, given him money whenever he asked and helped out by volunteering on various projects.

Now, when Chad needed *his* support, the priest dared to judge him and withhold his help? Chad needed someone to back him up and Reverend Bradley refused any assistance? The pastor thought it was OK to make fun of Chad's problem, and then make it out like Chad had something wrong with him? What kind of person let you down like that?

He thought of Callie, but she was dead, so it didn't matter any more. He thought of the fact that the man – or men – referred to as Andrew Pike knew Chad, and knew where he lived because Chad had found one with Callie. It would only be a matter of time before they remembered and came after him.

He knew not to bother going to the cops. They'd either charge him with breaking and entering or toss him in the drunk tank. Or worse, lock him up and transfer him to County Mental Health. He couldn't trust anyone at work. So he was on his own, and eventually the Pike things were going to kill him.

He got home and found the police there. They were checking his place, and asking about his alibi. Fortunately, he had one. He was pissed at the police. He'd gone to them to help and they'd turned it around, like he was the one who was the bad guy.

He had told them who had murdered Callie and now they were trying to pin the murder on him. Bastards! He noticed his hands trembled with rage if he didn't make his hands into fists, and his jaw was hurting badly as he clenched his teeth together in righteous indignation.

Oh no, he knew who the bad guy was. That bitch detective who had a major hard-on for him, that's who! She was standing over some tech instructing him to go over every square inch of his bed.

"Getting your jollies?" he asked her through his gritted teeth.

"No need to take that tone, Mr. Markham.

"Do you really think I'd come to you if I was guilty?"

"Well, Mr. Markham, that is sometimes a common tactic, used to try and divert blame from oneself onto another suspect."

"Nothing, ma'am," the technician said.

"These new sheets Mr. Markham?"

"No," he said. "Not exactly."

"Not exactly? What do you mean by that?"

"My mother gave them to me a while ago, and I just put them on now."

"Where are your old sheets?" she said as if she was so smart and had put it together. As if he had murdered Callie in here and used the sheets to dispose of the body. Why did the cop have it in for him? What'd he ever done to her?

"In the hamper," he pointed.

"In here, ma'am," the tech said after pawing through Chad's dirty clothes.

"Oh," she said. She sounded disappointed. "Well, take them in and check them."

Chad went and sat on his couch and tried to watch the news, but he was fuming. Acting like he was the guilty one, who did that detective think she was? After a couple of more hours, the police left, having taken a great many items with them as "evidence".

He looked in his mail box, which, hah, apparently they hadn't thought to check. He was surprised to see a letter from Callie. He smelled it: it smelled like roses, like she always did. Poor Callie. He ripped open the letter and sat down to read. It was eight pages of unspooled narrative. Crazy narrative, except he'd seen some of it too.

Andrew had propositioned her. At first she had thought he meant marriage, but instead he'd taken her down to the subway. She had followed Andrew into the underground, and he had showed her some kind of spider woman thing.

The spider thing had said that Callie could become a "mother" like it was. They needed fresh DNA, Andrew had said. They had both tried to convince her, promised her eternity and eternal love from her thousands of children. Callie had said she needed to think about it to buy time, but she didn't think she had much time left. She felt sure they were going to take her even if she refused.

The letter went on. Andrew Pike had explained that there were multiples of those mother things and they were apparently made from real people somehow. Then Callie warned Chad that he couldn't know who was human and who wasn't. She wanted him to go to the press, wanted him to warn the world.

She apologized to Chad for hurting him, and said she wished she had it to do over again. Then the letter ended. She signed her name with a heart over the letter 'i'. He had loved that about Callie, she was fun, nice and very passionate. She had thought he was brilliant. At least he would have her in his memories.

Chad sat back and had a cigarette and thought. Callie was right of course. He should go to the press, since no one else had believed him, and probably wouldn't. But what was the point? So that some other joker could laugh in his face, call him a bozo or a nut? No, no, Chad had other ideas.

Yes, this way was better, not only would he avoid being killed by those things, but he'd finally have the last word, put all those uppity fuckers that thought he was a joke or a crazy in their place.

He stubbed the cigarette out and went down to the subway. He went down to the room where the spider mother was and entered in. Several of the red-haired men detached and seized him.

"I'm going to kill you," one said.

"No, let me, brother,' another said.

"Hey, you, spider woman."

The thing looked over at him with reddish eyes.

"Callie went to the press. It's only a matter of time before the army comes down here and airs you out. And all your little children will be dead."

The spider thing looked visibly agitated. "Why do you warn us, human?" it asked.

"You seem like you've been misunderstood. I can understand that, I've felt a little put upon by people who seem to not have my best interests at heart. I can relate. You could say we have something in common."

"Come closer child," the spider mother said.

The Pike brothers released him and he stepped forward.

"What would you have us do?" the monster asked.

"Well, I would make a counter-move and hit them hard and fast. There are two bonuses to this: one, you won't have to hide any more and two, you can have dominion over the earth. I know exactly where to start."

Soon after, Chad, along with a group of red-haired men came up out of the sewer near the church. They strode inside, and Reverend Bradley stood up from where he had his arm around a young woman who was crying.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"Retribution," Chad said, walking up to him, "For your lack of faith."

"You need help," the pastor said.

"I'm not the one who needs help," Chad said.

"Take him," he said to the red-heads.

A great splash of blood was cast into the air as the pack moved in for the kill, and he had to close his eyes because of the splatter. The woman was screaming, and the spider children quickly made off with her as a future egg-layer.

As he washed his face in the baptismal basin, the sound of screaming and the howls of the spider people as they took New York City resonated through the empty church. The wind shrieked in the eves, a long, drawn out, excited roar. The sounds, they were like a symphony.

It was the sound of the tables being turned. Chad smiled at the large crucifix on the wall and nodded. He'd shown them. No one would ever underestimate Chad Markam again.

By Ria Kennedy

Broken

Marsha Grymes brushed her teeth, attempting to studiously avoid looking at the letter sitting on the counter getting wet from water leaking out from behind the faucet. She didn't want to see the news informing her that she had terminal pancreatic cancer. They didn't know how long she had. But she did. It wasn't enough time. And it wasn't fair.

She put lotion on her hands, and pulled the cross she had gotten from her Nana out of the top of her navy blue turtleneck. Then she brushed down her tan slacks and went to get the children. Her employers despised lateness, and she couldn't afford to lose her job with benefits now.

She played with the kids for a while, and while they were engrossed in their afternoon programming, she helped the maid bring up the laundry to the master bedroom. The door was open, and Marsha could see her employers in there. But what were they doing, making out? Mrs. Smolen kissed her husband's neck, and then seemed to swallow.

When she pulled her mouth away a little river of blood cascaded down Mr. Smolen's neck and Mrs. Smolen licked it. Marsha could see his skin was bitten and torn. But as she watched, it seemed to miraculously heal itself, like a film running backwards. Marsha quietly and a little dizzily walked down the hall a little and then stomped up. She didn't want the Smolens to realize she'd seen their gross little exchange.

She put the clothes in the drawers, and headed out as the Smolens clearly eyed each other with barely contained lust. They shut the door and locked it as soon as Marsha walked out. She leaned against the wall by the stairs. What was with the miraculous healing she'd seen Mr. Smolen undergo? Was that a *vampire* exchange of blood? And what should she do about it if it was – or what *could* she do about it?

She used her bathroom and saw the letter, forgetting all about her employers and their kinky sex games as despair swamped her. Over the next few days, Marsha felt a deep malaise, and it took a lot of energy to go through the motions. She lay awake at night, thinking of her impending death. She awoke in the morning and when she brushed her teeth, she looked into a doomed face.

She put the children to bed one night, and looked at Jeremy, the infant. He was just off the breast, and was cute as a pickle, all wrinkled and flaking with croup. He laid there and farted loudly. Jeremy was not an easy child, and she looked forward to him getting out of this stage and into the next one. If she was even around to see it. Marsha shivered.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?" Mrs. Smolen said as she strode up in a champagne colored satin robe. It was clear she had nothing else on underneath.

"Yes, Mrs. Smolen," Marsha dutifully lied.

"And such a good baby." Mrs. Smolen picked up her son and held him to her, inhaling his scent. "I think I'll sit with him for a while. You can go to bed now, Marsha. The children are all asleep."

"Thank you, Mrs. Smolen," Marsha said, and went to her room in the servant's addition.

She put on the TV, and a black and white movie came on with Bella Lugosi. He was playing a vampire. She ironed her clothes while it was on, and then picked the lint off the floor with her fingers. She was strangely restless watching the vampire in the movie. She became excited by what she'd seen happen between the Smolens and it seemed as if her mind was trying to figure something out.

She went into the bathroom to brush her teeth, and saw the letter. And it hit her. If Mr. Smolen could heal from a neck wound like that, so could his children. And they could help her recover from her grave illness. But they might fight back, or make noise. She would have to take Jeremy. He was small enough to handle and move easily.

She packed a bag and then waited until late, at which time she went up to Jeremy's room. The baby lay there, looking at her without any recognition aside from dumb infant curiosity. So what, was he like a dog or something, you know, since he wasn't human? Marsha suppressed her revulsion, collected a diaper bag and some baby food and drove away with him in her car.

She went to a friend's house. Newly divorced, Peg had a condo in a small bedroom community in LA that was being targeted for civic improvement. Peg looked askance to see the child, but Marsha guilted Peg into taking them in, claiming Jeremy's father had kicked them out and they were homeless.

"I didn't know you had a child," Peg said into the awkward silence that filled the tiny kitchen as they sat over tea.

"Yes, well, I didn't broadcast it. I wasn't sure about the father, you know." Marsha sipped her tea.

"How long do you think you'll stay?" Peg asked bluntly, "I have a friend coming in from out of town."

"Just a few days, until I get some things set-up. That's OK, right?" Marsha said as if it was a foregone conclusion that it was.

"Of course," Peg said uncertainly.

"Where should we sleep?" Marsha said standing up.

"I can pull the sofa out," Peg said.

"That will be fine, just try to keep the noise down because Jeremy is very sensitive to noise."

"Sure," Peg said miserably.

Marsha lay in bed with her hands behind her head. She was satisfied. She looked at the kid as he slept next to her. Soon she would find a way to let him help her. Then she fell asleep.

She took Jeremy with her wherever she went. First off, he cried if she wasn't around. Second off, he was her meal ticket so to speak, and she couldn't afford to let him out of her sight.

She came in from an afternoon walk to find Peg sitting there.

"Marsha, you lied to me," she said, "It's all over the news. You have to give that baby back to his mother and father."

"Peg, he's just staying with me, everything is fine," Marsha said desperately.

"No, it's not fine, or you wouldn't have lied to me about your boyfriend and you wouldn't have said that Jeremy is your child. I'm calling the police." Peg stood up and walked to the phone.

Marsha took Jeremy and left. They drove around for a long while, until they were on the outskirts of the city limits. They went to an old white and blue motel, and bunkered down. She tried really hard to drop off the radar, but finally was so hungry she had to go out and grab some fast food.

She ate her mushroom burger and eyed the infant critically. How could she get him to help her? She picked up a mushroom and pushed it into her mouth. She'd have to drink his blood. Wasn't that how vampires were supposed to do things? They drank each other's blood? She finished her fries and scrubbed off her hands.

Then she went to the dollar store and bought a cheap plastic handled steak knife. The idea of drinking the boy's – thing's – blood was starting to appeal to her. If this worked, not only could she cure her disease, but she could become immortal. She understood now how the Smolens had such great wealth – they were ageless! And she would never have to be a nanny again.

She was furious to see the child was crying when she got back, and his face was all red as if he had been crying since she'd left. She dumped some water on Jeremy. He hiccupped and stopped crying, regarding her out of his dark brown eyes.

It made her uncomfortable to see him look at her with apparent intelligence. Did Jeremy recognize her? She couldn't afford such thoughts: they might dissuade her from doing what was needed! Jeremy was no more than a vessel that held the sustenance that would save her life.

As she walked over to the child, knife gripped tightly in her hand, he started to cry again, large wet tears sliding out from under his eyes. Why did she keep thinking of it as a child? It was not a child, it was a thing! She couldn't do this if she kept making it into more than it was! She had a headache, and she could smell that 'its' diaper needed changing.

Suddenly overcome by extreme self-loathing, she fell back, dropping the knife and covering her face with her hands. What was she doing? She was a moral woman; this was no way to go about this.

Reluctantly, she changed Jeremy's diaper, noticing her hands shook. He stopped crying and eyed her, before smiling and reaching out. Marsha started crying then, she knew she couldn't do it. There had to be another way. She picked up the infant and walked with him.

She deserved to live, and she had to do this, she needed help. She didn't deserve to die, and she couldn't ask the Smolens for help. But maybe she could take Jeremy to the doctor, and they could transfuse her with his blood. That way, the child would be unharmed and she would get what she needed.

She looked at the phone book in the hotel room, and found a large city hospital less than ten miles away. Satisfied with her plan, she collected the baby and went out to the car. She drove over carefully, making sure not to hurt the kid.

She went inside, and walked up to the emergency room reception desk.

"Yes ma'am, can I help you?" the Hispanic nurse there asked.

"Yes," Marsha said, "I desperately need help. I'm dying of pancreatic cancer, and, as funny as it sounds, this child is a… This child can cure me. I need a blood transfusion from it to me."

There was a pause as the woman looked between her and the baby.

Marsha smiled at Jeremy and he cooed. She looked back at the nurse who was staring at them with a furrowed brow.

"What is it?" Marsha tilted her head curiously.

Quickly the nurse looked down at the clipboard in front of her and picked it up. "Have you been a patient here before?" she said in a very pleasant tone of voice.

Marsha felt instantly soothed. She had done the right thing by coming here. “No, this is our first time.” Marsha nodded to emphasize her point.

“I’ll need you to fill this out,” the nurse said handing over a form on a clipboard, and seemed to think a moment. “And if you have insurance, I need to see proof of it.”

“Of course, thank you,” Marsha said. She and Jeremy sat down.

She filled out the form. Then she stood to hand it to the nurse. Marsha saw a security guard walk in.

“Oh, is something wrong?” she asked clutching Jeremy to her and staring at the man in the uniform suspiciously.

“The guard always comes in this time of day,” the nurse said pleasantly, “If you’d like to come back here now, we’re ready for you.”

“Oh, great,” Marsha said, relieved.

They took her back to a wardroom divided by curtains on metal ceiling rails and showed her which area was hers. The space held some drawers, a gurney and a stainless steel table that looked like a tall TV tray on wheels.

“You’ll need to change into a gown, opening in the back,” the nurse said, “And we’ll need the baby to get him prepped for the transfusion.” She held out her hands.

“Of course,” Marsha said, and gave him to her.

The nurse left pulling the curtain shut behind her.

Marsha began to hum as she changed, and then she laid back on the gurney. Outside there seemed to be some kind of commotion, but the curtain was closed so she couldn't tell what was going on. She found a remote control and turned on the TV. The old black and white movie, "The Saint" was playing. She was quite involved with the plot, when the doctor came in.

"Ms. Grymes?"

"Yes," she said.

"Dr. Beckle," he said.

They shook hands.

"We're going to need to run some tests, set up an IV, all the usual stuff. When did you find out about the cancer?"

"A couple weeks ago. It was devastating, so you can imagine my relief to find out Jeremy was going to be able to cure me."

"And what makes you say that?" the doctor asked, writing some notes in his folder.

"Well, his mom and dad are vampires. So it stands to reason that he is too, and that his blood can cure me."

"I see. And how do you come to believe Jeremy's mother and father are vampires?"

"Well, they suck each other's blood, and heal miraculously."

"And when did you find this out?"

"The other day, thank God. And just in time."

"Was this before or after you got your diagnosis?"

"The same day."

Some nurse's, two men and a woman, dressed in scrubs came in and started getting the tray-table set-up with some needles, an IV and the like. One squeezed the air out of a syringe. Marsha wondered what it held.

"And it says here you have no other family? No one to call?"

"No, it's just me," Marsha said.

"Well, Marsha, I'm afraid you've had a total break with reality. We're going to put a 72-hour Psychiatric Hold on you, until we can get a handle on this."

"No," Marsha yelled sliding out of the bed. "You have to give me Jeremy's blood. If you don't, I'll die!"

The nurses grabbed her and looked at the doctor. He nodded to the one holding the needle.

"Marsha, this is something to take the edge off. It's a sedative, and will help you calm down. I know it's been very stressful the last few days, and we want you to have a good night of sleep."

Marsha tried to bite as the guy came at her with the needle. Another nurse gently but firmly held her head. They strapped her onto the gurney and took her to a facility upstairs. They took her in through a wide doorway and locked a large metal door behind her.

A strange looking man, balding with scars on either side of his forehead looked down at her and smiled a sweet, vacant smile.

"Get that patient away from here," an orderly said to a nurse, and she led the bald man away.

Marsha's bellows of rage had long since stopped as she fought to simply remain awake. She was barely conscious as they transferred her to a bed, buckled her down and left, turning the lights out. She was too tired to keep her eyes open. She sighed and fell into a dreamless asleep.

Dr. Beckle and some of his doctor friends talked to her every day, and she tried to impress on them the importance that they transfuse her with the blood of the vampire child. They always seemed compassionate, but a little condescending, as if she was making it up. When she asked if she could go home, they said they had to keep her a little longer.

"But you can relax, the Smolens are *not* going to press any charges on you for taking their son. They understand you're working through some things and are very sorry you have such a terrible illness."

The doctor looked at the orderly next to her. "You can take her back to her room, Smithy. And thank you." The doctor made some notes in the folder before him on the desk.

"Dr. Beckle, please, I'm running out of time! You have to help me!"

"Come on, Ms. Grymes, it's time for a nap," the orderly grabbed her arm.

"I'm not tired, I'm dying. Let me go!"

"It doesn't have to be like that," Smithy said as he took her other arm and tried to hold her.

Marsha spit on him in frustration.

Suddenly another orderly came and grabbed her feet and they carried her to her room, where they buckled her to the bed. Then they left and closed the door, locking it behind them.

"Let me up, please, I'll be good now. I'm sorry! I'm sorry." She cried and whimpered, but no one came.

"Marsha?" a voice said in the darkness.

"Hello?" Marsha said.

"It's Mrs. Smolen. You shouldn't have taken Jeremy."

"Mrs. Smolen?" Marsha said in a panicked voice.

"Yes. Scream as much as you like. No one in here will care. No one is coming to help."

Marsha did scream, and no one came.

When they brought her dinner, they found Marsha looking up at the ceiling with dead eyes. Her throat had two pinholes in it and she had been drained of blood. What's more, there was no sign of how her attacker had gotten in or out. Naturally, no one said "vampire". But everyone was thinking it.

Best Laid Plans

Donny Driscole made his way down Main Street, amused at the childish antics of the coltish teenage girls who found his height, chiseled features and artfully tousled hair irresistible.

He got free ice cream, licorice and offers of more than just a date from some of the local girls who were a whole lot less innocent than their parents would suspect. But he knew that they were jail bait, and he kept away – although flirting wasn't illegal now, was it? He winked at one pretty who blushed and ducked into a trinket shop. Whoo-hee, he still had it.

Not that Sondra Cohen, the local librarian was lacking, but he had to admit that pearl had lost its luster and her know-it-all attitude was starting to turn him off.

He ducked into the predictably quaint little bookstore that catered to the upper crusties who wanted coffee, a scone and the daily financial newspapers to read when they went fishing on the lake.

When he was in the store, he saw the married couples flirt with their neighbor's spouses as if no one in town knew what was going on, and he felt glee that they would suffer a total meltdown and failure sooner than later. He hated anyone to have a happy ending; it really got to him.

The indolent sow-bellied old fart with the horn-rimmed glasses and the petty cast to his face scowled when he saw Driscole. The old man took off his polished glasses and began to polish them, like he always did. He always did the same stupid act like no one knew he was trying to look like some big shot who knew the score.

Driscole began to drum his fingers on the counter and grabbed a pen to do a rim shot off the "Collect A Penny For A Furry Friend" jar sitting there.

The old man's face darkened. "Yes?" He glowered ineffectually.

Driscole licked his finger and made a one in the air and mouthed the words, "Score one."

The old man pretended not to see.

"My magazine, do you have it in? You were supposed to put it on display a week ago."

"All the magazines are in that aisle, you'll have to see for yourself." And the old fart turtled himself behind *The Wall Street Journal*.

Driscole thought, 'Piss on you old man, you'll take my money but won't move your fat-ass to earn it?' But what he did was hit the jar with another rim-shot, making a "Ka-cha" sound.

"Do you mind?" The old man's face was as wrinkled as his paper as he bent it down in frustration to glare at Driscole ineffectually.

"Not at all," Driscole said, giving him "the winning smile". The old man put up his newsprint wall and Driscole jogged off. His eyes lit up when he saw the magazine, and he took it and hunkered down to read it – for free. The old dude could kiss his ass. He opened it to the story that he'd been waiting for: "Our Cozy Kingdom" about a man who had marital troubles. Oh, Driscole could relate, he really could!

"Er-herm."

Driscole could see the old man's penny loafers – with pennies – beneath the edge of the magazine. He ignored him.

"That's stealing. The sign says "Bookstore" not library. So buy it or get out."

Driscole looked up and glared at him with as much menace as he could muster.

The old man glared back.

Driscole let his chin come up a notch.

The old man lowered his and glared back without dropping eye contact.

Driscole counted to ten.

The old man didn't move.

Shit, Driscole really wanted to finish that story.

"Ring me up," he said imperiously.

"You'll have to stand in line, there's a lady ahead of you."

Driscole stood behind the lard-assed woman and continued reading. He wouldn't buy the damned magazine if he could finish the article in time. He tuned out her wheedling for the old fart to special order some imported book on knitting. Driscole felt she should read a book on how not to be a fat-ass.

"Next!" The old man barked, yanking the magazine out of Driscole's hands, "Let me wrap that for you," he said meanly.

"No need," Driscole said, reaching for it.

"My pleasure, since you're such a *special* customer, I want only the best for you," the old man said stepping back out of Driscole's reach. "Now where'd I put that wrapping paper?" He peered slowly around, as if his head was a ponderous weight on his thick neck.

Driscole sighed.

"Oh, there it is." The old man moved slowly to a shelf and fiddled around there for a moment, before he slowly began cutting off a piece.

"Oh, that one's crooked, let me try again."

Driscole refused to say anything because that would let the old fart know he'd gotten Driscole's goat.

The old fart pulled down a sheet of pink tissue paper, hands trembling with old man-itis – but Driscole knew he was trying to act feeble just to waste time. As he licked his finger to pick up the paper, the old man started talking about bird watching. Once in a while he'd stop to gesture, showing the size of a Warbler, or how he'd nicked a knuckle on some branch, or how big the panoramic view had been.

Finally, the old man was done. "No charge for the gift-wrap," the old fart said, "My pleasure. I was happy to do it."

Driscole would have left and bought the magazine elsewhere, but there was no where else in this tiny shit-hole dead-end lake town. The town only had some luxuries for the richies, lots of working man necessities for the ignorant locals and a few tasteless amenities for the sun burnt tourists. He'd have to think up something good to get back at the old fart next time.

Driscole threw down his money, and then counted his change carefully to make sure the old fart hadn't cheated him.

"You come again now," the old fart said, and pulled his paper back up before Driscole could say anything.

Driscole slid the magazine under his arm and headed out the door, letting it slam behind him. God he hated this place. He remembered coming here as a tubby adolescent virgin to visit his lesbian aunt. She was into all things holistic, a vegan no less – Christ! – and tried to make him lose weight by feeding him kelp and lima beans. So he stole her money to buy nudie books and Ho-Hos. No matter how much rice and beans she *didn't* feed him, she never could understand why he hadn't lost any weight and had actually *gained* twenty-five pounds by the end of the summer.

Ha! Now the joke was on her. He was sleeping in her bed, with her dead in the ground. And since he'd gotten the divorce before Auntie May had died, the ex had no claim on it. Thus, he was stuck in this nowhere hole, because the ex had predictability taken everything else and he didn't have much of shit left.

He stopped a moment as he felt like someone was watching him. He looked around, but saw no one. He turned back and saw a stunning Asian woman wearing a wet white cotton man's shirt standing before him and wringing out her long black hair.

Shit! She was like a siren, and he felt an immediate rise in his pants. He stepped toward her and she glided away. He sped up, and somehow so did she, moving smoothly down the street. She turned a corner and was lost from sight.

He jogged after her, but when he looked into the small, dead-end alley she had gone into, there was no sign of her.

He searched high and low, but she was gone. Once he thought he heard girlish laughter and looking over his shoulder thought he saw something, but when he turned it was gone. He smiled. It was a game.

"I'll get you next time," he said in a low, sexy voice. Women loved it when he spoke to them in a confident, authoritative tone.

He heard that sweet giggle again.

He smiled a wolfish smile. His quarry seemed to like playing games. His breath caught as he imagined leaving marks on the woman's pale skin with his teeth. Just the thought of having her moved him to throbbing hardness. As he imagined taking her, the scent of lilies filled the air.

"Soon," he said gruffly, "Soon."

He slowly regained himself and got back under control. He had no idea such a smoking hot woman lived in these parts. But now that he knew, he would make her his. Who was the woman he had seen? Why had he never seen her before? And where did she go?

Glancing around, he noticed the magazine lying there, gift wrap torn off, and opened to the grisly artwork from the story he had been reading. He felt a chill, and walked over to the magazine. The corners were damp, as if wet fingertips had paged through it.

He took the magazine and then collected the salmon and wine for dinner. Sondra and some of her wannabe friends were coming over for some stupid parlor games and if he was good, maybe Sondra would let him pull her hair later.

He wanted to go woman hunting, but he had to play host. When he got in, his ex had left a message demanding alimony and child support for the

brat. Yes, he'd demanded a genetic test, and yes, even though he'd taken precautions the little shit was his. So the court, at his devil ex's urgings was taking more than half his income for his ex-family's petty indulgences. Why couldn't they just eat macaroni and cheese like the rest of America?

He made a gourmet meal, and set the table up just so. Then he changed into slacks and a textured polo shirt because dressing sharp made these podunks feel small. It helped salve his rage that life had turned out so screwed up.

He put on some Sinatra, got out the board games and settled in for a dreary night of his guests. They seemed mindless about life outside this little town. They talked of nothing but the tourists that came here and who had died or gotten married and what they remembered from grade school.

Bored, he thought of how Sondra's friend kept looking at him when she didn't think anyone else was watching. Normally, he would have taken advantage of the situation, but now he thought of the sex pot he'd seen earlier.

"So, who is the Asian woman who lives in town?" he asked casually.

"What Asian woman?' Sondra asked blankly.

"She was outside the bookstore today, looked like she'd been swimming in the lake."

"No, there's no Asian woman around here, must have been a tourist."

Inwardly, Driscole flinched. Shit, the idea of not being with that sexy woman pissed him off.

"Why?" Sondra asked without guile.

Sondra was such a dunce, she didn't even suspect that Driscole would stray. How naïve. How stupid. "No reason," he said. He knocked back his drink and went to get another.

"Anyone else?" He indicated the decanter.

There was a rousing chorus of yeses, so he poured out another round. Someone suggested they play blind man's bluff. Once, when he was the blind man, he touched Sondra's friend's boob. Since he was peeking, he could see that she blushed. Oh, she wanted him. Maybe later.

That night, he turned Sondra on her face and had at her, all the while thinking of the woman he'd seen on the street. Her dark eyes and sexy long hair haunted him. His nostrils flared as he imagined her scent, and he began to sweat as he fantasized about touching her pallid skin. He thought of dominating her, of showing her who was master and who was servant. Spent, he fell on his back.

"Donny, did you have to be so rough?" Sondra whined as she turned onto her back and modestly pulled the blankets up.

Why bother, Driscole thought as he watched her cover herself coyly. He'd seen it and done it, so there was no mystery left. He could tell she was trying to play all virginal after the things he'd done to her. Why did she have to play such stupid chick games?

Instead he laughed, "I thought you liked that dark side of me? That you nurtured it and tried to bring it out so you could feel like a whole woman?"

"What?" Sondra said in a small puzzled voice, holding the blankets more tightly to her well-endowed chest.

"Nothing," he said. What was the point?

"Donny, are you all right? It's like there's a distance between us."

"Yah, I'm fine. Just let me sleep."

"Donny, is everything OK? Are *we* OK?"

"Yah. Fine. G'night."

She asked a few more questions, but he tuned her out. Eventually she laid back and shut up. Good.

He closed his eyes and thought of the beautiful dark eyed woman. Who was she? Obviously, she was attracted to him. When would he see her next? He wondered *how* to see her again. Soon he drifted off, thinking of a small Asian woman, sitting at his feet and giving him a foot rub.

He awoke in the morning with a massive hard-on, the scent of lilies all around and an empty bed with wet sheets. It was as if the woman of his dreams had been here.

After breakfast, he was bored and pissed. He drove around town looking for the woman. He even went down and checked the lake. No sign of her. Finally he went to the library. Maybe there was a record of her there.

Sondra looked jazzed to see him. "Donny!"

"Sondra," he said, "I can't talk now, I'm on a major story."

"Oh, OK, Donny, is there anything you need?"

"Nah, I've got it," he said.

He wandered the aisles, when he heard the Asian woman giggle. It sounded right behind him and he turned. He saw someone going down the main aisle between the stacks, and he rushed down to the end of shelves to catch up.

He saw *her*, still dressed like yesterday, trailing her finger down the letter M. Entranced he closed on her. She turned down the aisle and he heard a book drop, but when he turned into that aisle, she was gone. A book was lying there, opened to a page.

He walked over and picked the book up carefully to look at it. The Asian woman of his dreams was looking up at him from a black and white photo from 1943. No. It couldn't be. She was *dead*?

According to this, the Japanese woman he had seen had been missing for over fifty years. However, aside from referring to her as 'the Japanese woman', apparently no one had thought to list her name. He had no idea who she was – or had been. He also saw that the pages were wet at the corners, like his magazine had been. What was that about?

He walked over to Sondra, who was at the big librarian's desk. "I need your help. I'm trying to find out about a ghost."

"A ghost? That could be dangerous, Donny."

"Whatever, do you know what I'm talking about or not?"

"Yes, Donny, but I have to warn you. Anyone who has seen that ghost dies mysteriously. I really hope—"

"Enough, what do you know about the ghost?"

Sondra sighed and rubbed her forehead. "She's supposed to be a Japanese woman that some men here killed. It's just rumors that it even happened at all, other people say she and her husband just left. Anyhow, the men were supposed to have thrown her in the lake, and now they say she haunts the area. But no woman has ever seen her, only men."

"So she's in the lake?" he asked.

"I don't know, that's the rumor. Gee, Donny, I really liked coming over last night. I have lunch in twenty minutes if you want to go spend some time together."

"Sorry, Sondra, I have to file a story. Gotta go." He buzzed her cheek and took off, taking a moment to make sure she was watching him as he went.

Sondra wasn't the sharpest knife in the box, but he liked them dumb and complacent. When they were smart, they stole your money and screwed you over but good. He shot a gun salute at her and headed out. This time Donny Driscole would be the one doing the screwing. And they'd ask for more.

He drove out to the lake. It had clear brown water, and it reflected the sky. What the hell did anyone come here for, he wondered, it was a large pond filled with bird shit and fish shit. God, he really hated this place. But with the housing slump he couldn't afford to sell Auntie May's lakeside dump, and unless his ex died, he couldn't move back into his old place.

He looked out at the lake, chewing on peppermint bubble gum and taking a pull off a flask of whiskey. "Come on, honey," he said to the water, "I'm here now, come and get it."

He squinted as a group of birds took flight. No ghost. "I haven't got all day, honey, front and center," he said.

Suddenly his car alarm went off, the lights flashing like crazy, the horn beeping. He looked everywhere, but he couldn't see the ghost. But he knew it had been her. He turned off the alarm and spun around happily.

"I'm here whenever you want me, babe. I'll show you a good time. We're perfect for each other. I'm hot, you're hot, no kids, no alimony. Come on baby, let's get it on."

He threw his arms out and fell down on the grass, hoping the ghost would climb on and thrill him like no human woman had ever done. He

heard some water splash and sat up. Two little boys in a dinghy were giggling.

"Get out of here," he hollered.

"You're funny mister," one said.

He picked up a rock and threw it at them.

"Hey, I'm telling!"

"Shit!" He got into the car and drove off.

That night Sondra came. She was wearing a dinky brown suit, and asked him in a pleasant tone if he wanted to go to the movies.

He didn't let on that he felt she was intruding, just brought her inside, took her hair down and had her in front of the fireplace. He'd try to make the ghost jealous.

While he was doing the deed, he saw a light in the mirror above the mantel, but couldn't decide if it was the ghost or something else.

Sondra asked him something.

"Yes," he said absently, rubbing her steady pulse. Oh yah, this one was steady all right, almost no matter what, he never got a rise out of her. It wasn't really cheating if the other person didn't really get into it was it? And was it cheating if the other woman was a ghost? He wondered about Sondra's friend from last night. Maybe he and her and Sondra could make a Donny sandwich. He wondered how to convince Sondra…

"Me too!" Sondra said, burrowing into his neck like an animal.

"What?" he asked nonplussed.

"I love you too," Sondra said and squeezed his cheeks together and kissed his mouth.

Oh shit he thought. For several hours, Sondra blathered on about her hopes and dreams. Fortunately, he dozed for most of it, waking to instruct her to make him some eggs while he took a shower.

When he came out, there was a heart drawn in the condensation and the smell of lilies on the air. He smiled knowingly at himself. This ghost just needed someone to be the boss.

As he watched, a broken line went through the heart so it looked like a broken heart.

"Yah, I'm a real heartbreaker. Come her, honey, let Uncle Donny show you how it's done."

A stack of towels was knocked over and then he felt like the ghost had left. That palpable sensation that someone else was there was gone.

He ate Sondra's eggs, and then turned on the sports recap.

She made moon eyes at him and he fell asleep.

The next few days, he asked around, checked at the library again – even lowered himself to ask the old fart at the book store about the ghost. The old man pretended to know what he was talking about, and then blew smoke up his ass. Fortunately, a grandmother who was there told him to ask at the Farnsworth Old Folks Retirement Center.

He parked his car in front and made his way in, flashing his reporter's credentials. The nurse fawned over him, and led him into a big day room. He listened to old people fart, play hanky-panky with each other and

snore. Finally he came across an old woman who looked at him with wet eyes and pursed her lips when he asked about the ghost.

"Aki Mikumo. That's who it was."

Driscole smiled. Mikumo – no wonder the ghost had pointed to the letter 'M' in the library. She was trying to help him find her. "You knew her?"

"My husband and I knew her and her husband. I don't remember his name. They were relocated here from the west coast, you know, they had Japanese Internment camps.'

"Anyhow, the local mayor lost one of his boys in the South Pacific, and he and his cronies got real bent out of shape. They wanted to get some payback on the Japanese couple. So, they went out there, shot him, burnt the place down and had their way with her. Then they weighted her down with chains and threw her in the lake while she was still alive. She's a ghost now," the old woman said.

"I've seen her," Driscole said.

"Then you're doomed young man. No one but a man sees her, and no man who's seen her lives."

"Whatever," Driscole said, "You wouldn't happen to know where her old place is, would you?"

"Over on Nestle road. It's gone back to the bush now. You won't find much there."

"Thanks," he said.

"No thanks is needed," the old woman said, "Since I'm talking to a dead man, I'm not sure as I did you any favors."

"Yah, well thanks for the concern, but I assure you, I'll live longer than you," Driscole said, and marched off.

Nestle road was a pock-marked goat-lane as far as he was concerned. He found an old homestead, and wondered if that's where the Mikumo's had lived. He pushed through the tall grass, and battered down the pinkened red door that was hanging on the hinges and went in. He stood on the door and took stock.

He hadn't been the first. The place was heavily graffitied, and he was pretty sure that it hadn't been a bear that had taken a shit on the table. He heard rustling in the corner and went to look. A snake slithered through the detritus and beer cans. He went into a room where it looked like there'd been a fire.

He found an old mattress on the floor and laid down on it, wondering if this was where the men had forced themselves on Aki, or whether this was just where some old bum had slept with his dirty ass.

He tried to sleep and fantasize about the ghost, but there was no response. The ghost seemed to be ignoring him.

He took himself out and masturbated, making sure to get it all over the mattress. That seemed to get the ghost's attention. A force seemed to grab him and throw him up against the wall, squeezing him so he couldn't breathe.

He resisted, trying to gain control of the ghost.

It seemed to falter and drift off.

He straightened his clothes and zipped up his pants.

"That's right little lady, let's get something straight. God made woman to serve. It will be your honor to service me. But don't ever try that shit with me again, or I'll cast your tight little ass into Hell. And don't you

doubt me, because I am not afraid of you, the devil or anyone else who wants to play. So deal with it."

He turned and strode off, wiping some cobwebs off his hand onto the curtains by the living room window.

As he walked away through the weed-infested yard, the ghost had a little temper tantrum. She flung the door back up as if to keep him out.

"Knock yourself out," he called back, sticking a stick of peppermint gum in his mouth. "But when I feel like it, I'll be back and that little show of temper won't keep me out."

The wind whistled loudly for a moment and the birds stopped singing. He got into his car and drove off as a sudden storm came up, wind gusting, lightening flashing, wind howling and thunder dashing. He put it up to Aki trying to haunt him, and he felt invigorated by her act. After a while it played out and a steady rain was falling as he pulled up to the house.

Sondra came by that night, and talked to him in hushed tones.

"You need to stop this ghost thing – the ghost is dangerous, maybe 20 men who claimed to have seen her have gone missing or died. You haven't seen her have you? You would tell me right? You know I'm here for you and we'll figure this out?"

Just to see Sondra's face. That's why he did it. Sondra was staring at him all seriously, like a dog that was intent on where the master would throw the stick.

"Yes," he said, "I've seen her."

"Oh my God!" Sondra said, leaping to her feet.

"Sondra, don't take the Lord's name in vain," he said sanctimoniously.

"Sorry," Sondra said, "Donny, this is terrible! What happened?"

"Well," he thought to make Sondra squirm, "The ghost came to me in a dream and had her way with me. Remember when I had you from the rear? That wasn't me."

Her jaw dropped.

"That was the ghost."

Sondra fell to her knees, mouth opening and closing spasmodically.

"Just kidding," he said after all the color had drained from Sondra's face. "No, I saw her by the bookstore. That's all."

"Donny, don't even joke about something like that! That's not funny," she said, and began to cry.

"Hey,hey, hey," Driscole snapped his fingers, "This is about my problems, not yours. So get it together. What do we do?"

Sondra struggled with some with silent internal battle. She seemed to want to say something about her feelings being hurt.

Donny waited to see if she had the guts.

She didn't. She finally regained her composure and it looked as if she was just going to pretend everything was hunky-dory. She had no self-respect.

"I'll do some research. But maybe you should leave town, and get to safety. I have some money saved up, enough for you to get a place, and then I can join you later."

Driscole thought about it. He could take her money and start over somewhere else. Oh, that was an appealing thought. Then he thought of the ghost. He thought of her sweet pert body and her appealing scent. And he thought of owning her and showing her who was boss. He would make it so she couldn't leave him.

He heard himself say, "No, I won't run."

"Oh, Donny, you're so brave!" Sondra clutched him to her.

"I know. Why don't you look into it and see what you can find."

"I will Donny, and trust me, it will be all right."

Sondra did whatever he asked that night. It had been worth it to tell her about the ghost, which he forgot about for a couple of extremely carnal hours. Sometimes Sondra begged him to stop, but he always pretended that he thought she was encouraging him, and she passively gave in and just laid there.

He awoke to the sound of glass breaking and Sondra screaming. The lamps flashed on and off. And an ashtray hit him in the head. He laid back, dazed, as Sondra ran around ducking.

It took him a minute to realize that it was the ghost. She was mad. And then he realized what it meant. It meant the ghost was jealous. He put his hands behind his head and smiled wolfishly.

After Sondra had "documented everything", which meant taking photos of the mess and drawing some extremely primitive diagrams of where everything was and had moved to, she raced off to the library.

In the morning, he went down and got into the boat and paddled out to the center of the lake. He called for the ghost.

"Aki, I'm here. Come on honey, I know you're mad at me and I want to make-up. Come on sweetie."

Suddenly the boat capsized, sending him under. He popped up, but found it impossible to right the boat. He felt a hand on his dick.

He was suddenly pulled under and came up sputtering. There it was, fingers trailing along his buttocks. Then there was a lusty pinch.

He tried to turn, to see where the ghost was, but there was no one. There was a playful tug and he went under the water again.

He felt a hand grab onto his hair and pull him up. He came out of the water screaming, looking into a matronly face.

"It's all right, I've got you mister," the woman said. "All right girls, help me get him up."

He struggled to get out of the water, and an all girl club of elementary school kids got him on board, before the little girls screamed and slapped their hands over their eyes.

"His thing, his thing, I saw his thing!" one little girl hollered, laughing and pointing.

Shocked, Driscole looked down and saw he was nude from the waist down.

"Mister, where are your pants?" the woman asked incensed. She yanked off her jacket and threw it over him. "Cover yourself," she said in disgust.

"Mrs. Walton, why does he have all that hair? My brother doesn't have hair."

Mrs. Walton shushed the girl and made them all row madly to the shore.

Driscole tuned out the arguments and whispering taking place around him, and shivered with delight as he heard the ghost chuckle near his ear. He tried not to get excited, because, God, a hard-on would be tough to explain to the angry looking woman sitting in the bow of the boat.

The sheriff didn't think it was funny. He couldn't decide whether or not to cite him, but fortunately, since Driscole didn't have a record of urinating in public or anything worse, and he claimed his pants fell off when he capsized, the sheriff just gave him a warning. By the time he had finished lecturing Driscole, some officers had brought his boat in and tied it to the dock.

Unfortunately, the rumor of him being caught without his pants was all over town by the time he got there to get a paper. The locals had pretty much pinned him as a rapist according to what he overhead them whispering as he walked down the street.

Instead of worshipping him with their eyes, the teens were now regarding him with suspicion and contempt. Apparently their little sisters had already told them what they had seen. Terrified of what would happen if he flirted, he chastely got some groceries and went home. He'd have to wait a bit for this to die down so his reputation came back in one piece.

That night Sondra came over, but refused to come in, standing on the porch instead. He noticed some blood on her bottom lip where he'd bitten it the night before. It gave him a special thrill to mark her like that.

Sondra claimed she wouldn't stay because of some cuts she had gotten from flying glass night and said she was afraid of the ghost, but she was acting skittish, like she was afraid of him. She wouldn't look him in the eye as she apologized, and seemed to want to keep her distance.

Never one to pass up on an opportunity to play a game with the opposite sex, he stepped into her comfort zone.

She backed up.

So he stepped forward.

She stepped back again.

He took her shoulders in his hands and shook them. “Stop! When you’re moving around like that, I can’t concentrate.”

“Sorry,” she said quietly with a little shiver.

So predictable, Driscole thought. He smiled innocently at her, but he was secretly enjoying her discomfort. What a simpleton!

“Well, that’s all I wanted to say. I’m still looking into it and will let you know as soon as I find anything,” she said, stammering.

“All right, but come on, stay with me. You don’t want to leave me all alone out here with the ghost?” he needled. He tried to kiss her and pull her inside to make her stay, but she stumbled away and ran down the stairs into the yard as if she was afraid he would chase her. Ha, he might chase Aki, but never Sondra. She wasn’t worth it.

“I – I have to go.” She unlocked her car and got in, locking the door again. She waved and drove off quickly.

He couldn’t tell who Sondra was more afraid of, him, or the ghost. He had a good laugh at that, and the memory of Sondra’s spooked blue eyes. Had she been shaking? He laughed some more.

Alone in the house without a woman to ease his tension, he was tossing back some Scotch, neat, when he heard ghostly singing. He set down the glass and went out to the porch. He saw a womanly shaped light, and went down to it. The light grew more solid, and seemed to flow around him.

"Aki Mikumo. Be mine," he ordered.

He watched as her hand came out and touched him, and he reached out to take her hand, but he passed out. He awoke the next morning surrounded by fog and the sound of water lapping. He realized he was in the boat in the middle of the lake. His body was covered with bite marks and scratches. Damn, if the ghost had had her way with him, he couldn't even remember it.

He got back to the house and ignored the phone when it rang. The ex's lawyer called. Then his editor. Then Sondra. But he was busy reading some of Auntie May's books looking for a way to bind a ghost. His dead relative had all kinds of books on magic, and he hoped there was something in the disorganized occult mess she had left that would help him.

He was on his twelfth book, when around noon, Sondra apparently had gotten worried enough to come out from town. She totally freaked when she saw what he was reading.

"An occult book? Donny, that stuff is dangerous."

"Only to the weak-minded," he said, "This can't harm me, but it's not much use. You have any books like this at the library?"

"No, Donny, it's forbidden! Stop reading that!" she said, grabbing the musty old book he was looking at and throwing it out into the yard.

"You little bitch," Donny yelled and smacked her.

"Oh!" Sondra fell back on her ass and began to cry, "Oh!" With difficulty, she regained her feet, standing before him and quivering, as if she expected another blow. Then she seemed to muster her courage.

Donny watched as she struggled to make sense of what had happened and to accept it. What a stupid, useless bitch.

"Donny, I love you, but I won't stand by while you play with the devil's own work. It's changing you!" she sobbed, holding her cheek. "Please, put this aside, and we can find out how to fix this together. We need to get a priest and –"

"No," Driscole thundered, "No priests. Now go get that book and bring it back here."

"I won't, Donny, that stuff is poison. I won't do it. I'll do anything you ask but that."

"Then go," he said, pointing.

"Donny I –"

"Go, get out!" he yelled, "I don't want you here!"

With a sob that sounded torn from her body, Sondra ran to her car, and after a few false starts, managed to turn on the ignition and drive away. For some reason Donny felt exhilarated by the fight. Not just that he had won, but that when Sondra had left she was crying as if her heart was broken. He smiled. He liked the feeling he was enjoying. It felt like power.

He walked over to where the book was in the yard, and he saw that it was lying open. Touching it, he felt that the corners were wet and he realized that the book had been opened to a specific page by the ghost.

Looking, he saw what it said. He felt a sort of electric shock and his heart started thumping quickly. It was the spell he needed. He rushed into the house to make his preparations. He would have her now. Aki Mikumko's ass was his.

After a long night of worrying Sondra arrived the next morning. The front door of the house was open and she let herself in.

"Donny?"

There was no answer. Donny wasn't in the house. His car keys were still in the bowl, and his car was still in driveway. The closets were full of his clothes. When she finally got the sheriff to come out and look, they found his boat in the middle of the lake, Donny's press pass floating in a small puddle of water in the bottom. Donny Driscole was never seen again.

13:13

> The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter. ~ *Revelation 8:11*

Lauren Banks squeezed the back of her neck beneath her Grace Kelly bun. She was tense, tired and afraid. She'd been looking for Caitlin now for a week and there was no sign of her sister anywhere. She leaned her head back against the wall of BART and hoped the lead she had gotten would pay-off. Some homeless man had, after she had given him twenty bucks, told her that Caitlin was in the Tenderloin. She could only hope.

She dozed, flashing back to that time when they were little girls spraying each other with the garden hose. Then their big Labrador had run up and grabbed the hose, spraying each of them as he ran around with it in his mouth. Jostled by the slowing of the subway, she got up and filed out with the rest of the people.

She knew if she headed up O'Farrell from Market Street it would take her right where she was going. She just hoped she could find Caitlin and

take her home, tell her that mom didn't mean those things and that dad would forgive her. It was getting dark, and her pale khakis and red and white sweater stood out in the darkness. Men eyed her appreciatively. She stilled her instincts to run in the opposite direction and pressed on.

She had walked a few blocks when she felt her arm grabbed. A powerful person spun her around and a second person grabbed her large purse.

"Let me go!" she hollered. Down the way, on the other side of the street, a group of people stood and stared, cat-calling and laughing.

"Help me!" she yelled, but they only laughed louder.

Her attackers pushed her down and kicked her, leaving her breathless and dizzy. The contents of her purse lay around her, cell phone, Mp3 player and wallet gone. She gingerly touched the palms of her hands, which were bloody from where she had fallen on the pavement.

She noticed black running shoe clad feet step up. A moment later, a tall burly white guy leaned down with a smile. He had on dark glasses, so she couldn't see his eyes, but he seemed courteous enough. He held out his hand.

"You all right?" he asked.

"They robbed me," she said with a sob, too frazzled to think.

After a moment, he withdrew his hand. "I can see that. It's just stuff." He nudged her belongings with his foot.

"This your sister?" he said, picking up Caitlin's photograph.

Lauren had been flashing it to anyone who would stop long enough to look. She sniffed and nodded.

"I can see the resemblance." He leaned down and helped her put her stuff into her purse, then took her elbow and helped her get up.

He didn't let go. She looked up and his mouth fastened onto hers. She felt a burning sting and he stepped away as she cried out in pain.

"You'll be OK, now. I've marked you. No one will bother you. Good luck finding your sister," he said and walked away.

Gross, she thought, and way too forward. He wasn't bad looking, but God, what was he, some kind of rapist?

Her mouth felt puffy where his lips had touched hers. She looked at where that group of people had been, but noticed they were gone. She looked back towards where the man was walking, but he was gone too. The street was deserted and it was dark. Her courage failed her, and on unsteady knees she hurriedly made her way out of the Tenderloin.

The little pit hotel she was rooming at while she looked for her sister begged for a health inspection or a burning. The man playing harmonica who usually grabbed her ass when she went by looked up from where he was seated on the bottom step. He seemed startled. He stood and slowly backed away.

Curiosity got the better of her. "What?"

He shook his head and ran out the door, nostrils flaring.

She made her way up to her room

She turned on the light, and saw fleet six-footed shadows dodge under the bed. She made her way into the closet-sized bathroom and looked in the mirror. Her lip was puffy as if she had been stung by a bee. Now that she thought of it, it felt like she had been stung by a bee.

She flung herself onto the bed and wished the room had a TV. She heard people outside playing drums on empty white hardware store barrels, and surprisingly she dozed off. She awoke feeling hungry and reached for her hair pins.

As she looked into the narrow tarnished mirror in the bathroom, she thought she heard something and froze. There it was again. It sounded like someone breathing. Could someone be watching her through a pinhole somewhere? The exact same thing had happened in Jr. High, when the boys had drilled a hole through their locker room into the girls', but she had a feeling that if an adult had done the same thing, he would be slightly more dangerous.

Carefully, she backed out of the room and ran into the hotel hallway. It was empty. She made her way to the payphone in the lobby to call her mother and ask for her to wire some money. She also belatedly called the bank and credit card companies. Stupid, she should have called to report she'd been robbed earlier, but she'd been so tired.

She walked down Market towards the Western Union, and felt alarmed, like she had something under her skin. It took her a minute to realize what it was. It felt like someone was following her.

After what happened today, she couldn't afford to take any chances. She turned around abruptly hoping to startle anyone who was too close. She was unprepared though, for the reality as she met the sinister black eyes of the man in front of her. She couldn't see the whites of his eyes. He smiled. Just what was she supposed to do when she found someone on her tail? What was wrong with his eyes? She froze.

He hit her and reached out as she fell. Before he laid a hand on her, the big man from the Tenderloin seemed to come out of nowhere. He grabbed the other man and shoved so hard the other man seemed to fly back. The other man hit him. He hit back. She fell, hitting her head.

Stunned, she lay there. After a moment, she jerkily regained her feet and ran, dodging into a donut store. She watched as the grotesque shadows of the two men fighting came together quickly, as if they were speeded up on film.

She thought she knew now where the sound of breathing had come from. Her attacker must have been the heavy breather and he probably had followed her from the hotel. She was terrified and couldn't stop shaking at the idea that he would come for her. As she watched, a spray of something erupted from one man. She shivered at the idea that the last man standing *wouldn't* be her savior from earlier that day.

Overcome with relief, and suddenly weak, she began to fall as the big man from the Tenderloin came into the shop and she had to grab the window ledge to stay standing up. She giggled as she noticed the man still wore his sunglasses. He grabbed the lapels of her coat and swept her up with a hand under her knee, carrying her out into the darkness.

She must have passed out, because she awoke on a hard-armed sofa, as her savior cleaned the pieces to a very old gun.

"Water?" he asked after he sighted down the barrel.

She nodded, afraid. What if he hurt her? She looked around and saw that the walls were covered with an unusual, papery gray wallpaper. She felt dizzy again, and noticed a strange odor in the air. It seemed stronger in the air around him.

He set the barrel down and went into another room. Curious, she stood and carefully made her way to the wall. She noticed that the wall also emitted a strange smell. Gingerly, she peeled a piece back. Underneath was a worm-riddled sort of glue or resin. She stumbled back in horror, and ran into someone standing behind her.

Turning, she looked up. It was the big man. He set the glass of water he was holding down.

"It's time," he said.

"For what?" she said in a quavering voice. Her words were high-pitched with anxiety.

He didn't answer, simply picking her up and throwing her over his shoulder. She pummeled him with her fists, and kicked with her feet, but he ignored her. She thought he was going to take her into the bedroom, but he went out into the hall of what looked like an apartment building. She thought she saw someone crawl across the wall, but surely she was imagining things in her terror.

They got into an elevator and he pushed the button for the basement. The elevator made a stop and some other people got on. They didn't seem at all worried that the Big Man was kidnapping her, and ignored her when she begged for help.

The elevator stopped and they got out. He carried her through a stygian darkness. Then he set her down, and pushed her onto her back. Was he going to rape her? She rolled onto her knees and jumped to her feet as she heard a clanking sound and a squeak. She saw him remove a large key from a barred iron door.

Looking down, she saw a cement floor, and more of the dark brown resin went up and down one of the walls in here. She swore she saw something crawling around beneath the surface and vowed not to touch it. She noticed there were bars on the remaining three walls. The metal was rusted, and looked old, like it had been there for a while.

"Please," she heard herself say, "Let me out."

"I'll check on you later," he said, pocketing the key and leaving. She noticed that the light was slightly orange, and the air was hot and humid. She heard whirring sounds, and as she watched, the big man stopped and talked to someone else. They seemed to communicate with weird clicking sounds.

She couldn't stop shaking, and finally collapsed against the floor. It all hit her at once. The big man, all the people she saw here, they weren't human. She began to cry piteously. No one tried to stop her. Finally she stopped, head feeling swollen, nose burning and so thirsty she couldn't swallow.

She heard a sound and stood so she could look out the front of the cell. Whatever was happening, if they were coming for her, she'd meet them on her feet. She could at least give them a good fight for their money. Instead, she saw a crowd of these – things – against the opposite wall. Each had on dark glasses, and was watching as a slight, grossly fat figure was wheeled into the room on a gurney.

Lauren stilled. Something about the figure seemed familiar. But no, it couldn't be. Caitlin?

"Caitlin?" she whispered.

The woman on the gurney whimpered.

Lauren thought she would faint again. It was Caitlin's voice. But what had they done to her? Lauren steeled herself to look out through the bars. It *was* Caitlin!

"Caitlin?" she called, "Caitlin, I'm here."

"Lauren? Lauren *help* me!" her younger sister wailed.

"You, someone, we'll pay, we'll pay whatever you want," Lauren yelled desperately, "Just stop this!"

No one answered.

Lauren's eyes widened as she watched them pull the blanket off her naked sister. She became hoarse screaming and swearing, kicking the door fruitlessly, begging the creatures for mercy as her sister died an unimaginably horrific death. The creatures seemed unmoved, uncaring and unperturbed y the loss of life or by the mess they methodically cleaned up.

She sat for a time; she didn't know how long. It was as if she was outside her body looking down at herself huddled in the cell. She didn't want to think that the sights she had seen, the death of her sister. She wanted her

own kidnapping to have happened to someone else. Then it was like something happened to bring her back to the present. In a rush she suddenly didn't feel numb anymore, just sick and weak, sore and uneasy.

She wiped her sweater over her mouth, and turned to look at the cement wall. It was gross, but she had to see if she could get through it. She had to get out of here. Some very calm, very logical part of her knew her fate now if she didn't escape. What had happened to her sister – they were going to do that to her, too.

She realized she was making strange groaning sounds as the horror of it left her filled with an animal fear. Mindlessly she started kicking the resin-coated wall. Again. And again. Was she making any progress? She couldn't tell.

She screamed as she noticed tiny white insects streaming out from a break in the resin. They moved in a flood over her shoes as she stomped and screamed, trying to get them off her.

It didn't stop them, and they bit into her skin above and below her clothes. A sweet taste entered her mouth and her eyelids grew heavy. She realized that the insects had drugged her somehow.

She fell again, this time on her hands and knees, but the pain didn't register. She watched as the world revolved in slow motion and she fell onto her back. The big man leaned down, unsmiling. She saw her face reflected in his dark glasses. Angry, she reached up and slapped them away with the last of her strength.

Black eyes. He had black eyes. They were all pupil, like the man who had attacked her earlier on Market Street. Had that fight been a set-up allowing her "savior" from the Tenderloin to win her over so she would go with him willingly, thus avoiding attracting the attention of the authorities? She had no way of knowing. She only knew she had trusted him and hadn't resisted when he carried her off.

The big man picked her up and held her as if she weighed no more than a child. He laid her on the ground in front of an Asian woman who

seemed to evaluate her. The two of them had a conversation by making clicking sounds out of their throats.

The Asian felt Lauren's skin. She clicked something, and the big man reached down and pulled off Lauren's sweater. The Asian ran her hand over Lauren's stomach, tapping here and there. Then she smiled and opened her arms wide to the big man. He jumped over Lauren and sank to his knees in front of the woman. She enfolded him in her arms. The drug coursing through Lauren's system was too much. She lost consciousness.

She awoke to find herself nude and bound in a spread-eagled pose, covered with a grayish blue pearlescent powder. She was sure it had chemicals in it, because it made her skin feel tight and itchy.

The Asian woman Lauren had seen before detached from a shadow along the wall. She looked impossibly tall to Lauren. She sauntered toward Lauren, arrogance and confidence oozing out of every step, and other people began to come from where they too were hiding in the shadows. They were clapping.

The woman turned towards her audience and stretched her arms into a 'V'. Her cloak fell off. She was also naked. The clapping erupted into cheers, and there was a cacophonous sound of clicking and whirring. Lauren noticed the word 'Queen' tattooed vertically in Kanji-like writing down the spine of the woman's lower back.

Unfortunately, Lauren seemed like she had lost herself somewhere. She couldn't find the will to fight the straps binding her. She tried to blank her mind of the horror around her. The horror that was happening to her.

She thought of Caitlin and the garden hose. The naughty dog. She felt the cool skin of the woman as she straddled Lauren. She thought of the cool water spraying over them. The heat of the summer sun. The woman bit down on her breast and Lauren felt the sting. Something was deposited subcutaneously. Instead, she thought of the blue sky overhead, and the white fluffy cumulous clouds.

The Queen turned then and forced Lauren's mouth open, vomiting some kind of yellow ochre into Lauren's mouth. Lauren swallowed, choking, coughing. The dream was gone, and she was left looking into the black alien eyes of the Queen.

Lauren could feel the liquid in her hair, and coughing again, felt it bubbling in her lungs. She looked down and saw the mass in her right breast travel down until it stopped in her abdomen above her belly button. The crowd really was beset with excitement then, and it whirred and buzzed. The wasp people seemed to bounce off the walls and chitter in glee.

Lauren was never alone after that. Was it days? Weeks? She didn't know. They didn't talk to her, and never answered questions. They kept her clean by nibbling her flesh and consuming her waste and turning it into the powder they kept her coated in. The coating was her only clothes and only blanket. They kept her naked otherwise so that they could monitor her.

She learned to eat what they gave her, because when she refused, the Queen would come and vomit into her mouth. She spent as much time as possible dreaming. Thinking of seeing Caitlin again when she died was some comfort.

She tried not to think of her mom and dad, and what the loss of both their daughters would do to them; it hurt too much. But the thought of the death that awaited her often left her moaning and sobbing as if she was a crazy person. The wasp people would come then and consume her tears as if they were a special nectar.

One day, Lauren woke out of her stupor. She heard explosions. Gunfire. Suddenly, the big man came into the room and began releasing her. Lauren was so weak though, she couldn't even lift her arms and legs, let alone escape.

She coughed as she tried to find her voice. Finally, she let out a rusty sounding yell. The big man ignored her.

She forced herself to articulate. "I'm in here!" she yelled, "Help, they're keeping me a prisoner!"

The big man punched her in the face. She tasted blood in her mouth and shut-up. Her stomach felt huge and leaned to the side as he carefully picked her up. He began walking when a gunshot rang out and his head exploded. She fell with him: weak, she lay tangled with the dead thing as men dressed in tactical uniforms cleared the room.

Eventually she found herself in an ambulance. She didn't even cry out when they put in an IV, she was so relieved. Tears of thankfulness streamed from beneath her eyelids.

"Is she pregnant?" Lauren heard a woman say from up in the front.

"I'll check," the EMT said.

Lauren opened her mouth to answer, but he pulled down the blanket and looked. Then he put on a glove and touched the large lump in her belly. It seemed to squirm away from his touch.

"Definitely, yes Ma'am," he said leaning up to talk to the woman in the front. He had forgotten to cover her naked body. Lauren reached for the blanket and was startled to feel that her wrists were bound. She kicked her feet and found her ankles were also bound.

"No, I'm not dangerous," she whimpered, "Let me go."

"Calm down," the EMT said. "We're almost there."

Lauren obeyed, because he covered her up again. She didn't want them to think she was hostile. What if they thought she was one of those things? She didn't know what to do. She had to try to think, she had to think of how to tell them what had happened.

She felt dizzy as the parasites inside her seemed to writhe and tumble under her flesh. Soon the ambulance stopped moving. The EMTs wheeled

her out the door. She shivered as she felt rain on her face, and worried that they would spill her onto the ground.

As they wheeled her along, she noticed a sign. It said “DARPA”.

“What’s that mean?” she asked.

“What?” Lauren looked and saw the woman from the front. The woman was older, and had short white hair. She looked down at Lauren from where she was walking beside the gurney.

“That sign, what’s DARPA?”

“It’s where you are, dear. We’re at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.”

“What? I want to go home,” Lauren cried. “I thought I was going home!” She struggled against her restraints and began to cry.

Doctors in lab coats watched as she was wheeled by. Some faces were screwed up in interest, other faces looked disgusted.

“Doctor Wheelan, you better make sure that she does not present a hazard to this facility,” someone ordered. Lauren craned her head. It was a man wearing a military uniform.

“Yes, General, I’ve got it completely in hand. You can rely upon me,” the woman with the white hair saluted. *She* must be Dr. Wheelan.

“Carry on.”

“Yes sir,” Dr. Wheelan said.

"Dr. Wheelan, are you going to take these things out of me?" Lauren asked as they moved her into a more comfortable hospital-style bed.

"Of course dear," Dr. Wheelan said as she scribbled in Lauren's chart.

Orderlies secured Lauren, this time to the bed rails. She reminded herself to remain calm; they probably were just playing it safe. When they saw she was no threat, they would let her go, Lauren was sure of it. After all, they were the US military weren't they? Or were they? She had no idea. Lauren was hungry, tired and confused and her face hurt where she'd been punched.

She looked around. Lauren noticed that three walls were glass and the back wall was covered with switches, buttons, etc. The floor was some kind of metal grating that looked like it was suspended over a second metal floor below it.

"Doctor, I'm cold, can you give me another blanket?" Lauren asked in a small voice.

"Doctor?" she asked again as Dr. Wheelan left the room.

A few seconds later, the automatic door opened, and a young ebony-colored soldier came into the room. He had an armload of blankets, so she was happy to see him. When he covered her, she saw that there was embroidery that said US Marines above his left breast pocket.

The Marine Corps! Lauren was amazed! As a secretary at an accounting firm, this was way out of her scope of reference, but she did know that the Marines where reputable and always helped wherever they could. She relaxed.

"Oh thank you," Lauren cried, "I'm so cold. And I feel so sick. Are they going to help me?"

"Yes ma'am," the soldier said, avoiding looking at Lauren.

"Please, can you tell me your name?"

"Clark," he said in a choked sounding voice as he edged his way toward the door. "I have to go.

"Clark?" she called out. "Clark?"

The door shut with a bang.

Alone but warm, she fell asleep, relieved by the antiseptic smells and very human cleanliness of the place.

They helped her clean up, did tests, x-rays, MRIs, and took all kinds of blood samples. They never turned the lights completely off, so Lauren had to sleep in the semi-dusk, and they said they couldn't move her to a room with a window or give her a TV or radio. Everyone seemed to avoid answering her questions and only Clark would talk to her.

Little by little, everyone who entered the room wore a special suit with a glass face shield 'just in case'. After all, they said reasonably, Lauren didn't want to hurt them, did she? Of course not, Lauren said, you better protect yourselves. From what she didn't know, but she wanted to cooperate fully so they could see that Lauren was on their side and was no one to fear.

Eventually, the staff started wearing full suits with hoses coming out of the helmet. They told her that it was so they could evaluate her properly and safely, because they didn't want Lauren to get sick since she had developed a weakened immune system.

Because of her condition, they'd have to keep her a little longer; they didn't know how long. Of course Lauren said, but she wasn't happy. She tried to put on a brave face though, and stay optimistic, and tried not to cry, because she couldn't even blow her own nose since her hands were buckled down.

"Why is Dr. Wheelan so brusque?" she asked Clark one day.

"She lost her son in the Fort Worth bombings," he answered as he sponged her down. Lauren avoided looking at her stomach. It was so huge, though, it made her back ache constantly.

"Are they going to operate soon?" she asked him, "I feel worse and worse every day."

"Soon," Clark said. He always avoided looking at Lauren's stomach, and he never looked her in the eye.

She wasn't surprised when he stammered good-bye and ran out the door. He did that all the time.

In the control room, Clark approached the Sergeant, a large bald white man from Tennessee. "Sir, I don't feel right about this, sir," he said, saluting sharply.

"You don't make the decisions," the Sarge said, "The people in charge make the decisions."

"Sarge, I don't want to see this," Clark said to his superior officer.

"I'll tell you what son, you don't have to look. Just keep your eyes on the back wall. There," he said pointing, "Do you see that light switch?"

They could see beyond the instruments through the glass into the adjoining room where "the subject" as Dr. Wheelan called her was looking very sad.

Clark looked at the wall near Lauren's head where the Sergeant was pointing. He nodded.

"Just keep your eyes on that," the Sergeant said.

"Yes, sir, but won't there be noise?"

"You can bet on it, Corporal." The Sergeant put a heavy hand on Clark's shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Just remember, this is for the greater good. None of us like it. We just have to get it done."

"Yes sir."

Lauren suddenly screamed. They could all see that her stomach seemed to be bleeding profusely under the blanket.

Everyone in the control room snapped to. Corporal Clark tried hard to ignore the sound of Lauren begging for someone to help her. Dr. Wheelan, already in her clean room suit, hustled into Lauren's room followed by the rest of her containment team.

Two of the scientists swept the blanket off of Lauren. She was naked underneath. She was contorting herself and bowing up off the bed, so they quickly and efficiently strapped her down, putting two straps over her chest and hips. Her enormous abdomen wiggled as if something was in there.

Lauren screamed as her bleeding stomach emitted a burst of blood and a white bloody form oozed out of the hole.

"No," Lauren screamed, "No!"

She screamed louder and more desperately as more of her stomach seemed to turn into a thrashing mass of writhing white forms and gore. The screams were those of someone in anguish, inarticulate, rising and falling on fresh waves of pain, sometimes turning into loud screaming incoherent rants.

Clark was shaking and felt nauseated. He tried to keep his eyes on the light switch. A droplet of sweat ran down his right cheek and his muscles twitched he felt so tense. Clark kept his eyes on the light switch, but he

couldn't stop shaking as the woman's moans and cries of distress echoed through the control room.

"Please, please, please!" Lauren moaned in a sing-song voice, "Please, please, please."

He could hear Dr. Wheelan talking about how beautiful the creatures were, and how this was going to change everything.

Clark found his eyes glancing again at "the subject". He tried to think of her as that. A stream of blood and bubbles was issuing from Lauren's mouth. He saw a mass of writhing bloody larva. It looked like Lauren's stomach was gone. God, it looked like they had eaten Lauren's stomach. He lurched sideways as his knees went weak.

The Sergeant stepped in front of Clark.

"Look at me, son, look at me," the Sergeant said.

Clark forced his eyes to look into the eyes of his Sergeant through an act of sheer will. He could hear the woman in the other room screaming, a high keening animal shriek that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"Repeat after me, Corporal," the sergeant barked, "Say freedom."

"Freedom," Clark muttered. He felt faint as the woman screamed again, one scream starting right after the last one stopped.

"That's 'Freedom, *sir'*," the Sergeant barked.

"Freedom, *sir*," he said in a louder voice. He tried to concentrate on what the sergeant was saying, tried not to hear the woman crying in the next room.

"Say it loud, like you mean it. What's it for?" the Sergeant hollered.

"Freedom," Clark yelled.

"That's right, corporal," the Sergeant said, "Now stand your post," the Sarge said slapping him on the back.

"Yes, sir," Corporal Clark saluted.

Adrenaline coursed through Clark's veins as if he were in combat. He tried to maintain himself, to get into the right frame of mind. He was on the side of right. They didn't want to do this, no one did, but circumstances dictated that they put aside their personal feelings and do the hard work. The *necessary* work.

That's what he kept telling himself. Meeting his sergeant's stern eyes, he decided to put this event out of his mind. What he thought wouldn't make any difference anyhow. Clark was angry. He was angry at the woman for getting infected like that. He hoped she died soon.

When next Clark glanced at Lauren it was because he realized that the sounds she was making were growing quieter. Her struggles were faint and feeble. Clark saw now that she was as good as dead. One more soldier for the cause, Dr. Wheelan had told them. She had said to appreciate Lauren's sacrifice and to make the most of it.

Soon it was silent except for the sound of those sticky, bloody little worms turning Lauren into a skeleton. Detached, Clark saw that the little white bodies were now pinkish, as if the human flesh they had just eaten had changed their color from albino white to salmon colored.

"All right, Dr. Wheelan," one of the scientists said into the radio, "It's over," he said in a not too steady voice. He cleared his throat. "Time of death is 13:13."

"Whew, look at these beauties!" Dr. Wheelan said kneeling next to one of the large grubs that had fallen off the bed.

"Dr. Wheelan, let's get one for posterity," one of the other scientists said holding up a camera.

Wheelan got into a pose, getting out a specimen bin and holding the tongs out for a live capture as the photo was taken. She had a big grin on her face.

Bending to look at the tubby pinkish worm with lidless black eyes before her, shivered, and touched in gently with the tongs. It hissed.

"These things are appalling," she said as if she was talking quietly to herself, her chin trembling now that the camera was pointed elsewhere. "But what else can we do?"

All Fall Down

Ed Garcia tossed back his tequila and bit into his wedge of lime. Mr. Tuttle did the same. Both men laughed, but it was obvious that they were feeling each other out.

"They say you used to run the streets when you were young. That you'd still do anything if the money was right," Mr. Tuttle said.

"That was before the Army," Ed pointed out reasonably.

"But you've been discharged. Honorably, congratulations. And you've gotten married and have a son." Mr. Tuttle beckoned for the severely outfitted waiter to bring another round. "But I've heard since then that married life is not all bliss."

"What are you saying?" Ed asked.

Mr. Tuttle threw back his shot and indicated that Ed should do the same. Ed did.

"Well," Mr. Tuttle went on finally, "I hear that a series of misfortunes has hit your family and hit them hard. I understand your son has leukemia."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Ed asked. He needed to maintain his cool. Mr. Tuttle had a reputation for making sure people gave him proper respect or that they would pay – and not in the courts. But he didn't like the tubby little man getting in his business, and he didn't like talking about his son with someone who was known to be not only ruthless, but bloodthirsty.

"Well, medical bills are expensive. And since you lost your job you don't have medical insurance, how much longer do you think you can keep this going?"

"And?" Ed asked, hoping Mr. Tuttle would get to the point but not wanting to admit to Tuttle that he was already deep in the hole – so deep they would be homeless soon.

"You need money." He paused, his shrewd eyes in their fleshy pockets were cold and cunning. "And I need something you can get for me."

"Look man, I'm not into that stuff anymore."

"There won't be any killing, I just need you to go down south of the border and acquire a little collectible for me. That's it."

"And for how much?"

"Five million US."

"The American dollar is worth shit now."

"All right, five million Euros and I'll gift you with the paper to your house."

"Throw in medical insurance for me and my family, get me the details and I'll think about it."

"I'll throw in medical insurance, but no details until you're in. That's on a need to know basis. You're all in – or you're all out."

Ed tried to think if there was any other way. Mr. Tuttle's mission would probably be dangerous. But he couldn't really see any other option.

"If something happens to me, my widow would get all the money and stuff," Ed said.

"As long as I get my item, you can have the money and it will go to anyone you transfer it to."

"I want half up front, the papers to my house and the insurance policy before I go."

Mr. Tuttle snapped open his sleek little red cell phone and made some phone calls. Before Ed left the bar that evening, two and a half million Euros – three and a half million American dollars after the currency was exchanged – mortgage payment in a separate envelope and new insurance policy for himself, his wife and child in hand, he went home and started packing.

His wife was at the hospital. He didn't know what to tell her. He knew she would worry, and argue. She would try to convince him that there was another way, a better option, but he knew there wasn't. He put the money, insurance and mortgage information in an old suitcase and left it on the bed.

He uncomfortably started writing a note, but it was too detailed. He tried another but the tone was wrong. Finally he just wrote, “Called away on business. Will call. Love, Ed.” Ducking out like this and leaving a note was the best option.

He caught a red-eye down to Mazatlan and checked into a humid hotel that was old and crumbling in some spots, and being reconstructed in others. Its overgrown garden that smelled of fecund growth and decomposition was far from the carefully tended gardens of the tourist paradises on the beaches. It suited him well. He lay down to get some sleep; someone was supposed to come by with the details and a gun later.

He awoke and neatly trimmed his mustache, showered and dressed in a guayabera shirt and cotton pants so he fit in with the locals. He opened the door when someone knocked and said the code phrase, ‘Tiny Pinata’, correctly. A well tanned man walked in, tall, and blonde with cold gray eyes. A scar down one side of his face turned his mouth into a permanent snarl. Ed instantly disliked him.

The man threw down a manila envelope on the little rickety table in the room, took out an automatic pistol and a box of bullets put them down next to it, then wandered over to the window where he lit a cigarette and began to smoke.

“Do you mind?” Ed asked, disgusted.

“No,” the man said, and he continued to smoke.

“Shit heel,” Ed said.

Blondie just smiled and exhaled through his nostrils.

Ed checked the gun. It was an old SIG-Sauer P-229. It was scratched up, but looked well-cleaned, there were no numbers on it but it seemed operational. He checked the bullets, the box was full. Finally he opened the envelope. Immediately a bunch of loose photographs fell out, and spilled across his lap and the floor.

"Shit," Ed said, and got down to collect them up. "Would it have killed you to use a rubber band?" he asked.

"Yes," the blond man said.

Ed shook his head and sat back down. The paper was short and terse. There was some strange local monastery that wasn't Catholic, and they had a fist-sized stone idol that Mr. Tuttle wanted. It looked to Ed like a butt-plug, except with pumpkin seed eyes and an afro.

The photographs showed more pictures of the idol, where it was hidden and what its priests looked like. Instantly Ed thought of the Heaven's Gate Cult, only these folks here were dressed in priest's cassocks.

"Who are these people, some kind of cult?"

"Yes," blondie said.

"If you could get this close to get pictures, why not just take it?"

"They were getting suspicious."

"So an infiltration is out?"

"Yes, it's a straight-up B&E."

He read over some of the other notes. Apparently Los Sacerdotes, or The Priests as they called themselves, had a very rigid schedule of rituals, martial practices and housework. Locals were so superstitious, they would bring food and money to Los Sacerdotes, and in return have blessings given or curses removed. Some of the locals even thought the cultists could tell the future. Los Sacerdotes rarely left the compound and didn't even have to, unless they were venturing forth on some head-hunting mission.

"Can I call if I need you?"

"Leave a message for me here," the blond man said scribbling something in a small wire-bound notebook. He ripped it out and handed it to Ed. "But don't bother me unless it's important," he warned.

"All right," Ed said. He saw the blond man out, put on his straw hat and went and got something to eat. He thought about calling his wife. Then he thought better of it. The less she was involved, the better, and she always had a way of getting him to say more than he should.

For the next few days, he checked out the town and poked around, trying to find out about Los Sacerdotes. Apparently they had some kind of weird prophecy that some time in the next year the second-coming would occur. They also felt that the idol would bring this about in some way, and apparently it was their most sacred of objects.

Like any religious fanatics, they were sexually chaste and militant, and kept their order going by taking in street kids and brainwashing them to think like them. They only left the compound in groups of two, and there were almost always eight or more people on-site at all times. More worrisome, they carried machetes and had a guard go around every twenty minutes night or day. According to one woman, she had seen a couple of them buying guns.

It took longer than he would have liked, but finally with meticulous and discreet recon, Ed developed a plan. After dinner, when the cultists went in for prayers, only one person would be on patrol and everyone else would be in the chapel. Ed would get the idol then.

That night, when it was getting dark, he snuck through a neighbor's backyard and got into position in a little banana tree grove up the hill a ways above the walls of the Los Sacredotes complex. He looked down on the compound.

It was shoehorned into the side of the hill, and narrow beaten mud paths wound between the buildings. It had rustic dorms, an army tent covered cafeteria, a chapel, an outdoor fighting ring in the interior mud-pan

courtyard, classrooms and an office. Goats and fowl roamed freely. Blue rain buckets were set-out to catch any moisture that fell from the sky. It looked and smelled like a slum.

He waited for one of the cultists to ring his hand bell, which was the call to prayer. Soon their strange oily chanting started. To Ed, it sounded like mumbo jumbo. But it did indicate it was almost time to move, and he got into position.

After the guard, who wore a priest's robe and sandals and held a machete like a guy in some Warner Brothers Cartoon had passed, Ed slid a rope down and crept over the wall. He left the rope for when he would escape. Then he made his way behind a wood pile. He skipped around to the door next to it when he was sure no one would see him. The office lay within.

Finally, when he was sure he had been unnoticed he walked in through the unlocked office door and started looking at the shelves that contained all sorts of curios. After a moment of searching, he came across what he was looking for. The idol was soon wrapped and in his satchel. As he stood-up and stepped back, he felt something underfoot and sprang forward. A goose honked loudly and bit him.

He stifled a cry of pain, and tried to jog around it. It followed him and bit him again.

He went to kick it, when he heard someone say, "Stop there, or I'll cut off your head."

Turning, he saw the guard, holding the machete over his head with both hands.

He threw a chair at the man and dodged around him as he fell. The guard grabbed Ed's foot, and Ed fell hard on his knees. The guard went for the grand slam with the blade, and Ed kicked him in the stomach.

The guard coughed and fell back. Ed leapt forward and twisted his arm, grabbed the machete and chopped his neck. The guard coughed and choked, letting out a truncated scream of rage and pain, and Ed broke his neck. He struggled for breath. The blood had gotten on his wrists above his black leather gloves.

The chanting had stopped. Ed heard someone say, “What was that?” and he ran.

Almost immediately he heard a group of people start yelling, and then the sound of racing footsteps. He climbed the wall like a monkey and pulled the rope back with him. He dropped and raced through the banana grove, trying to get as much lead time as he could.

He got to the street, when he was knocked down and his shoulder felt strangely numb. His hand came away wet with blood. Then he heard several more gunshots and realized he’d been shot. He ran and got into his car, pulling away and driving like a fanatic to put them behind him.

Finally, after he was sure no one was following him, he made his way back to the hotel and parked the car on the street. He was walking down the sidewalk to the entrance when he saw a couple of local police talking to the manager. They were showing her a photograph and asking questions. It wasn’t about him, but there was no way he could get past them while he was bleeding and dressed in fatigues like a mercenary.

He dropped out of sight to lay low. His shoulder was just creased by the bullet, but it burnt with an unholy throbbing. Then he checked to make sure he had the idol. He did, and it was undamaged. Phew! Soon the rest of the cash would be his.

Apparently the drop off of adrenalin and the relentless pain got to him, because he dozed off. He woke up when someone sprayed him in the face with a garden hose, calling him names and swearing at him. The man who owned the yard said Ed was trespassing and swore he would call the police if Ed didn’t leave.

Ed stumbled to his feet, murmuring apologies, and went back down to the street. Two robed figures by his car gave him pause. Los Sacerdotes had found him. With no other option, he hurried back into the man's yard. The man swore at him and sprayed him again with the hose. Ed leapt the slippery fence in front of him to get onto the street behind it.

He ran down a narrow lane across the way and stole an old rusty bicycle that was leaning there. He coasted down a hill and pedaled towards the tourist section. When he found a likely enough place, he went in.

It was nice, the kind of place a young but poor honeymooner might go to. It wasn't a resort, but it was pretty. The manager tried to refuse Ed service because he was bloody. Ed lied and said he was almost hit by a truck and fell off his bike. The manager sent up his wife, who cleaned Ed up and gave him some painkillers.

Once she had gone, he called the blond man and left a message that he'd gotten the idol, but he'd had to move. He would meet the blond man at a seashell tourist shop in the Central Market at 4:00 PM and give him the statue. Then Ed would go home.

He fell asleep after taking some Tylenol and fell into a dream so vivid it was like a fever nightmare. A horse was running down the beach, and began stomping his wife, hooves flailing at her, dashing in her face until she lay on the beach, her blood swirling in the surf.

Breathing heavily, feeling sick, he awoke and called home with trembling fingers. He heard her on the answering machine, but she didn't answer. She must not be there. Probably still at the hospital. He laid back, heart pounding, and stared at the ceiling. After a long time, he slept.

He awoke to a loud thumping on the door. It was still dark. A police officer stood there, and shone a light in his eyes.

"Who are you?" the officer asked.

"Juan Morales," Ed said, lying.

"Did you hear any noise in the last hour?"

"No, sir, why do you ask?"

"There've been a couple of murders. The manager and his wife."

"What?"

"Yes, their throats were cut. And there was a warning in their blood to an Ed Garcia. You wouldn't know him would you?"

Ed felt sick. It must be the cultists, and this meant that the cultists knew his name!

"No, no sir, but it sounds bad. Is there anything I can do?" Ed tried to play it cool; he just had to act like a clueless hotel guest.

"Nothing now, but we may come back later if we have any questions. Where are you from did you say?"

"Chihuahua."

"And what are you doing in town?"

"My sister wants me to meet her new boyfriend. We're going to The Angela Peralta Theater tonight."

"OK, well write down your information, we might get back to you. May be just a robbery gone awry, you know there's a rash of these things going on right now. Make sure to keep your valuables safe."

Ed did as the man asked, writing down the address of a guy he knew in Chihuahua who would vouch for him. Then he went back into his room, gathered his things and got out when the cops were busy elsewhere.

He went down to the Market, and lost himself there, eating a hearty breakfast of garlic shrimp. But inside himself, he felt sick, like something was really wrong. Some street kids asked him for some money and he gave it to them.

"Ed Garcia?" one asked.

Startled, he looked up. They smiled at his obvious surprise.

"Bring back The Cabeza De La Estrella or your family will die."

"Wait," Ed called, but the children scampered away, disappearing into the crowd.

So Los Sacerdotes wanted the idol back did they? They even had a dumb name for it, The Star Head in English. Or his family would die. What were the odds they knew his family or could get to them? He knew for a fact that several million dollars was in his house right now, and that another several million would be available by the end of today.

That was more than enough to move his family to safety, hire guards, whatever it took. No, these cultists had lost their bauble, he had it, and he was going to make sure it got to Mr. Tuttle and that he and his family got the rest of their money.

"Excuse me, Mr. Garcia?" The waiter came up to him.

Ed looked up suspiciously.

"You have to go now, or my wife and I will be killed. Please, leave now, or I will shoot you myself." The man showed the butt of a gun under his apron. "Go, go, I will not ask you again."

Ed stood, and moved quickly away, thinking of the inn-keepers that had been killed earlier. Apparently Los Sacerdotes were now threatening any business owners that catered to or helped him. He'd thought "bloodthirsty cult" was an exaggeration, but he could see it was true. Wherever he tried to sit, whatever he tried to buy, he found doors closed to him, he was threatened, and in one place they threw a bucket of fish guts on him.

Tired, reeking of gore and rot, sore and thirsty, he stumbled into the Mazatlan Cathedral, and sat down in the middle of one side of the church. He wanted to make sure no one was going to come up beside him and stick an ice pick in his ear without him noticing as they walked up to him between the benches.

He must have dozed off in the still afternoon heat. He dreamt another fever dream, of blood dripping across the sky, stars spiraling and falling to earth like bombs, and his wife lying in the surf, opening her eyes and begging for his help.

"Senor, no!" he heard someone yell.

He awoke in significant pain, and looking down saw his knife in his hand, where he was using it to cut into his left forearm.

"Senor," the Catholic priest said, "We need to get you to a doctor, but nothing can be as bad as this, not a thing in the world. Please senor, would you like to unburden yourself? Perhaps there is some reason you feel guilty?"

Ed stumbled to his feet, his knife falling from his nerveless fingers. What had come over him? What was he doing? The blood flowed freely, dripping onto the floor in a sickle shaped pattern.

"Please, let me help you senor," the priest implored.

Ed ran away, afraid. He was sweating profusely, although it was cool in the church. Outside, he noticed the sun was almost set. It was the time of

sunset! Shocked, he looked at his watch. It was after five PM. He'd missed his meeting with the blond man. Mr. Tuttle and his people would be looking for him! They would think he had stiffed them.

He walked the streets after that, every step was heavy but unsure, and he kept looking around. It felt like someone was watching him, like he was being followed, and he wondered if he could take off his skin and wash it because it felt so uncomfortably restrictive and irritated.

At one AM, he lay down in a shed by the side of the road, and caught some sleep. He awoke to the satchel strap choking him. He had rolled over and the weight of the idol was strangling him. He readjusted it and sat up to check it.

He felt numb, neither relieved nor happy to see that the idol was still there, intact, and in his possession. Somehow, things had gotten very out of hand. This simple job had stirred up a hornet's nest. Mr. Tuttle would think Ed had double-crossed him now. And now that he thought of it, maybe that was the best option – get the money from someone else and sick Mr. Tuttle and his people as well as the cultists onto the new owner.

He heard a whistling sound and a cane hit him across his back.

"Get, you're causing my pigs to sicken. You are cursed; do not put a curse on my house. Go, get." The old man hit him again and again with the cane, until Ed jogged off. He hitched a ride on a bus and headed to Guadalajara. The bus was crowded, but no one bothered him and he was able to get some sleep.

He got out at the bus station, and made his way to a hotel. He made sure it was air conditioned, and then he put the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door. He ordered out for food, and paid the boy that brought it, then asked him to go get him some clothes and other things. The boy complied, and Ed gave him fat money before the child scampered off.

Then Ed looked in his little book and started calling everyone he knew from the service. He needed to find another big time collector like Mr.

Tuttle, someone bigger, if possible. He fell asleep at dinner watching a talk show with a leg of fried chicken in his hand.

He dreamt of a light chasing him through a thick forest. He ran faster and it moved faster. He slowed and it slowed. He hid and it hovered near him, but out of eyesight. He then felt as if he was drowning in sand, as if he was being buried alive. The light seemed to expand, devouring the forest and turning him into a rain of dust. He snapped awake as the phone on the bedside began ringing.

Heart racing, he considered it. Should he or should he not answer it? Yes, he had put out some feelers. But what if it was the blond man? Ed was apprehensive as he picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mr. Garcia? This is Amy Chang, and I understand you have a very desirable collectible in your possession. I represent an interested party who would be willing to make a generous offer if the item is authenticated."

"It would have to be a generous offer. Say, in the tune of twelve million euros?" Ed went for a high price, suspecting that the collector would bid him down.

"That's a little steep, Mr. Garcia, let's say six million euros."

"That's not gonna cut it," Garcia said even though he was secretly pleased. He couldn't let them think he was passing a problem onto them; he had to make it seem like a real deal. And what could it hurt if he got rich on the side? "Ten million Euros."

"Seven million," Amy said.

"Nine million," Ed countered.

"Eight million," Amy said, "And that's my final offer."

"Sold American," Ed said, "Who is going to authenticate the item?"

"I will."

"When and where should I meet you?" he asked.

"Let's meet at The Rotunda of Illustrious Men, in the city's historic center, tomorrow at three PM."

"That's a little too public, don't you think?"

"No, I don't, and if you have a problem with that, the deal is off. Totally off."

Ed could tell she was serious. Uncomfortable with the meeting place, he nonetheless agreed. "All right."

"OK." Her voice was all business. "I take it you pissed someone off to get this?"

"You could say that."

"Then make sure you're not followed."

"OK. Tomorrow at three." He disconnected.

He hung low, happy that the boy came back to see if he needed anything else. He said yes, and sent him out for some cigars. He'd leave the booze until later to celebrate. He paid the boy a handsome tip, and smoked, something he didn't usually do. His wife would be so pleased about the money, she wouldn't yell at him for this little lapse.

He slept that night, and awoke naked in the shower, holding the idol. He had absolutely no idea what he was doing there or how long he'd been

there. He slipped and fell into the wall as he came out, and almost dropped the idol, but happily didn't. It was safe. He spent the rest of the night smoking and eyeing it suspiciously.

The next day, he scouted out the rotunda for a couple of hours beforehand. It was safe. He was in the clear. He went a little late, after he'd seen a woman in dark glasses with a navy blue checked kerchief on her head go up and sit down. She looked at her watch. She had a large valise sitting next to her. The money? He went up.

She looked at him as he came up.

"Ms. Chang?"

"Yes," she held out her hand. "Mr. Garcia I presume?"

"That's right."

He tried to pull back his hand but she didn't let go.

"Let's not make a scene, Mr. Garcia," she said, standing.

Ed saw that she held a small pistol, blocking the other patron's view with her body.

"Give me the idol or I'll blow your pecker off. Mr. Tuttle said I could do whatever I need to get his idol back."

Wordlessly, Ed handed the satchel containing it over.

"Your passport and shit is in the valise. You have forfeited the rest of your payment, and I would highly suggest you forego any attempts to reclaim it. Mr. White would not understand and would probably kill you."

"Mr. White?" he asked after he swallowed dryly.

"The man with the scar. I highly recommend that you do nothing else to get on his bad side. Mr. White is a very impatient man."

"Of course."

"Take your shit and go."

He picked up the valise and left. He felt lighter somehow, and better. It was too bad about the rest of the money, but he was still alive. That was the main thing. He got back to his hotel, and went through the contents of the valise. His passport, his clothes from the other hotel, a bullet with his name scratched into it.

OK, Ed was sufficiently warned to get the hell out of town. He threw everything into the valise, and opened the door. The young boy that had helped him was standing there.

"Where you going Mr. Man?" he asked in a sing-song voice.

"I'm outta here," Ed said, "Get me a cab and there's five bucks in it for you."

"Your ride is ready, son," a man said stepping into view. A Los Sacerdotes cultist stood there holding a Scorpion SA Vz 68 on him. It looked ancient, with a battered wooden butt stock, but gave every impression of being lethally functional. "Come with me or I'll shoot you."

"Look, I don't have the idol any more," Ed said, "I'm out."

"Well, that's unfortunate for you."

"Look, it was nothing personal, just business," Ed said, "My son is sick, I needed money…"

"We know."

"What do you mean?"

"We have a center for healing at Guadalajara. And we brought your son here. As well as your wife. They are most worried about you."

Ed stumbled back, stunned.

"We told them you sent us, and they came, happily, to do your bidding. They believe we are with the Catholics. Naturally, this guise serves us well."

Ed still couldn't speak. He swallowed. Then he swallowed again. He'd swallowed three times when the cultist spoke again.

"Will you join us son?" the cultist asked in a resonant, pious voice.

Ed went back, past his military training to before. He called on what he'd learned on the streets. Never ever let them see you sweat. Never let them see you care.

"Sure," Ed said, "Let's see, do I have everything? Yep? Let's go." He tried to be nonchalant.

"After you, son."

Ed slipped out. The boy loped along up ahead, keeping watch, but they weren't challenged. The cultist followed behind, silently walking down the hall, all oiled muscle. Soon they went out a side door and into an alley, where an old VW Beetle was parked. He and the cultist got in, and the boy scampered off.

They drove to a place in Zapopan. This compound looked wealthy and permanent like any old country Catholic sanctuary, made of stone with lots of pillars and carved wood. He'd had no idea the cult was so wide-spread.

The brother took him aside and asked him to please have a seat on a wooden bench. Would he care for a refreshment? Something to eat perhaps? The cultist was the picture of sincerity, good humor and hospitality.

It unnerved Ed. "No thanks," he said politely.

"I'll be back soon, just wait here if you please."

"Of course," Ed said, watching as the brother walked away.

Ed noticed that several guards with their compulsory machetes were clocking him. There were five guards within eye and ear-shot. There was no way he was going anywhere.

Some time passed. His body felt leaden, and his mind was exhausted from racing through all of the options. His options were very limited. He did not have a bargaining chip anymore. He had to make a deal with the cultists. He had to get the icon back.

They called for him then. He was welcomed by his wife, who ran into his arms gratefully. She had put on weight with the child, and the stress from the baby's sickness caused her to over-eat, but he anxiously looked over her dear plump body to make sure she hadn't been starved or abused. He was relieved that so far, she seemed unhurt and unharmed.

"Rosa, darling," he murmured into her sweet smelling hair. "Oh, how I missed you."

"Me too," she said, "Why didn't you tell me the Brotherhood would help with Jaime? I was so worried, and when I found the money, I was so

scared something bad had happened to you," she said, her voice harsh with unshed tears.

"It's OK, everything is OK. You just wait here, and I'm going to go over and talk to the brother there. I might have to go again, but you and Jaime are in good hands. All right?"

"All right," Rosa wiped her eyes, "I love you," she kissed him.

He kissed her back. He couldn't imagine being anywhere but in her arms. He had to convince the cultists that he would help them. He had to convince them to let his family go.

He stepped back with a smile, and made his way to the small group of cultists.

"I have a proposition," he said in a low voice. He watched as someone led Rosa out. He waved as she waved good bye.

"And what's that?" the cultist who had kidnapped him asked.

"I'd like to make this right. You see, I wasn't given all the information. And I made a bad call, really, and a lot of people have suffered for that. I feel terrible about it. And I want to make it up to you. Why don't I go, get the artifact back, and give it to you? You keep my wife and son safe until then, and I'll bring you the artifact back and we'll get out of your hair," he said, holding his hands in a placating gesture.

The cultists went over to the side, and caucused. Before long, they returned.

"Your proposition is a fair one, but what of our Brother that you slayed when you took the relic? How will you pay for this crime against Los Sacerdotes?"

"I will gladly pay with my blood," Ed said, sensing this was the only way his family would be freed.

"Then it is agreed upon," the cultist said, holding out his hand.

Ed shook it.

"The woman known as Amy Chang has left the city and is headed for Puerto Vallarta. Go there and await our phone call."

"Of course," Ed said. He knew the audience was over and he left. He walked to a mall, and caught a taxi to the airport. He flew into Puerto Vallarta, and checked into a hotel. He watched TV, killed some beers. Tried not to think of the end. The it. The afterlife. He even lost a few dollars in an illicit poker game. And whenever he wanted to run, he looked at Rosa and Jaime's photo, and he was filled with peace.

He didn't worry about getting in touch with the cultists here. He knew that they somehow would know where he was. Had probably known even as he was studying them back in Mazatlan. The street kids ran for them, and who knew who else helped them out?

Better still, he didn't have any weird dreams. Hadn't had since the idol was given over to Amy Chang. He kept his gun oiled and ready, and stayed close to the phone.

On the sixth day, there was a knock at the door. He opened it. A boy no more than five years old stood there. He shyly handed over a piece of paper and then held out his hand. Ed smiled wryly. Couldn't be too young or shy to be streetwise in Puerto Vallarta Ed guessed, and gave him a tenner.

He read the paper. Amy was staying at a hotel by the beach, and was going to board a cruise ship back to Long Beach tomorrow at noon. That didn't leave him much time. He got his gun and bullets and headed over there.

The hotel was literally across the street from the beach, small, red tiled roof and wrought-iron balconies. He easily climbed up to her balcony and watched her as she did sit-ups like a mad woman. He could see the satchel sitting in a chair by the desk, but he couldn't kill her until he made sure she still had the idol.

"Freeze," he said.

Amy froze. Her legs were very tanned under her shorts. She had a shirt that said Navy on the chest. Ed laughed. It was Army vs. Navy, the traditional contest between the US armed forces.

"That phrase is so over-used," she said.

"I know, but it does the trick," he said, stepping in and staying as far away from her as he could. He flipped the lid of the satchel up. And tried to mask his dismay to see it was empty.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"In there," she said, nodding towards the bathroom.

Ed stepped forward, and looked in, as a Talavera vase hit him upside the head. He turned and fired, and Amy went down holding her stomach.

"Stay there, or I'll kill you," Ed said.

Amy nodded and breathed shallowly and noisily.

Ed looked in the bathroom, but the idol wasn't there.

"Where is it? Where's the icon? There's a lot of you left to shoot up and I still have a full box of bullets, so tell me now, where is it?"

"I gave it to Mr. White," she coughed.

"You what?"

"I gave it to Mr. White. On the road. We were afraid Los Sacerdotes would see us make the exchange, so we made the trade on the road."

"Where's he going? Tell me?" he shoved the gun in her face.

"He's at a hotel down by the beach. He's giving the icon to Mr. Tuttle tomorrow. Let me live, and I'll tell you where. I won't tell anyone, I swear. Look, I need to pay the ransom on my sister. They said this was the only way. I'm sorry," she said, tears falling from her eyes.

"Shit!" Ed said, pacing. He could buy her story, it sounded too true, too believable to be false. "Fine, but I want to know where each of them is staying."

"I only know where Mr. White is staying. Only he knows where Mr. Tuttle is staying. If I tell you that, will you let me go?"

"Yes," he said. His only other option was to kill her. The idea turned his stomach.

She told him where to find the man with the scar and he left her to see to her own medical needs. He couldn't afford to waste time in case she changed her mind and ratted him out. He had to move quickly now, he was running out of time and soon he'd be out of options.

Mr. White's place was a nice cabin. Good for Ed to infiltrate. Ed took a moment to reload his gun, and went in through an open patio side door. He heard someone brushing their teeth. Mr. White? A moment later, he heard a man use the toilet. As he stepped into the room, Ed stepped out. Both exclaimed in shock. The naked man quaking before Ed was *not* Mr. White.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"Trouble," Ed said. It was probably one of the stupidest things that he'd ever said, but he couldn't think. Nothing had prepared him for this. That bitch Amy had given him the wrong address!

The cabin door opened, and Mr. White walked in with a bag of groceries, which he instantly dropped to pull out a gun and level it at Ed. Ed tried to stay calm, but he was really unsure what to do. Good God almighty, this had all gone south.

"Whitey, who is this? Is this one of your little friends?" the quaking man asked.

"Yes, sugar, everything is fine. Why don't you skedaddle into the bathroom until we get this all sorted out."

"Okey-dokey," the man said and jogged off, quietly shutting the door behind him as Ed rapidly turned the gun on Mr. White. The smell of wine filled the air with a drunken aroma; a bottle must have broken when Mr. White dropped his grocery bag.

"What are you doing here?" Mr. White asked pleasantly.

"I need the stone head. They've got my wife and son."

"Fucking Los Sacerdotes. They're fucking mental, you know?" Mr. White asked conversationally.

'Yah," Ed said, trying to breathe steadily. He blinked as sweat fell into his eyes.

"Well, why don't I go over to the desk and get your little head?"

"That'd be great," Ed said.

"OK, I'm just walking. Let's not get excited." Mr. White kept the gun pointed at Ed and Ed kept the gun pointed at Mr. White.

"It's in here," Mr. White said, touching a box with his free hand.

"Show me," Ed said.

"OK," Mr. White said, flipping the lid off and carefully, slowly, pulling out the idol. He turned it to face Ed. "See?"

Ed could indeed see it was the idol, and was so relieved, he relaxed his guard.

The instant his eyes shifted to the idol, as if he had been waiting for that specific moment when Ed would be distracted, Mr. White shot him.

As Ed fell toward the floor, he shot Mr. White.

Or at least, he thought he did. Instead the bullet hit the idol, shattering it into dust. The air was instantly filled with tiny little lights, like a cloud of fireflies, only much smaller, and all moving in every possible direction.

They suddenly swarmed Mr. White. He began to choke and his eyes bulged out until they started bleeding. Then he began to talk, except it didn't sound like Mr. White. It sounded like many voices.

"We are free, free at last. We have waited for millennia. We will now take back this dimension and any that interest us. For we are Legion."

The last thing that Ed knew was that there was a sense a hand had crawled up his neck and was directing him from some painful area inside his brain. Ed saw the room pass by, as if he was walking. Then, from a great distance, as if he was falling away into some deep, dark place, he saw Mr. White's boyfriend screaming in the bathroom and trying to hold up his hands in self defense. And then Ed remembered no more.