

DEAN KOONTZ



The

Odd Thomas
SERIES



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KOONTZ

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Dean Koontz

Odd Thomas

Forever Odd

Brother Odd

Odd Hours



Bantam Books

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ODD
THOMAS

B a n t a m B o o k s

ODD THOMAS
A Bantam Book

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To the Old Girls:

Mary Crowe, Gerda Koontz,

Vicky Page, and Jana Prais.

We'll get together. We'll nosh.

We'll tipple. We'll dish, dish, dish.

Hope requires the contender
Who sees no virtue in surrender.
From the cradle to the bier,
The heart must persevere.
—*The Book of Counted Joys*



CHAPTER 1

MY NAME IS ODD THOMAS, THOUGH IN THIS AGE when fame is the altar at which most people worship, I am not sure why you should care who I am or that I exist.

I am not a celebrity. I am not the child of a celebrity. I have never been married to, never been abused by, and never provided a kidney for transplanted into any celebrity. Furthermore, I have no desire to be a celebrity.

In fact I am such a nonentity by the standards of our culture that *People* magazine not only will never feature a piece about me but might also reject my attempts to subscribe to their publication on the grounds that the black-hole gravity of my noncelebrity is powerful enough to suck their entire enterprise into oblivion.

I am twenty years old. To a world-wise adult, I am little more than a child. To any child, however, I'm old enough to be distrusted, to be excluded forever from the magical community of the short and beardless.

Consequently, a demographics expert might conclude that my sole audience is other young men and women currently adrift between their twentieth and twenty-first birthdays.

In truth, I have nothing to say to that narrow audience. In my experience, I don't care about most of the things that other twenty-year-old Americans care about. Except survival, of course.

I lead an unusual life.

By this I do not mean that my life is better than yours. I'm sure that your life is filled with as much happiness, charm, wonder, and abiding fear as anyone could wish. Like me, you are human, after all, and we know what a joy and terror *that* is.

I mean only that my life is not typical. Peculiar things happen to me that don't happen to other people with regularity, if ever.

For example, I would never have written this memoir if I had not been commanded to do so by a four-hundred-pound man with six fingers on his left hand.

His name is P. Oswald Boone. Everyone calls him Little Ozzie because his father, Big Ozzie, is still alive.

Little Ozzie has a cat named Terrible Chester. He loves that cat. In fact, if Terrible Chester were to use up his ninth life under the wheels of a Peterbilt, I am afraid that Little Ozzie's big heart would not survive the loss.

Personally, I do not have great affection for Terrible Chester because, for one thing, he has on several occasions peed on my shoes.

His reason for doing so, as explained by Ozzie, seems credible, but I am not convinced of his truthfulness. I mean to say that I am suspicious of Terrible Chester's veracity, not Ozzie's.

Besides, I simply cannot fully trust a cat who claims to be fifty-eight years old. Although photographic evidence exists to support this claim, I persist in believing that it's bogus.

For reasons that will become obvious, this manuscript cannot be published during my lifetime, and my effort will not be repaid with royalties while I'm alive. Little Ozzie suggests that I should leave my literary estate to the loving maintenance of Terrible Chester, who, according to him, will outlive all of us.

I will choose another charity. One that has not peed on me.

Anyway, I'm not writing this for money. I am writing it to save my sanity and to discover if I can convince myself that my life has purpose and meaning enough to justify continued existence.

Don't worry: These ramblings will not be insufferably gloomy. P. Oswald Boone has sternly instructed me to keep the tone light.

“If you don’t keep it light,” Ozzie said, “I’ll sit my four-hundred-pound ass on you, and that’s *not* the way you want to die.”

Ozzie is bragging. His ass, while grand enough, probably weighs no more than a hundred and fifty pounds. The other two hundred fifty are distributed across the rest of his suffering skeleton.

When at first I proved unable to keep the tone light, Ozzie suggested that I be an unreliable narrator. “It worked for Agatha Christie in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*,” he said.

In that first-person mystery novel, the nice-guy narrator turns out to be the murderer of Roger Ackroyd, a fact he conceals from the reader until the end.

Understand, I am not a murderer. I have done nothing evil that I am concealing from you. My unreliability as a narrator has to do largely with the tense of certain verbs.

Don’t worry about it. You’ll know the truth soon enough.

Anyway, I’m getting ahead of my story. Little Ozzie and Terrible Chester do not enter the picture until after the cow explodes.

This story began on a Tuesday.

For you, that is the day after Monday. For me, it is a day that, like the other six, brims with the potential for mystery, adventure, and terror.

You should not take this to mean that my life is romantic and magical. Too much mystery is merely an annoyance. Too much adventure is exhausting. And a little terror goes a long way.

Without the help of an alarm clock, I woke that Tuesday morning at five, from a dream about dead bowling-alley employees.

I never set the alarm because my internal clock is so reliable. If I wish to wake promptly at five, then before going to bed I tell myself three times that I must be awake sharply at 4:45.

While reliable, my internal alarm clock for some reason runs fifteen minutes slow. I learned this years ago and have adjusted to the problem.

The dream about the dead bowling-alley employees has troubled my sleep once or twice a month for three years. The details are not yet specific enough to act upon. I will have to wait and hope that clarification doesn’t come to me too late.

So I woke at five, sat up in bed, and said, “Spare me that I may serve,” which is the morning prayer that my Granny Sugars taught me to say when I was little.

Pearl Sugars was my mother’s mother. If she had been my father’s mother, my name would be Odd Sugars, further complicating my life.

Granny Sugars believed in bargaining with God. She called Him “that old rug merchant.”

Before every poker game, she promised God to spread His holy word or to share her good fortune with orphans in return for a few unbeatable hands. Throughout her life, winnings from card games remained a significant source of income.

Being a hard-drinking woman with numerous interests in addition to poker, Granny Sugars didn’t always spend as much time spreading God’s word as she promised Him that she would. She believed that God expected to be conned more often than not and that He would be a good sport about it.

You can con God and get away with it, Granny said, if you do so with charm and wit. If you live your life with imagination and verve, God will play along just to see what outrageously entertaining thing you’ll do next.

He’ll also cut you some slack if you’re astonishingly stupid in an amusing fashion. Granny claimed that this explains why uncountable millions of breathtakingly stupid people get along just fine in life.

Of course, in the process, you must never do harm to others in any serious way, or you’ll cease to amuse Him. Then payment comes due for the promises you didn’t keep.

In spite of drinking lumberjacks under the table, regularly winning at poker with stone-hearted psychopaths who didn’t like to lose, driving fast cars with utter contempt for the laws of physics (but never while intoxicated), and eating a diet rich in pork fat, Granny Sugars died peacefully in her sleep at the age of seventy-two. They found her with a nearly empty snifter of brandy on the nightstand, a book by her favorite novelist turned to the last page, and a smile on her face.

Judging by all available evidence, Granny and God understood each other pretty well.

Pleased to be alive that Tuesday morning, on the dark side of the dawn, I switched on my nightstand lamp and surveyed the chamber that served as my bedroom, living room, kitchen, and dining room. I never get out of bed until I know who, if anyone, is waiting for me.

If visitors either benign or malevolent had spent part of the night watching me sleep, they had not lingered for a breakfast chat. Sometimes simply getting from bed to bathroom can take the charm out of a new day.

Only Elvis was there, wearing the lei of orchids, smiling, and pointing one finger at me as if it were a cocked gun.

Although I enjoy living above this particular two-car garage, and though I find my quarters cozy, *Architectural Digest* will not be seeking an exclusive photo layout. If one of their glamour scouts saw my place, he'd probably note, with disdain, that the second word in the magazine's name is not, after all, *Indigestion*.

The life-size cardboard figure of Elvis, part of a theater-lobby display promoting *Blue Hawaii*, was where I'd left it. Occasionally, it moves—or is moved—during the night.

I showered with peach-scented soap and peach shampoo, which were given to me by Stormy Llewellyn. Her real first name is Bronwen, but she thinks that makes her sound like an elf.

My real name actually is Odd.

According to my mother, this is an uncorrected birth-certificate error. Sometimes she says they intended to name me Todd. Other times she says it was Dobb, after a Czechoslovakian uncle.

My father insists that they always intended to name me Odd, although he won't tell me why. He notes that I don't have a Czechoslovakian uncle.

My mother vigorously asserts the existence of the uncle, though she refuses to explain why I've never met either him or her sister, Cymry, to whom he is supposedly married.

Although my father acknowledges the existence of Cymry, he is adamant that she has never married. He says that she is a freak, but what he means by this I don't know, for he will say no more.

My mother becomes infuriated at the suggestion that her sister is any kind of freak. She calls Cymry a gift from God but otherwise remains uncommunicative on the subject.

I find it easier to live with the name Odd than to contest it. By the time I was old enough to realize that it was an unusual name, I had grown comfortable with it.

Stormy Llewellyn and I are more than friends. We believe that we are soul mates.

For one thing, we have a card from a carnival fortune-telling machine that says we're destined to be together forever.

We also have matching birthmarks.

Cards and birthmarks aside, I love her intensely. I would throw myself off a high cliff for her if she asked me to jump. I would, of course, need to understand the reasoning behind her request.

Fortunately for me, Stormy is not the kind of person to ask such a thing lightly. She expects nothing of others that she herself would not do. In treacherous currents, she is kept steady by a moral anchor the size of a ship.

She once brooded for an entire day about whether to keep fifty cents that she found in the change-return slot of a pay phone. At last she mailed it to the telephone company.

Returning to the cliff for a moment, I don't mean to imply that I'm afraid of Death. I'm just not ready to go out on a date with him.

Smelling like a peach, as Stormy likes me, not afraid of Death, having eaten a blueberry muffin, saying good-bye to Elvis with the words "Taking care of business" in a lousy imitation of his voice, I set off for work at the Pico Mundo Grille.

Although the dawn had just broken, it had already flash-fried into a hard yellow yolk on the eastern horizon.

The town of Pico Mundo is in that part of southern California where you can never forget that in spite of all the water imported by the state aqueduct system, the true condition of the territory is desert. In March we bake. In August, which this was, we broil.

The ocean lay so far to the west that it was no more real to us than the Sea of Tranquility, that vast dark plain on the face of the moon.

Occasionally, when excavating for a new subdivision of tract homes on the outskirts of town, developers had struck rich veins of seashells in their deeper diggings. Once upon an ancient age, waves lapped these shores.

If you put one of those shells to your ear, you will not hear the surf breaking but only a dry mournful wind, as if the shell has forgotten its origins.

At the foot of the exterior steps that led down from my small apartment, in the early sun, Penny Kallisto waited like a shell on a shore. She wore red sneakers, white shorts, and a sleeveless white blouse.

Ordinarily, Penny had none of that preadolescent despair to which some kids prove so susceptible these days. She was an ebullient twelve-year-old, outgoing and quick to laugh.

This morning, however, she looked solemn. Her blue eyes darkened as does the sea under the passage of a cloud.

I glanced toward the house, fifty feet away, where my landlady, Rosalia Sanchez, would be expecting me at any minute to confirm that she had not disappeared during the night. The sight of herself in a mirror was never sufficient to put her fear to rest.

Without a word, Penny turned away from the stairs. She walked toward the front of the property.

Like a pair of looms, using sunshine and their own silhouettes, two enormous California live oaks wove veils of gold and purple, which they flung across the driveway.

Penny appeared to shimmer and to darkle as she passed through this intricate lace of light and shade. A black mantilla of shadow dimmed the luster of her blond hair, its elaborate pattern changing as she moved.

Afraid of losing her, I hurried down the last of the steps and followed the girl. Mrs. Sanchez would have to wait, and worry.

Penny led me past the house, off the driveway, to a birdbath on the front lawn. Around the base of the pedestal that supported the basin, Rosalia Sanchez had arranged a collection of dozens of the seashells, all shapes and sizes, that had been scooped from the hills of Pico Mundo.

Penny stooped, selected a specimen about the size of an orange, stood once more, and held it out to me.

The architecture resembled that of a conch. The rough exterior was brown and white, the polished interior shone pearly pink.

Cupping her right hand as though she still held the shell, Penny brought it to her ear. She cocked her head to listen, thus indicating what she wanted me to do.

When I put the shell to my ear, I did not hear the sea. Neither did I hear the melancholy desert wind that I mentioned previously.

Instead, from the shell came the rough breathing of a beast. The urgent rhythm of a cruel need, the grunt of mad desire.

Here in the summer desert, winter found my blood.

When she saw from my expression that I had heard what she wished me to hear, Penny crossed the lawn to the public sidewalk. She stood at the curb, gazing toward the west end of Marigold Lane.

I dropped the shell, went to her side, and waited with her.

Evil was coming. I wondered whose face it would be wearing.

Old Indian laurels line this street. Their great gnarled surface roots have in places cracked and buckled the concrete walkway.

Not a whisper of air moved through the trees. The morning lay as uncannily still as dawn on Judgment Day one breath before the sky would crack open.

Like Mrs. Sanchez's place, most houses in this neighborhood are Victorian in style, with varying degrees of gingerbread. When Pico Mundo was founded, in 1900, many residents were immigrants from the East Coast, and they preferred architectures better suited to that distant colder, damper shore.

Perhaps they thought they could bring to this valley only those things they loved, leaving behind all ugliness.

We are not, however, a species that can choose the baggage with which it must travel. In spite of our best intentions, we always find that we have brought along a suitcase or two of darkness, and misery.

For half a minute, the only movement was that of a hawk gliding high above, glimpsed between laurel branches.

The hawk and I were hunters this morning.

Penny Kallisto must have sensed my fear. She took my right hand in her left.

I was grateful for this kindness. Her grip proved firm, and her hand did not feel cold. I drew courage from her strong spirit.

Because the car was idling in gear, rolling at just a few miles per hour, I didn't hear anything until it turned the corner. When I recognized the vehicle, I knew a sadness equal to my fear.

This 1968 Pontiac Firebird 400 had been restored with loving care. The two-door, midnight-blue convertible appeared to glide toward us with all tires a fraction of an inch off the pavement, shimmering like a mirage in the morning heat.

Harlo Landerson and I had been in the same high-school class. During his junior and senior years, Harlo rebuilt this car from the axles up, until it looked as cherry as it had in the autumn of '67, when it had first stood on a showroom floor.

Self-effacing, somewhat shy, Harlo had not labored on the car with the hope either that it would be a babe magnet or that those who had thought of him as tepid would suddenly think he was cool enough to freeze the mercury in a thermometer. He'd had no social ambitions. He had suffered no illusions about his chances of ever rising above the lower ranks of the high-school caste system.

With a 335-horsepower V-8 engine, the Firebird could sprint from zero to sixty miles per hour in under eight seconds. Yet Harlo wasn't a street racer; he took no special pride in having wheels of fury.

He devoted much time, labor, and money to the Firebird because the beauty of its design and function enchanted him. This was a labor of the heart, a passion almost spiritual in its purity and intensity.

I sometimes thought the Pontiac figured so large in Harlo's life because he had no one to whom he could give the love that he lavished on the car. His mom died when he was six. His dad was a mean drunk.

A car can't return the love you give it. But if you're lonely enough, maybe the sparkle of the chrome, the luster of the paint, and the purr of the engine can be mistaken for affection.

Harlo and I hadn't been buddies, just friendly. I liked the guy. He was quiet, but quiet was better than the boast and bluster with which many kids jockeyed for social position in high school.

With Penny Kallisto still at my side, I raised my left hand and waved at Harlo.

Since high school, he'd worked hard. Nine to five, he unloaded trucks at Super Food and moved stock from storeroom to shelves.

Before that, beginning at 4:00 A.M., he dropped hundreds of newspapers at homes on the east side of Pico Mundo. Once each week, he also delivered to *every* house a plastic bag full of advertising flyers and discount-coupon books.

This morning, he distributed only newspapers, tossing them with a snap of the wrist, as though they were boomerangs. Each folded and bagged copy of the Tuesday edition of the *Maravilla County Times* spun through the air and landed with a soft *thwop* on a driveway or a front walk, precisely where the subscriber preferred to have it.

Harlo was working the far side of the street. When he reached the house opposite me, he braked the coasting Pontiac to a stop.

Penny and I crossed to the car, and Harlo said, "Good mornin', Odd. How're you this fine day?"

"Bleak," I replied. "Sad. Confused."

He frowned with concern. "What's wrong? Anything I can do?"

"Something you've already done," I said.

Letting go of Penny's hand, I leaned into the Firebird from the passenger's side, switched off the engine, and plucked the key from the ignition.

Startled, Harlo grabbed for the keys but missed. "Hey, Odd, no foolin' around, okay? I have a tight schedule."

I never heard Penny's voice, but in the rich yet silent language of the soul, she must have spoken to me.

What I said to Harlo Landerson was the essence of what the girl revealed: "You have her blood in your pocket."

An innocent man would have been baffled by my statement. Harlo stared at me, his eyes suddenly owlsh not with wisdom but with fear.

“On that night,” I said, “you took with you three small squares of white felt.”

One hand still on the wheel, Harlo looked away from me, through the windshield, as if willing the Pontiac to move.

“After using the girl, you collected some of her virgin blood with the squares of felt.”

Harlo shivered. His face flushed red, perhaps with shame.

Anguish thickened my voice. “They dried stiff and dark, brittle like crackers.”

His shivers swelled into violent tremors.

“You carry one of them with you at all times.” My voice shook with emotion. “You like to smell it. Oh, God, Harlo. Sometimes you put it between your teeth. And bite on it.”

He threw open the driver’s door and fled.

I’m not the law. I’m not vigilante justice. I’m not vengeance personified. I don’t really know what I am, or why.

In moments like these, however, I can’t restrain myself from action. A kind of madness comes over me, and I can no more turn away from what must be done than I can wish this fallen world back into a state of grace.

As Harlo burst from the Pontiac, I looked down at Penny Kallisto and saw the ligature marks on her throat, which had not been visible when she had first appeared to me. The depth to which the garroting cloth had scored her flesh revealed the singular fury with which he had strangled her to death.

Pity tore at me, and I went after Harlo Landerson, for whom I had no pity whatsoever.

CHAPTER 2

BLACKTOP TO CONCRETE, CONCRETE TO GRASS, alongside the house that lay across the street from Mrs. Sanchez's place, through the rear yard, to a wrought-iron fence and over, then across a narrow alleyway, up a slumpstone wall, Harlo Landerson ran and clambered and flung himself.

I wondered where he might be going. He couldn't outrun either me or justice, and he certainly couldn't outrun who he was.

Beyond the slumpstone wall lay a backyard, a swimming pool. Dappled with morning light and tree shadows, the water glimmered in shades of blue from sapphire to turquoise, as might a trove of jewels left by long-dead pirates who had sailed a sea since vanished.

On the farther side of the pool, behind a sliding glass door, a young woman stood in pajamas, holding a mug of whatever brew gave her the courage to face the day.

When he spotted this startled observer, Harlo changed directions toward her. Maybe he thought he needed a shield, a hostage. Whatever, he wasn't looking for coffee.

I closed on him, snared his shirt, hooked him off his feet. The two of us plunged into the deep end of the pool.

Having banked a summer's worth of desert heat, the water wasn't cold. Thousands of bubbles like shimmering showers of silver coins flipped across my eyes, rang against my ears.

Thrashing, we touched bottom, and on the way up, he kicked, he flailed. With elbow or knee, or foot, he struck my throat.

Although the impeding water robbed the blow of most of its force, I gasped, swallowed, choked on the taste of chlorine flavored with tanning oil. Losing my grip on Harlo, I tumbled in slow-mo through undulant curtains of green light, blue shadow, and broke the surface into spangles of sunshine.

I was in the middle of the pool, and Harlo was at the edge. He grabbed the coping and jacked himself onto the concrete deck.

Coughing, venting atomized water from both nostrils, I splashed noisily after him. As a swimmer, I have less potential for Olympic competition than for drowning.

On a particularly dispiriting night when I was sixteen, I found myself chained to a pair of dead men and dumped off a boat in Malo Suerte Lake. Ever since then, I've had an aversion to aquatic sports.

That man-made lake lies beyond the city limits of Pico Mundo. Malo Suerte means "bad luck."

Constructed during the Great Depression as a project of the Works Progress Administration, the lake originally had been named after an obscure politician. Although they have a thousand stories about its treacherous waters, nobody around these parts can quite pin down when or why the place was officially renamed Malo Suerte.

All records relating to the lake burned in the courthouse fire of 1954, when a man named Mel Gibson protested the seizure of his property for nonpayment of taxes. Mr. Gibson's protest took the form of self-immolation.

He wasn't related to the Australian actor with the same name who would decades later become a movie star. Indeed, by all reports, he was neither talented nor physically attractive.

Now, because I hadn't been burdened on this occasion by a pair of men too dead to swim for themselves, I reached the edge of the pool in a few swift strokes. I levered myself out of the water.

Having arrived at the sliding door, Harlo Landerson found it locked.

The pajamaed woman had disappeared.

As I scrambled to my feet and started to move, Harlo backed away from the door far enough to get momentum. Then he ran at it, leading with his left shoulder, his head tucked down.

I winced in expectation of gouting blood, severed limbs, a head guillotined by a blade of glass.

Of course the safety pane shattered into cascades of tiny, gummy pieces. Harlo crashed into the house with all his limbs intact and his head still attached to his neck.

Glass crunched and clinked under my shoes when I entered in his wake. I smelled something burning.

We were in a family room. All the furniture was oriented toward a big-screen TV as large as a pair of refrigerators.

The gigantic head of the female host of the *Today* show was terrifying in such magnified detail. In these dimensions, her perky smile had the warmth of a barracuda's grin. Her twinkly eyes, here the size of lemons, seemed to glitter maniacally.

In this open floor plan, the family room flowed into the kitchen with only a breakfast bar intervening.

The woman had chosen to make a stand in the kitchen. She gripped a telephone in one hand and a butcher knife in the other.

Harlo stood at the threshold between rooms, trying to decide if a twentysomething housewife in too-cute, sailor-suit pajamas would really have the nerve to gut him alive.

She brandished the knife as she shouted into the phone. "He's inside, he's right *here!*"

Past her, on a far counter, smoke poured from a toaster. Some kind of pop-up pastry had failed to pop. It smelled like strawberries and smoldering rubber. The lady was having a bad morning.

Harlo threw a bar stool at me and ran out of the family room, toward the front of the house.

Ducking the stool, I said, "Ma'am, I'm sorry about the mess," and I went looking for Penny's killer.

Behind me, the woman screamed, "*Stevie, lock your door! Stevie, lock your door!*"

By the time I reached the foot of the open stairs in the foyer, Harlo had climbed to the landing.

I saw why he had been drawn upward instead of fleeing the house: At the second floor stood a wide-eyed little boy, about five years old, wearing only undershorts. Holding a blue teddy bear by

one of its feet, the kid looked as vulnerable as a puppy stranded in the middle of a busy freeway.

Prime hostage material.

“Stevie, lock your door!”

Dropping the blue bear, the kid bolted for his room.

Harlo charged up the second flight of stairs.

Sneezing out the tickle of chlorine and the tang of burning strawberry jam, dripping, squishing, I ascended with somewhat less heroic flair than John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*.

I was more scared than my quarry because *I* had something to lose, not least of all Stormy Llewellyn and our future together that the fortune-telling machine had seemed to promise. If I encountered a husband with a handgun, he'd shoot me as unhesitatingly as he would Harlo.

Overhead, a door slammed hard. Stevie had done as his mother instructed.

If he'd had a pot of boiling lead, in the tradition of Quasimodo, Harlo Landerson would have poured it on me. Instead came a sideboard that evidently had stood in the second-floor hall, opposite the head of the stairs.

Surprised to discover that I had the agility and the balance of a monkey, albeit a wet monkey, I scrambled off the stairs, onto the railing. The deadfall rocked past step by step, drawers gaping open and snapping shut repeatedly, as if the furniture were possessed by the spirit of a crocodile.

Off the railing, up the stairs, I reached the second-floor hall as Harlo began to break down the kid's bedroom door.

Aware that I was coming, he kicked harder. Wood splintered with a dry crack, and the door flew inward.

Harlo flew with it, as if he'd been sucked out of the hall by an energy vortex.

Rushing across the threshold, pushing aside the rebounding door, I saw the boy trying to wriggle under the bed. Harlo had seized him by the left foot.

I snatched a smiling panda-bear lamp off the red nightstand and smashed it over Harlo's head. A ceramic carnage of perky black

ears, fractured white face, black paws, and chunks of white belly exploded across the room.

In a world where biological systems and the laws of physics functioned with the absolute dependability that scientists claim for them, Harlo would have dropped stone-cold unconscious as surely as the lamp shattered. Unfortunately, this isn't such a world.

As love empowers some frantic mothers to find the superhuman strength to lift overturned cars to free their trapped children, so depravity gave Harlo the will to endure a panda pounding without significant effect. He let go of Stevie and rounded on me.

Although his eyes lacked elliptical pupils, they reminded me of the eyes of a snake, keen with venomous intent, and though his bared teeth included no hooked or dramatically elongated canines, the rage of a rabid jackal gleamed in his silent snarl.

This wasn't the person whom I had known in high school so few years ago, not the shy kid who found magic and meaning in the patient restoration of a Pontiac Firebird.

Here was a diseased and twisted bramble of a soul, thorny and cankerous, which perhaps until recently had been imprisoned in a deep turning of Harlo's mental labyrinth. It had broken down the bars of its cell and climbed up through the castle keep, deposing the man who had been Harlo; and now it ruled.

Released, Stevie squirmed all the way under his bed, but no bed offered shelter to me, and I had no blankets to pull over my head.

I can't pretend that I remember the next minute with clarity. We struck at each other when we saw an opening. We grabbed anything that might serve as a weapon, swung it, flung it. A flurry of blows staggered both of us into a clinch, and I felt his hot breath on my face, a spray of spittle, and heard his teeth snapping, snapping at my right ear, as panic pressed upon him the tactics of a beast.

I broke the clinch, shoved him away with an elbow under the chin and with a knee that missed the crotch for which it was intended.

Sirens arose in the distance just as Stevie's mom appeared at the open door, butcher knife glinting and ready: two cavalries, one in pajamas, the other in the blue-and-black uniform of the Pico Mundo Police Department.

Harlo couldn't get past both me and the armed woman. He couldn't reach Stevie, his longed-for shield, under the bed. If he threw open a window and climbed onto the front-porch roof, he would be fleeing directly into the arms of the arriving cops.

As the sirens swelled louder, nearer, Harlo backed into a corner where he stood gasping, shuddering. Wringing his hands, his face gray with anguish, he looked at the floor, the walls, the ceiling, not in the manner of a trapped man assessing the dimensions of his cage, but with bewilderment, as though he could not recall how he had come to be in this place and predicament.

Unlike the beasts of the wild, the many cruel varieties of human monsters, when at last cornered, seldom fight with greater ferocity. Instead, they reveal the cowardice at the core of their brutality.

Harlo's wringing hands twisted free of each other and covered his face. Through the chinks in that ten-fingered armor, I could see his eyes twitching with bright terror.

Back jammed into the corner, he slid down the junction of walls and sat on the floor with his legs splayed in front of him, hiding behind his hands as though they were a mask of invisibility that would allow him to escape the attention of justice.

The sirens reached a peak of volume half a block away, and then subsided from squeal to growl to waning groan in front of the house.

The day had dawned less than an hour ago, and I had spent every minute of the morning living up to my name.

CHAPTER 3

THE DEAD DON'T TALK. I DON'T KNOW WHY.

Harlo Landerson had been taken away by the authorities. In his wallet they had found two Polaroids of Penny Kallisto. In the first, she was naked and alive. In the second, she was dead.

Stevie was downstairs, in his mother's arms.

Wyatt Porter, chief of the Pico Mundo Police Department, had asked me to wait in Stevie's room. I sat on the edge of the boy's unmade bed.

I had not been alone long when Penny Kallisto walked through a wall and sat beside me. The ligature marks were gone from her neck. She looked as though she had never been strangled, had never died.

As before, she remained mute.

I tend to believe in the traditional architecture of life and the afterlife. This world is a journey of discovery and purification. The next world consists of two destinations: One is a palace for the spirit and an endless kingdom of wonder, while the other is cold and dark and unthinkable.

Call me simple-minded. Others do.

Stormy Llewellyn, a woman of unconventional views, believes instead that our passage through this world is intended to toughen us for the next life. She says that our honesty, integrity, courage, and determined resistance to evil are evaluated at the end of our days here, and that if we come up to muster, we will be conscripted

into an army of souls engaged in some great mission in the next world. Those who fail the test simply cease to exist.

In short, Stormy sees this life as boot camp. She calls the next life “service.”

I sure hope she’s wrong, because one of the implications of her cosmology is that the many terrors we know here are an inoculation against worse in the world to come.

Stormy says that whatever’s expected of us in the next life will be worth enduring, partly for the sheer adventure of it but primarily because the reward for service comes in our third life.

Personally, I’d prefer to receive my reward one life sooner than she foresees.

Stormy, however, is into delayed gratification. If on Monday she thirsts for a root-beer float, she’ll wait until Tuesday or Wednesday to treat herself to one. She insists that the wait makes the float taste better.

My point of view is this: If you like root-beer floats so much, have one on Monday, another on Tuesday, and a third on Wednesday.

According to Stormy, if I live by this philosophy too long, I’m going to be one of those eight-hundred-pound men who, when they fall ill, must be extracted from their homes by construction crews and cranes.

“If you want to suffer the humiliation of being hauled to the hospital on a flatbed truck,” she once said, “don’t expect me to sit on your great bloated gut like Jiminy Cricket on the brow of the whale, singing ‘When You Wish Upon a Star.’”

I’m reasonably sure that in Disney’s *Pinocchio*, Jiminy Cricket never sits on the brow of the whale. In fact I’m not convinced that he himself encounters the whale.

If I were to make this observation to Stormy, however, she would favor me with one of those wry looks that means *Are you hopelessly stupid or just being pissy?* This is a look to be avoided if not dreaded.

As I waited there on the edge of the boy’s bed, even thinking about Stormy couldn’t lift my spirits. Indeed, if the grinning images of Scooby-Doo, imprinted on the sheets, didn’t cheer me, perhaps nothing could.

I kept thinking about Harlo losing his mother at six, about how his life might have been a memorial to her, about how instead he had shamed her memory.

And I thought about Penny, of course: her life brought to such an early end, the terrible loss to her family, the enduring pain that had changed their lives forever.

Penny put her left hand in my right and squeezed reassuringly.

Her hand felt as real as that of a living child, as firm, as warm. I didn't understand how she could be this real to me and yet walk through walls, this real to me and yet invisible to others.

I wept a little. Sometimes I do. I'm not embarrassed by tears. At times like this, tears exorcise emotions that would otherwise haunt me and, by their haunting, embitter me.

Even as my vision blurred at the first shimmer of tears not yet spent, Penny clasped my hand in both of hers. She smiled, and winked as if to say, *It's all right, Odd Thomas. Get it out, be rid of it.*

The dead are sensitive to the living. They have walked this path ahead of us and know our fears, our failings, our desperate hopes, and how much we cherish what cannot last. They pity us, I think, and no doubt they should.

When my tears dried, Penny rose to her feet, smiled again, and with one hand smoothed the hair back from my brow. *Good-bye*, this gesture seemed to say. *Thank you, and good-bye.*

She walked across the room, through the wall, into the August morning one story above the front yard—or into another realm even brighter than a Pico Mundo summer.

A moment later, Wyatt Porter appeared in the bedroom doorway.

Our chief of police is a big man, but he isn't threatening in appearance. With basset eyes and bloodhound jowls, his face has been affected by Earth's gravity more than has the rest of him. I've seen him move fast and decisively, but in action and in repose he seems to carry a great weight on his beefy, rounded shoulders.

Over the years, as the low hills encircling our town have been sculpted into neighborhoods of tract houses, swelling our population, and as the meanness of an ever crueler world has crept into the last havens of civility, like Pico Mundo, perhaps Chief

Porter has seen too much of human treachery. Perhaps the weight he carries is a load of memories that he would prefer to shed, but can't.

"So here we are again," he said, entering the room.

"Here we are," I agreed.

"Busted patio door, busted furniture."

"Didn't bust most of it myself. Except the lamp."

"But you created the situation that led to it."

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you come to me, give me a chance to figure a way Harlo could entrap himself?"

We had worked together in that fashion in the past.

"My feeling," I said, "was that he needed to be confronted right away, that maybe he was going to do it again real soon."

"Your feeling."

"Yes, sir. That's what I think Penny wanted to convey. There was a quiet urgency about her."

"Penny Kallisto."

"Yes, sir."

The chief sighed. He settled upon the only chair in the room: a child-size, purple upholstered number on which Barney the dinosaur's torso and head served as the back support. He appeared to be sitting in Barney's lap. "Son, you sure complicate my life."

"*They* complicate your life, sir, and mine much more than yours," I said, meaning the dead.

"True enough. If I were you, I'd have gone crazy years ago."

"I've considered it," I admitted.

"Now listen, Odd, I want to find a way to keep you out of the courtroom on this one, if it comes to that."

"I want to find a way, too."

Few people know any of my strange secrets. Only Stormy Llewellyn knows all of them.

I want anonymity, a simple and quiet life, or at least as simple as the spirits will allow.

The chief said, "I think he's going to give us a confession in the presence of his attorney. There may be no trial. But if there is, we'll

say that he opened his wallet to pay some bet he'd made with you, maybe on a baseball game, and the Polaroids of Penny fell out."

"I can sell that," I assured him.

"I'll speak with Horton Barks. He'll minimize your involvement when he writes it up."

Horton Barks was the publisher of the *Maravilla County Times*. Twenty years ago in the Oregon woods, while hiking, he'd had dinner with Big Foot—if you can call some trail mix and canned sausages *dinner*.

In truth, I don't know for a fact that Horton had dinner with Big Foot, but that's what he claims. Given my daily experiences, I'm in no position to doubt Horton or anyone else who has a story to tell about an encounter with anything from aliens to leprechauns.

"You all right?" Chief Porter asked.

"Pretty much. But I sure hate being late for work. This is the busiest time at the Grille."

"You called in?"

"Yeah." I held up my little cell phone, which had been clipped to my belt when I went into the pool. "Still works."

"I'll probably stop in later, have a pile of home fries and a mess of eggs."

"Breakfast all day," I said, which has been a solemn promise of the Pico Mundo Grille since 1946.

Chief Porter shifted from one butt cheek to the other, causing Barney to groan. "Son, you figure to be a short-order cook forever?"

"No, sir. I've been thinking about a career change to tires."

"Tires?"

"Maybe sales first, then installation. They've always got job openings out at Tire World."

"Why tires?"

I shrugged. "People need them. And it's something I don't know, something new to learn. I'd like to see what that life's like, the tire life."

We sat there half a minute or so, neither of us saying anything. Then he asked, "And that's the only thing you see on the horizon? Tires, I mean."

“Swimming-pool maintenance looks intriguing. With all these new communities going in around us, there’s a new pool about every day.”

Chief Porter nodded thoughtfully.

“And it must be nice working in a bowling alley,” I said. “All the new people coming and going, the excitement of competition.”

“What would you do in a bowling alley?”

“For one thing, take care of the rental shoes. They need to be irradiated or something between uses. And polished. You have to check the laces regularly.”

The chief nodded, and the purple Barney chair squeaked more like a mouse than like a dinosaur.

My clothes had nearly dried, but they were badly wrinkled. I checked my watch. “I better get moving. I’m going to have to change before I can go to the Grille.”

We both rose to our feet.

The Barney chair collapsed.

Looking at the purple ruins, Chief Porter said, “That could have happened when you were fighting Harlo.”

“Could have,” I said.

“Insurance will cover it with the rest.”

“There’s always insurance,” I agreed.

We went downstairs, where Stevie was sitting on a stool in the kitchen, happily eating a lemon cupcake.

“I’m sorry, but I broke your bedroom chair,” Chief Porter told him, for the chief is not a liar.

“That’s just a stupid old Barney chair, anyway,” the boy said. “I outgrew that stupid old Barney stuff *weeks* ago.”

With a broom and a dustpan, Stevie’s mom was sweeping up the broken glass.

Chief Porter told her about the chair, and she was inclined to dismiss it as unimportant, but he secured from her a promise that she would look up the original cost and let him know the figure.

He offered me a ride home, but I said, “Quickest for me is just to go back the way I came.”

I left the house through the hole where the glass door had been, walked around the pool instead of splashing through it, climbed the slumpstone wall, crossed the narrow alleyway, climbed the wrought-iron fence, walked the lawn around another house, crossed Marigold Lane, and returned to my apartment above the garage.

CHAPTER 4

I SEE DEAD PEOPLE. BUT THEN, BY GOD, I *DO* something about it.

This proactive strategy is rewarding but dangerous. Some days it results in an unusual amount of laundry.

After I changed into clean jeans and a fresh white T-shirt, I went around to Mrs. Sanchez's back porch to confirm for her that she was visible, which I did every morning. Through the screen door, I saw her sitting at the kitchen table.

I knocked, and she said, "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I hear you just fine."

"Who do you hear?"

"You. Rosalia Sanchez."

"Come in then, Odd Thomas," she said.

Her kitchen smelled like chiles and corn flour, fried eggs and jack cheese. I'm a terrific short-order cook, but Rosalia Sanchez is a natural-born chef.

Everything in her kitchen is old and well worn but scrupulously clean. Antiques are more valuable when time and wear have laid a warm patina on them. Mrs. Sanchez's kitchen is as beautiful as the finest antique, with the priceless patina of a life's work and of cooking done with pleasure and with love.

I sat across the table from her.

Her hands were clasped tightly around a coffee mug to keep them from shaking. "You're late this morning, Odd Thomas."

Invariably she uses both names. I sometimes suspect she thinks Odd is not a name but a royal title, like *Prince* or *Duke*, and that protocol absolutely requires that it be used by commoners when they address me.

Perhaps she thinks that I am the son of a deposed king, reduced to tattered circumstances but nonetheless deserving of respect.

I said, "Late, yes, I'm sorry. It's been a strange morning."

She doesn't know about my special relationship with the deceased. She's got enough problems without having to worry about dead people making pilgrimages to her garage.

"Can you see what I'm wearing?" she asked worriedly.

"Pale yellow slacks. A dark yellow and brown blouse."

She turned sly. "Do you like the butterfly barrette in my hair, Odd Thomas?"

"There's no barrette. You're holding your hair back with a yellow ribbon. It looks nice that way."

As a young woman, Rosalia Sanchez must have been remarkably beautiful. At sixty-three, having added a few pounds, having acquired the seams and crinkles of seasoning experience, she possessed the deeper beauty of the beatified: the sweet humility and the tenderness that time can teach, the appealing glow of care and character that, in their last years on this earth, no doubt marked the faces of those who were later canonized as saints.

"When you didn't come at the usual time," she said, "I thought you'd been here but couldn't see me. And I thought I couldn't see you anymore, either, that when I became invisible to you, you also became invisible to me."

"Just late," I assured her.

"It would be terrible to be invisible."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't have to shave as often."

When discussing invisibility, Mrs. Sanchez refused to be amused. Her saintly face found a frown of disapproval.

"When I've worried about becoming invisible, I've always thought I'd be able to see other people, they just wouldn't be able to see or hear me."

“In those old Invisible Man movies,” I said, “you could see his breath when he went out in really cold weather.”

“But if other people become invisible to me when I’m invisible to them,” she continued, “then it’s like I’m the last person in the world, all of it empty except for me wandering around alone.”

She shuddered. Clasped in her hands, the coffee mug knocked against the table.

When Mrs. Sanchez talks about invisibility, she’s talking about death, but I’m not sure she realizes this.

If the true first year of the new millennium, 2001, had not been good for the world in general, it had been bleak for Rosalia Sanchez in particular, beginning with the loss of her husband, Herman, on a night in April. She had gone to sleep next to the man whom she had loved for more than forty years—and awakened beside a cold cadaver. For Herman, death had come as gently as it ever does, in sleep, but for Rosalia, the shock of waking with the dead had been traumatic.

Later that year, still mourning her husband, she had not gone with her three sisters and their families on a long-planned vacation to New England. On the morning of September 11, she awakened to the news that their return flight out of Boston had been hijacked and used as a guided missile in one of the most infamous acts in history.

Although Rosalia had wanted children, God had given her none. Herman, her sisters, her nieces, her nephews had been the center of her life. She lost them all while sleeping.

Sometime between that September and that Christmas, Rosalia had gone a little crazy with grief. Quietly crazy, because she had lived her entire life quietly and knew no other way to be.

In her gentle madness, she would not acknowledge that they were dead. They had merely become invisible to her. Nature in a quirky mood had resorted to a rare phenomenon that might at any moment be reversed, like a magnetic field, making all her lost loved ones visible to her again.

The details of all the disappearances of ships and planes in the Bermuda Triangle were known to Rosalia Sanchez. She’d read every

book that she could find on the subject.

She knew about the inexplicable, apparently overnight vanishment of hundreds of thousands of Mayans from the cities of Copán, Piedras Negras, and Palenque in A.D. 610.

If you allowed Rosalia to bend your ear, she would nearly break it off in an earnest discussion of historical disappearances. For instance, I know more than I care to know and immeasurably more than I *need* to know about the evaporation, to a man, of a division of three thousand Chinese soldiers near Nanking, in 1939.

“Well,” I said, “at least you’re visible this morning. You’ve got another whole day of visibility to look forward to, and that’s a blessing.”

Rosalia’s biggest fear is that on the same day when her loved ones are made visible again, she herself will vanish.

Though she longs for their return, she dreads the consequences.

She crossed herself, looked around her homey kitchen, and at last smiled. “I could bake something.”

“You could bake *anything*,” I said.

“What would you like me to bake for you, Odd Thomas?”

“Surprise me.” I consulted my watch. “I better get to work.”

She accompanied me to the door and gave me a good-bye hug. “You are a good boy, Odd Thomas.”

“You remind me of my Granny Sugars,” I said, “except you don’t play poker, drink whiskey, or drive fast cars.”

“That’s sweet,” she said. “You know, I thought the world and all of Pearl Sugars. She was so feminine but also...”

“Kick-ass,” I suggested.

“Exactly. At the church’s strawberry festival one year, there was this rowdy man, mean on drugs or drink. Pearl put him down with just two punches.”

“She had a terrific left hook.”

“Of course, first she kicked him in that special tender place. But I think she could have handled him with the punches alone. I’ve sometimes wished I could be more like her.”

From Mrs. Sanchez’s house, I walked the six blocks to the Pico Mundo Grille, which is in the heart of downtown Pico Mundo.

Every minute that it advanced from sunrise, the morning became hotter. The gods of the Mojave don't know the meaning of the word *moderation*.

Long morning shadows grew shorter before my eyes, retreating from steadily warming lawns, from broiling blacktop, from concrete sidewalks as suitable for the frying of eggs as the griddle that I would soon be attending.

The air lacked the energy to move. Trees hung limp. Birds either retreated to leafy roosts or flew higher than they had at dawn, far up where thinner air held the heat less tenaciously.

In this wilted stillness, between Mrs. Sanchez's house and the Grille, I saw three shadows moving. All were independent of a source, for they were not ordinary shadows.

When I was much younger, I called these entities *shades*. But that is just another word for *ghosts*, and they are not ghosts like Penny Kallisto.

I don't believe they ever passed through this world in human form or knew this life as we know it. I suspect they don't belong here, that a realm of eternal darkness is their intended home.

Their shape is liquid. Their substance is no greater than that of shadows. Their movement is soundless. Their intentions, though mysterious, are not benign.

Often they slink like cats, though cats as big as men. At times they run semi-erect like dream creatures that are half man, half dog.

I do not see them often. When they appear, their presence always signifies oncoming trouble of a greater than usual intensity and a darker than usual dimension.

They are not shades to me now. I call them *bodachs*.

Bodach is a word that I heard a visiting six-year-old English boy use to describe these creatures when, in my company, he glimpsed a pack of them roaming a Pico Mundo twilight. A bodach is a small, vile, and supposedly mythical beast of the British Isles, who comes down chimneys to carry off naughty children.

I don't believe these spirits that I see are actually bodachs. I don't think the English boy believed so, either. The word popped into his mind only because he had no better name for them. Neither do I.

He was the only person I have ever known who shared my special sight. Minutes after he spoke the word *bodach* in my presence, he was crushed to death between a runaway truck and a concrete-block wall.

By the time I reached the Grille, the three bodachs had joined in a pack. They ran far ahead of me, shimmered around a corner, and disappeared, as though they had been nothing more than heat imps, mere tricks of the desert air and the grueling sun.

Fat chance.

Some days, I find it difficult to concentrate on being the best short-order cook that I can be. This morning, I would need more than the usual discipline to focus my mind on my work and to ensure that the omelets, home fries, burgers, and bacon melts that came off my griddle were equal to my reputation.

CHAPTER 5

“EGGS—WRECK ’EM AND STRETCH ’EM,” SAID Helen Arches. “One Porky sitting, hash browns, cardiac shingles.”

She clipped the ticket to the order rail, snatched up a fresh pot of coffee, and went to offer refills to her customers.

Helen has been an excellent waitress for forty-two years, since she was eighteen. After so much good work, her ankles have stiffened and her feet have flattened, so when she walks, her shoes slap the floor with each step.

This soft *flap-flap-flap* is one of the fundamental rhythms of the beautiful music of the Pico Mundo Grille, along with the sizzle and sputter of things cooking, the clink of flatware, and the clatter of dishes. The conversation of customers and employees provides the melody.

We were busy that Tuesday morning. All the booths were occupied, as were two-thirds of the stools at the counter.

I like being busy. The short-order station is the center stage of the restaurant, in full view, and I draw fans as surely as does any actor on the Broadway boards.

Being a short-order cook on a slow shift must be akin to being a symphony conductor without either musicians or an audience. You stand poised for action in an apron instead of a tuxedo, holding a spatula rather than a baton, longing to interpret the art not of composers but of chickens.

The egg is art, sure enough. Given a choice between Beethoven and a pair of eggs fried in butter, a hungry man will invariably choose the eggs—or in fact the chicken—and will find his spirits lifted at least as much as they might be by a requiem, rhapsody, or sonata.

Anyone can crack a shell and spill the essence into pan, pot, or pipkin, but few can turn out omelets as flavorful, scrambled eggs as fluffy, and sunnysides as sunny as mine.

This is not pride talking. Well, yes it is, but this is the pride of accomplishment, rather than vanity or boastfulness.

I was not born with the artistry of a gifted hash-slinger. I learned by study and practice, under the tutelage of Terri Stambaugh, who owns the Pico Mundo Grille.

When others saw in me no promise, Terri believed in my potential and gave me a chance. I strive to repay her faith with cheeseburgers of exemplary quality and pancakes almost light enough to float off the plate.

She isn't merely my employer but also my culinary mentor, my surrogate mother, and my friend.

In addition, she is my primary authority on Elvis Presley. If you cite any day in the life of the King of Rock-'n'-Roll, Terri will without hesitation tell you where he was on that date and what he was doing.

I, on the other hand, am more familiar with his activities since his death.

Without referencing Helen's ticket on the rail, I stretched an order of eggs, which means that I added a third egg to our usual serving of two. Then I wrecked 'em: scrambled them.

A "Porky sitting" is fried ham. A pig sits on its ham. It lies on its abdomen, which is the source of bacon, so "one Porky lying" would have called for a rasher with the eggs.

"Cardiac shingles" is an order of toast with extra butter.

Hash browns are merely hash browns. Not every word we speak during the day is diner lingo, just as not every short-order cook sees dead people.

I saw only the living in the Pico Mundo Grille during that Tuesday shift. You can always spot the dead in a diner because the dead don't eat.

Toward the end of the breakfast rush, Chief Wyatt Porter came in. He sat alone in a booth.

As usual, he washed down a tablet of Pepcid AC with a glass of low-fat moo juice before he ordered the mess of eggs and the home fries that he'd mentioned earlier. His complexion was as milky gray as carbolic-acid solution.

The chief smiled thinly at me and nodded. I raised my spatula in reply.

Although eventually I might trade hash-slinging for tire sales, I'll never contemplate a career in law enforcement. It's stomach-corroding work, and thankless.

Besides, I'm spooked by guns.

Half the booths and all but two of the counter stools had been vacated by the time a bodach came into the diner.

Their kind don't appear to be able to walk through walls as do the dead like Penny Kallisto. Instead they slip through any crevice or crack, or keyhole.

This one seeped through the thread-thin gap between the glass door and the metal jamb. Like an undulant ribbon of smoke, as insubstantial as fumes but not translucent, ink-black, the bodach entered.

Standing rather than slinking on all fours, fluid in shape and without discernible features, yet suggestive of something half man and half canine, this unwanted customer slouched silently from the front to the back of the diner, unseen by all but me.

It seemed to turn its head toward each of our patrons as it glided along the aisle between the counter stools and the booths, hesitating in a few instances, as though certain people were of greater interest to it than were others. Although it possessed no discernible facial features, a portion of its silhouette appeared headlike, with a suggestion of a dog's muzzle.

Eventually this creature returned from the back of the diner and stood on the public side of the counter, eyeless but surely watching

me as I worked at the short-order station.

Pretending to be unaware of my observer, I focused more intently on the grill and griddle than was necessary now that the breakfast rush had largely passed. From time to time, when I looked up, I never glanced at the bodach but at the customers, at Helen serving with her signature *flap-flap-flap*, at our other waitress—sweet Bertie Orbic, round in name and fact—at the big windows and the well-baked street beyond, where jacaranda trees cast shadows too lacy to cool and where heat snakes were charmed off the blacktop not by flute music but by the silent sizzle of the sun.

As on this occasion, bodachs sometimes take a special interest in me. I don't know why.

I don't think they realize that I am aware of them. If they knew that I can see their kind, I might be in danger.

Considering that bodachs seem to have no more substance than do shadows, I'm not sure how they could harm me. I'm in no hurry to find out.

The current specimen, apparently fascinated by the rituals of short-order cookery, lost interest in me only when a customer of peculiar demeanor entered the restaurant.

In a desert summer that had toasted every resident of Pico Mundo, this newcomer remained as pale as bread dough. Across his skull spread short, sour-yellow hair furrier than a yeasty mold.

He sat at the counter, not far from the short-order station. Turning his stool left and right, left and right, as might a fidgety child, he gazed at the griddle, at the milkshake mixers and the soft-drink dispensers, appearing to be slightly bewildered and amused.

Having lost interest in me, the bodach crowded the new arrival and focused intently on him. If this inky entity's head was in fact a head, then its head cocked left, cocked right, as though it were puzzling over the smiley man. If the snout-shaped portion was in fact a snout, then the shade sniffed with wolfish interest.

From the service side of the counter, Bertie Orbic greeted the newcomer. "Honey, what can I do you for?"

Managing to smile and talk at the same time, he spoke so softly that I couldn't hear what he said. Bertie looked surprised, but then

she began to scribble on her order pad.

Magnified by round, wire-framed lenses, the customer's eyes disturbed me. His smoky gray gaze floated across me as a shadow across a woodland pool, registering no more awareness of me than the shadow has of the water.

The soft features of his wan face brought to mind pale mushrooms that I once glimpsed in a dark dank corner of a basement, and mealy puffballs clustered in moist mounds of forest mast.

Busy with his mess of eggs, Chief Porter appeared to be no more aware of Fungus Man than he was of the observing bodach. Evidently, his intuition did not tell him that this new customer warranted special attention or concern.

I, however, found Fungus Man worrisome—in part but not entirely because the bodach remained fascinated by him.

Although, in a sense, I commune with the dead, I don't also have premonitions—except sometimes while fast asleep and dreaming. Awake, I am as vulnerable to mortal surprises as anyone is. My death might be delivered through the barrel of a terrorist's gun or by a falling stone cornice in an earthquake, and I would not suspect the danger until I heard the crack of the fatal shot or felt the earth leap violently beneath my feet.

My wariness of this man came from suspicion based not on reason, either, but on crude instinct. Anyone who smiled this relentlessly was a simpleton—or a deceiver with something to hide.

Those smoke-gray eyes appeared to be bemused and no more than half-focused, but I saw no stupidity in them. Indeed, I thought that I detected a cunningly veiled watchfulness, like that of a stone-still snake feigning prestrike indifference to a juicy mouse.

Clipping the ticket to the rail, Bertie Orbic relayed his order: "Two cows, make 'em cry, give 'em blankets, and mate 'em with pigs."

Two hamburgers with onions, cheese, and bacon.

In her sweet clear voice, which sounds like it belongs in a ten-year-old girl destined for a scholarship to Juilliard, she continued: "Double spuds twice in Hell."

Two orders of French fries made extra crispy.

She said: “Burn two British, send ’em to Philly for fish.”

Two English muffins with cream cheese and lox.

She wasn’t finished: “Clean up the kitchen, plus midnight
whistleberries with zeppelins.”

An order of hash, and an order of black beans with sausages.

I said, “Should I fire this or wait till his friends join him?”

“Fire it,” Bertie replied. “This is for one. A skinny boy like you
wouldn’t understand.”

“What’s he want first?”

“Whatever you want to make.”

Fungus Man smiled dreamily at a salt shaker, which he turned
around and around on the counter in front of him, as if the white
crystalline contents fascinated and mystified him.

Although the guy didn’t have a buffed physique that would
qualify him as a spokesman for a health club, he wasn’t fat, just
gently rounded in his mushroom way. If his every meal was this
elaborate, he must have the metabolism of a Tasmanian devil on
methamphetamine.

I toasted and finished the muffins first, while Bertie prepared both
a chocolate milkshake and a vanilla Coke. Our star eater was also a
two-fisted drinker.

By the time I followed the muffins with the hash and sausages, a
second bodach had appeared. This one and the first moved through
the diner with an air of agitation, back and forth, here and there,
always returning to the smiley gourmand, who remained oblivious
of them.

When the bacon cheeseburgers and the well-done fries were
ready, I slapped one hand against the bell that rested beside the
griddle, to alert Bertie that the order was up. She served it hot,
kissing plate to counter without a rattle, as she always does.

Three bodachs had gathered at the front window, persistent
shadows that remained impervious to the wilting power of the
desert sun, peering in at us as though we were on exhibit.

Months often pass during which I encounter none of their kind.
The running pack that I’d seen earlier in the street and now this
convocation suggested that Pico Mundo was in for hard times.

Bodachs are associated with death much the way that bees seek the nectar of flowers. They seem to sip of it.

Ordinary death, however, does not draw a single bodach, let alone a swarm of them. I've never seen one of these beasts hovering at the bedside of a terminal cancer patient or in the vicinity of someone about to suffer a fatal heart attack.

Violence attracts them. And terror. They seem to know when it's coming. They gather like tourists waiting for the predictable eruption of a reliable geyser in Yellowstone Park.

I never saw one of them shadowing Harlo Landerson in the days before he murdered Penny Kallisto. I doubt that any bodachs were in attendance when he raped and throttled the girl.

For Penny, death had come with terrible pain and intolerable fear; surely each of us prays—or merely hopes, depending on his certainty of God—that his death will not be as brutal as hers. To bodachs, however, a quiet strangulation apparently isn't sufficiently exciting to bestir them from whatever lairs they inhabit in whatever strange realm is their true home.

Their appetite is for operatic terror. The violence they crave is of the most extreme variety: multiple untimely deaths spiced with protracted horror, served with cruelty as thick as bad gravy.

When I was nine years old, a drug-whacked teenager named Gary Tolliver sedated his family—little brother, little sister, mother, father—by doctoring a pot of homemade chicken soup. He shackled them while they were unconscious, waited for them to wake, and then spent a weekend torturing them before he killed them with a power drill.

During the week preceding these atrocities, I had twice crossed Tolliver's path. On the first occasion, he'd been followed closely by three eager bodachs. On the second occasion: not three but fourteen.

I have no doubt that those inky forms roamed the Tolliver house throughout that bloody weekend, invisible to the victims and to the killer alike, slinking from room to room as the scene of the action shifted. Observing. Feeding.

Two years later, a moving van, driven by a drunk, sheered off the gasoline pumps at a busy service station out on Green Moon Road,

triggering an explosion and fire that killed seven. That morning, I had seen a dozen bodachs lingering there like misplaced shadows in the early sun.

Nature's wrath draws them as well. They were seething over the ruins of the Buena Vista Nursing Home after the earthquake eighteen months ago, and did not leave until the last injured survivor had been extracted from the rubble.

If I had passed by Buena Vista prior to the quake, surely I would have seen them gathering. Perhaps I could have saved some lives.

When I was a child, I first thought that these shades might be malevolent spirits who fostered evil in those people around whom they swarmed. I've since discovered that many human beings need no supernatural mentoring to commit acts of savagery; some people are devils in their own right, their telltale horns having grown inward to facilitate their disguise.

I've come to believe that bodachs don't foster terror, after all, but take sustenance from it in some fashion. I think of them as psychic vampires, similar to but even scarier than the hosts of daytime-TV talk shows that feature emotionally disturbed and self-destructive guests who are encouraged to bare their damaged souls.

Attended now by four bodachs inside the Pico Mundo Grille and also watched by others at the windows, Fungus Man washed down the final bites of his burgers and fries with the last of his milkshake and vanilla Coke. He left a generous tip for Bertie, paid his check at the cashier's station, and departed the diner with his slinking entourage of slithery shadows.

Through dazzles of sunlight, through shimmering curtains of heat rising from the baked blacktop, I watched him cross the street. The bodachs at his sides and in his wake were difficult to count as they swarmed over one another, but I would have bet a week's wages that they numbered no fewer than twenty.

CHAPTER 6

ALTHOUGH HER EYES ARE NEITHER GOLDEN NOR heavenly blue, Terri Stambaugh has the vision of an angel, for she sees through you and knows your truest heart, but loves you anyway, in spite of all the ways that you are fallen from a state of grace.

She's forty-one, therefore old enough to be my mother. She is not, however, *eccentric enough* to be my mother. Not by half.

Terri inherited the Grille from her folks and runs it to the high standard that they established. She's a fair boss and a hard worker.

Her only offbeat quality is her obsession with Elvis and all things Elvisian.

Because she enjoyed having her encyclopedic knowledge tested, I said, "Nineteen sixty-three."

"Okay."

"May."

"What day?"

I picked one at random: "The twenty-ninth."

"That was a Wednesday," Terri said.

The lunch rush had passed. My workday had ended at two o'clock. We were in a booth at the back of the Grille, waiting for a second-shift waitress, Viola Peabody, to bring our lunch.

I had been relieved at the short-order station by Poke Barnet. Thirty-some years older than I am, lean and sinewy, Poke has a Mojave-cured face and gunfighter eyes. He is as silent as a Gila monster sunning on a rock, as self-contained as any cactus.

If Poke had lived a previous life in the Old West, he had more likely been a marshal with a lightning-quick draw, or even one of the Dalton gang, rather than a chuck-wagon cook. With or without past-life experience, however, he was a good man at grill and griddle.

“On Wednesday, May 29, 1963,” Terri said, “Priscilla graduated from Immaculate Conception High School in Memphis.”

“Priscilla Presley?”

“She was Priscilla Beaulieu back then. During the graduation ceremony, Elvis waited in a car outside the school.”

“He wasn’t invited?”

“Sure he was. But his presence in the auditorium would have been a major disruption.”

“When were they married?”

“Too easy. May 1, 1967, shortly before noon, in a suite in the Aladdin Hotel, Las Vegas.”

Terri was fifteen when Elvis died. He wasn’t a heartthrob in those days. By then he had become a bloated caricature of himself in embroidered, rhinestone-spangled jumpsuits more appropriate for Liberace than for the bluesy singer with a hard rhythm edge who had first hit the top of the charts in 1956, with “Heartbreak Hotel.”

Terri hadn’t yet been born in 1956. Her fascination with Presley had not begun until sixteen years after his death.

The origins of this obsession are in part mysterious to her. One reason Elvis mattered, she said, was that in his prime, pop music had still been politically innocent, therefore deeply life-affirming, therefore relevant. By the time he died, most pop songs had become, usually without the conscious intention of those who wrote and sang them, anthems endorsing the values of fascism, which remains the case to this day.

I suspect that Terri is obsessed with Elvis partly because, on an unconscious level, she has been aware that he has moved among us here in Pico Mundo at least since my childhood, perhaps ever since his death, a truth that I revealed to her only a year ago. I suspect she is a latent medium, that she may sense his spiritual presence,

and that as a consequence she is powerfully drawn to the study of his life and career.

I have no idea why the King of Rock-'n'-Roll has not moved on to the Other Side but continues, after so many years, to haunt this world. After all, Buddy Holly hasn't hung around; he's gotten on with death in the proper fashion.

And why does Elvis linger in Pico Mundo instead of in Memphis or Vegas?

According to Terri, who knows everything there is to know about all the days of Elvis's busy forty-two years, he never visited our town when he was alive. In all the literature of the paranormal, no mention is made of such a geographically dislocated haunting.

We were puzzling over this mystery, not for the first time, when Viola Peabody brought our late lunch. Viola is as black as Bertie Orbic is round, as thin as Helen Arches is flat-footed.

Depositing our plates on the table, Viola said, "Odd, will you read me?"

More than a few folks in Pico Mundo think that I'm some sort of psychic: perhaps a clairvoyant, a thaumaturge, seer, soothsayer, *something*. Only a handful know that I see the restless dead. The others have whittled an image of me with the distorting knives of rumor until I am a different piece of scrimshaw to each of them.

"I've told you, Viola, I'm not a palmist or a head-bump reader. And tea leaves aren't anything to me but garbage."

"So read my face," she said. "Tell me—do you see what I saw in a dream last night?"

Viola was usually a cheerful person, even though her husband, Rafael, had traded up to a waitress at a fancy steakhouse over in Arroyo City, thereafter providing neither counsel nor support for their two children. On this occasion, however, Viola appeared solemn as never before, and worried.

I told her, "The *last* thing I can read is faces."

Every human face is more enigmatic than the timeworn expression on the famous Sphinx out there in the sands of Egypt.

"In my dream," Viola said, "I saw myself, and my face was... broken, dead. I had a hole in my forehead."

“Maybe it was a dream about why you married Rafael.”

“Not funny,” Terri admonished me.

“I think maybe I’d been shot,” Viola said.

“Honey,” Terri comforted her, “when’s the last time you had a dream come true?”

“I guess never,” Viola said.

“Then I wouldn’t worry about this one.”

“Best I can remember,” Viola said, “I’ve never before seen myself face-on in a dream.”

Even in my nightmares, which sometimes *do* come true, I’ve never glimpsed my face, either.

“I had a hole in my forehead,” she repeated, “and my face was... spooky, all out of kilter.”

A high-powered round of significant caliber, upon puncturing the forehead, would release tremendous energy that might distort the structure of the entire skull, resulting in a subtle but disturbing new arrangement of the features.

“My right eye,” Viola added, “was bloodshot and seemed to...to swell half out of the socket.”

In our dreams, we are not detached observers, as are the characters who dream in movies. These internal dramas are usually seen strictly from the dreamer’s point of view. In nightmares, we can’t look into our own eyes except by indirection, perhaps because we fear discovering that therein lie the worst monsters plaguing us.

Viola’s face, sweet as milk chocolate, was now distorted by a beseeching expression. “Tell me the truth, Odd. Do you see death in me?”

I didn’t say to her that death lies dormant in each of us and will bloom in time.

Although not one small detail of Viola’s future, whether grim or bright, had been revealed to me, the delicious aroma of my untouched cheeseburger induced me to lie in order to get on with lunch: “You’ll live a long happy life and pass away in your sleep, of old age.”

“Really?”

Smiling and nodding, I was unashamed of this deception. For one thing, it might be true. I see no real harm in giving people hope. Besides, I had not sought to be her oracle.

In a better mood than she'd arrived, Viola departed, returning to the paying customers.

Picking up my cheeseburger, I said to Terri, "October 23, 1958."

"Elvis was in the army then," she said, hesitating only to chew a bite of her grilled-cheese sandwich. "He was stationed in Germany."

"That's not very specific."

"The evening of the twenty-third, he went into Frankfurt to attend a Bill Haley concert."

"You could be making this up."

"You know I'm not." Her crisp dill pickle crunched audibly when she bit it. "Backstage, he met Haley and a Swedish rock-'n'-roll star named Little Gerhard."

"Little Gerhard? That can't be true."

"Inspired, I guess, by Little Richard. I don't know for sure. I never heard Little Gerhard sing. Is Viola going to be shot in the head?"

"I don't know." Juicy and cooked medium-well, the meat in the cheeseburger had been enhanced with a perfect pinch of seasoned salt. Poke was a contender. "Like you said, dreams are just dreams."

"She's had things hard. She doesn't need this."

"Shot in the head? Who *does* need it?"

"Will you look after her?" Terri asked.

"How would I do that?"

"Put out your psychic feelers. Maybe you can stop the thing before it happens."

"I don't have psychic feelers."

"Then ask one of your dead friends. They sometimes know things that are going to happen, don't they?"

"They're generally not friends. Just passing acquaintances. Anyway, they're helpful only when they want to be helpful."

"If I was dead, I'd help you," Terri assured me.

"You're sweet. I almost wish you were dead." I put down the cheeseburger and licked my fingers. "If somebody in Pico Mundo is going to start shooting people, it'll be Fungus Man."

“Who’s he?”

“Sat at the counter a while ago. Ordered enough food for three people. Ate like a ravenous swine.”

“That’s my kind of customer. But I didn’t see him.”

“You were in the kitchen. He was pale, soft, with all rounded edges, like something that would grow in Hannibal Lecter’s cellar.”

“He put off bad vibes?”

“By the time he left, Fungus Man had an entourage of bodachs.”

Terri stiffened and looked warily around the restaurant. “Any of them here now?”

“Nope. The worst thing on the premises at the moment is Bob Sphincter.”

The real name of the pinchpenny in question was Spinker, but he earned the secret name we gave him. Regardless of the total of his bill, he always tipped a quarter.

Bob Sphincter fancied himself to be two and a half times more generous than John D. Rockefeller, the oil billionaire. According to legend, even in the elegant restaurants of Manhattan, Rockefeller had routinely tipped a dime.

Of course in John D’s day, which included the Great Depression, a dime would purchase a newspaper and lunch at an Automat. Currently, a quarter will get you just a newspaper, and you won’t want to read anything in it unless you’re a sadist, a masochist, or a suicidally lonely wretch desperate to find true love in the personal ads.

Terri said, “Maybe this Fungus Man was just passing through town, and he hit the highway as soon as he cleaned his plate.”

“Got a hunch he’s still hanging around.”

“You gonna check him out?”

“If I can find him.”

“You need to borrow my car?” she asked.

“Maybe for a couple hours.”

I walk to and from work. For longer trips, I have a bicycle. In special cases, I use Stormy Llewellyn’s car, or Terri’s.

So many things are beyond my control: the endless dead with all their requests, the bodachs, the prophetic dreams. I’d probably long

ago have gone seven kinds of crazy, one for each day of the week, if I didn't simplify my life in every area where I *do* have some control. These are my defensive strategies: no car, no life insurance, no more clothes than I absolutely need—mostly T-shirts, chinos, and jeans—no vacations to exotic places, no grand ambitions.

Terri slid her car keys across the table.

"Thanks," I said.

"Just don't haul any dead people around in it. Okay?"

"The dead don't need a ride. They can appear when they want, where they want. They walk through air. They fly."

"All I'm saying is, if you tell me some dead person was sitting in my car, I'll waste a whole day scrubbing the upholstery. It creeps me out."

"What if it's Elvis?"

"That's different." She finished her dill pickle. "How was Rosalia this morning?" she asked, meaning Rosalia Sanchez, my landlady.

"Visible," I said.

"Good for her."

CHAPTER 7

GREEN MOON MALL STANDS ALONG GREEN Moon Road, between old-town Pico Mundo and its modern western neighborhoods. The huge structure, with walls the color of sand, had been designed to suggest humble adobe construction, as though it were a home built by a family of gigantic Native Americans averaging forty feet in height.

In spite of this curious attempt at environmentally harmonious but deeply illogical architecture, patrons of the mall can still be Starbucked, Gapped, Donna Karaned, and Crate Barreled as easily in Pico Mundo as in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, or Miami.

In a corner of the vast parking lot, remote from the mall, stands Tire World. Here the architecture is more playful.

The single-story building supports a tower crowned by a giant globe. This model of Earth, rotating lazily, seems to represent a world of peace and innocence lost when the snake entered Eden.

Like Saturn, this planet sports a ring, not of ice crystals and rocks and dust but of rubber. Encircling the globe is a tire that both rotates and oscillates.

Five service bays ensure that customers will not wait long to have new tires installed. The technicians wear crisp uniforms. They are polite. They smile easily. They seem happy.

Car batteries can be purchased here, as well, and oil changes are offered. Tires, however, remain the soul of the operation.

The showroom is saturated with the enchanting scent of rubber waiting for the road.

That Tuesday afternoon, I wandered the aisles for ten or fifteen minutes, undisturbed. Some employees said hello to me, but none tried to sell me anything.

I visit from time to time, and they know that I am interested in the tire life.

The owner of Tire World is Mr. Joseph Mangione. He is the father of Anthony Mangione, who was a friend of mine in high school.

Anthony attends UCLA. He hopes to have a career in medicine.

Mr. Mangione is proud that his boy will be a doctor, but he is disappointed, as well, that Anthony has no interest in the family business. He would welcome me to the payroll and would no doubt treat me as a surrogate son.

Here, tires are available for cars, SUVs, trucks, motorcycles. The sizes and degrees of quality are many; but once the inventory is memorized, no stress would be associated with any job at Tire World.

That Tuesday, I had no intention of resigning my spatula at the Pico Mundo Grille anytime soon, although short-order cooking can be stressful when the tables are full, tickets are backed up on the order rail, and your head is buzzing with diner lingo. On those days that also feature an unusual number of encounters with the dead, in addition to a bustling breakfast and lunch trade, my stomach sours and I know that I am courting not merely burnout but also early-onset gastrointestinal reflux disease.

At times like that, the tire life seems to be a refuge almost as serene as a monastery.

However, even Mr. Mangione's rubber-scented corner of paradise was haunted. One ghost stubbornly inhabited the showroom.

Tom Jedd, a well-regarded local stonemason, had died eight months previous. His car careened off Panorama Road after midnight, broke through rotted guardrails, tumbled down a rocky hundred-foot embankment, and sank in Malo Suerte Lake.

Three fishermen had been in a boat, sixty yards offshore, when Tom went swimming in his PT Cruiser. They called the cops on a

cell phone, but emergency-rescue services arrived too late to save him.

Tom's left arm had been severed in the crash. The county coroner declared himself undecided as to whether Tom had bled to death or drowned first.

Since then, the poor guy had been moping around Tire World. I didn't know why. His accident had not been caused by a defective tire.

He'd been drinking at a roadhouse called Country Cousin. The autopsy cited a blood-alcohol level of .18, well over the legal limit. He either lost control of the vehicle due to inebriation or he fell asleep at the wheel.

Each time I visited the showroom to stroll the aisles and mull a career change, Tom realized that I saw him, and he acknowledged me with a look or a nod. Once he even winked at me, conspiratorially.

He had not, however, made any attempt to communicate either his purpose or his needs. He was a reticent ghost.

Some days I wish more of them were like him.

He had died in a parrot-patterned Hawaiian shirt, khaki shorts, and white sneakers worn without socks. He always appeared in those clothes when he roamed Tire World.

Sometimes he was dry, but at other times he appeared to be soaked, as if he'd just walked out of Malo Suerte Lake. Usually he had both arms, but occasionally his left arm was missing.

You can tell a lot about a dead person's state of mind by the condition in which he manifests. When dry, Tom Jedd seemed to be resigned to his fate if not fully at peace with it. When wet, he looked angry or distressed, or sullen.

On this occasion, he was dry. His hair had been combed. He appeared to be relaxed.

Tom had both arms this time, but the left wasn't attached to his shoulder. He carried his left arm in his right hand, casually, as though it were a golf club, gripping it by the biceps.

This grotesque behavior did not include gore. Fortunately, I had never seen him bloody, perhaps because he was squeamish or

because he remained in denial that he had bled to death.

Twice, when he knew that I was looking, he used his severed arm as a back scratcher. He clawed between his shoulder blades with the stiff fingers of that detached limb.

As a rule, ghosts are serious about their condition and solemn in their demeanor. They belong on the Other Side but are stuck here, for whatever reasons, and they are impatient to move on.

Once in a while, however, I encounter a spirit with his sense of humor intact. For my amusement, Tom even conspired to pick his nose with the forefinger of his severed arm.

I prefer ghosts to be somber. There's something about a walking dead man trying to get a laugh that chills me, perhaps because it suggests that even postmortem we have a pathetic need to be liked—as well as the sad capacity to humiliate ourselves.

If Tom Jedd had been in less of a jokey mood, I might have lingered longer at Tire World. His shtick disturbed me, as did his twinkly-eyed smile.

As I walked to Terri's Mustang, Tom stood at a showroom window, vigorously and clownishly waving good-bye with his severed arm.

I drove across sun-scorched acres of parking lot and found a space for the Mustang near the main entrance to the mall, where workmen were hanging a banner announcing the big annual summer sale that would run Wednesday through Sunday.

Inside this cavernous retail mecca, most of the stores appeared to be only moderately busy, but the Burke Bailey's ice-cream parlor drew a crowd.

Stormy Llewellyn has worked at Burke Bailey's since she was sixteen. At twenty, she's the manager. Her plan is to own a shop of her own by the time she's twenty-four.

If she had gone into astronaut training after high school, she would have a lemonade stand on the moon by now.

According to her, she's not ambitious, just easily bored and in need of stimulation. I have frequently offered to stimulate her.

She says she's talking about *mental* stimulation.

I tell her that, in case she hasn't noticed, I *do* have a brain.

She says there's definitely no brain in my one-eyed snake and that what might be in my *big* head is still open to debate.

"Why do you think I sometimes call you Pooh?" she once asked.

"Because I'm cuddly?"

"Because Pooh's head is full of stuffin'."

Our life together isn't always a New Wave Abbott and Costello routine. Sometimes she's Rocky and I'm Bull-winkle.

I went to the counter in Burke Bailey's and said, "I need something hot and sweet."

"We specialize in cold," Stormy said. "Go sit out there in the promenade and be good. I'll bring you something."

Although busy, the parlor offered a few empty tables; however, Stormy prefers not to chat on the premises. She is an object of fascination for some of the other employees, and she doesn't want to give them fuel for gossip.

I understand precisely how they feel about her. She's an object of fascination for me, too.

Therefore I stepped out of Burke Bailey's, into the public promenade, and sat with the fish.

Retail sales and theater have joined forces in America: Movies are full of product placements, and malls are designed with drama in mind. At one end of Green Moon Mall, a forty-foot waterfall tumbled down a cliff of man-made rocks. From the falls, a stream coursed the length of the building, over a series of diminishing rapids.

At the end of a compulsive-shopping spree, if you realized that you had bankrupted yourself in Nordstrom, you could fling yourself into this water feature and drown.

Outside Burke Bailey's, the stream ended in a tropical pond surrounded by palm trees and lush ferns. Great care had been taken to make this vignette look real. Faint recorded bird calls echoed hauntingly through the greenery.

Except for the lack of enormous insects, suffocating humidity, malaria victims groaning in death throes, poisonous vipers as thick as mosquitoes, and rabid jungle cats madly devouring their own feet, you would have sworn you were in the Amazon rainforest.

In the pond swam brightly colored koi. Many were large enough to serve as a hearty dinner. According to the mall publicity, some of these exotic fish were valued as high as four thousand dollars each; tasty or not, they weren't within everyone's grocery budget.

I sat on a bench with my back to the koi, unimpressed by their flashy fins and precious scales.

In five minutes, Stormy came out of Burke Bailey's with two cones of ice cream. I enjoyed watching her walk toward me.

Her uniform included pink shoes, white socks, a hot-pink skirt, a matching pink-and-white blouse, and a perky pink cap. With her Mediterranean complexion, jet-black hair, and mysterious dark eyes, she looked like a sultry espionage agent who had gone undercover as a hospital candy striper.

Sensing my thoughts, as usual, she sat beside me on the bench and said, "When I have my own shop, the employees won't have to wear stupid uniforms."

"I think you look adorable."

"I look like a goth Gidget."

Stormy gave one of the cones to me, and for a minute or two we sat in silence, watching shoppers stroll past, enjoying our ice cream.

"Under the hamburger and bacon grease," she said, "I can still smell the peach shampoo."

"I'm an olfactory delight."

"Maybe one day when I have my own shop, we can work together and smell the same."

"The ice-cream business doesn't move me. I love to fry."

"I guess it's true," she said.

"What?"

"Opposites attract."

"Is this the new flavor came in last week?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Cherry chocolate coconut chunk?"

"Coconut cherry chocolate chunk," she corrected. "You've got to get the proper adjective in front of *chunk* or you're screwed."

"I didn't realize the grammar of the ice-cream industry was so rigid."

“Describe it your way, and some weasel customers will eat the whole thing and then ask for their money back because there weren’t chunks of coconut in it. And don’t ever call me adorable again. Puppies are adorable.”

“As you were coming toward me, I thought you looked sultry.”

“The smart thing for you would be to stay away from adjectives altogether.”

“Good ice cream,” I said. “Is this the first taste you’ve had?”

“Everyone’s been raving about it. But I didn’t want to rush the experience.”

“Delayed gratification.”

“Yeah, it makes everything sweeter.”

“Wait too long, and what was sweet and creamy can turn sour.”

“Move over Socrates. Odd Thomas takes the podium.”

I know when the thin ice under me has begun to crack. I changed the subject. “Sitting with my back to all those koi creeps me out.”

“You think they’re up to something?” she asked.

“They’re too flashy for fish. I don’t trust them.”

She glanced over her shoulder, at the pond, then turned her attention once more to the ice cream. “They’re just fornicating.”

“How can you tell?”

“The only thing fish ever do is eat, excrete, and fornicate.”

“The good life.”

“They excrete in the same water where they eat, and they eat in the semen-clouded water where they fornicate. Fish are disgusting.”

“I never thought so until now,” I said.

“How’d you get out here?”

“Terri’s Mustang.”

“You been missing me?”

“Always. But I’m looking for someone.” I told her about Fungus Man. “This is where my instinct brought me.”

When someone isn’t where I expect to find him, neither at home nor at work, then sometimes I cruise around on my bicycle or in a borrowed car, turning randomly from street to street. Usually in less than half an hour, I cross paths with the one I seek. I need a face or a name for focus, but then I’m better than a bloodhound.

This is a talent for which I have no name. Stormy calls it “psychic magnetism.”

“And here he comes now,” I said, referring to Fungus Man, who ambled along the promenade, following the descending rapids toward the tropical koi pond.

Stormy didn’t have to ask me to point the guy out to her. Among the other shoppers, he was as obvious as a duck in a dog parade.

Although I had nearly finished the ice cream without being chilled, I shivered at the sight of this strange man. He trod the travertine promenade, but my teeth chattered as if he had just walked across my grave.

CHAPTER 8

PALE, PUFFY, HIS WATERY GRAY GAZE FLOATING over store windows, looking almost as bemused as an Alzheimer's patient who has wandered out of his care facility into a world he no longer recognizes, Fungus Man carried stuffed shopping bags from two department stores.

"What's that yellow thing on his head?" Stormy asked.

"Hair."

"I think it's a crocheted yarmulke."

"No, it's hair."

Fungus Man went into Burke Bailey's.

"Are the bodachs still with him?" Stormy asked.

"Not as many as before. Just three."

"And they're in my store with him?"

"Yeah. They all went inside."

"This is bad for business," she said ominously.

"Why? None of your customers can see them."

"How could slinky, slithering evil spirits be *good* for business?" she countered. "Wait here."

I sat with the fornicating koi at my back and the unfinished ice cream in my right hand. I had lost my appetite.

Through the windows of Burke Bailey's, I could see Fungus Man at the counter. He studied the flavor menu, then placed an order.

Stormy herself didn't serve him but hovered nearby, behind the counter, on some pretense.

I didn't like her being in there with him. I sensed that she was in danger.

Although experience has taught me to trust my feelings, I did not go inside to stand guard near her. She had asked me to wait on the bench. I had no intention of crossing her. Like most men, I find it mortifying to be ass-kicked by a woman who doesn't even weigh 110 pounds *after* Thanksgiving dinner.

If I'd had a lamp and a genie and one wish, I would have wished myself back to Tire World, to the serenity of that showroom with its aisles of soothingly round rubber forms.

I thought of poor Tom Jedd, waving good-bye with his severed arm, and I decided to finish my ice cream, after all. None of us ever knows when he's approaching the end of his road. Maybe this was the last scoop of coconut cherry chocolate chunk that I'd ever have a chance to eat.

As I finished the final bite, Stormy returned and sat beside me again. "He's ordered takeout. One quart of maple walnut and one quart of mandarin-orange chocolate."

"Are the flavors significant?"

"That's for you to decide. I'm just reporting in. He's sure one megaweird sonofabitch. I wish you'd just forget about him."

"You know I can't."

"You have a messiah complex, got to save the world."

"I don't have a messiah complex. I just have...this gift. It wouldn't have been given to me if I wasn't supposed to use it."

"Maybe it's not a gift. Maybe it's a curse."

"It's a gift." Tapping my head, I said, "I've still got the box it came in."

Fungus Man stepped out of Burke Bailey's. In addition to the two department-store bundles, he carried a quilted, insulated bag that contained the ice cream.

He looked right, looked left, and right again, as though not certain from which direction he had arrived here. His vague smile, which seemed to be as permanent as a tattoo, widened briefly, and he nodded as though in cheerful agreement with something that he'd said to himself.

When Fungus Man began to move, heading upstream toward the waterfall, two bodachs accompanied him. For the moment, the third remained in Burke Bailey's.

Rising from the bench, I said, "I'll see you for dinner, Goth Gidget."

"Try to show up alive," she said. "Because, remember, *I* can't see the dead."

I left her there, all pink and white and sultry, in the palmy tropics with the scent of amorous koi, and I followed the human mushroom to the main entrance of the mall and then out into sunshine almost sharp enough to peel the corneas off my eyes.

The griddle-hot blacktop seemed but one degree cooler than the molten tar pits that had sucked down dinosaurs in distant millennia. The air flash-dried my lips and brought to me that summer scent of desert towns that is a melange of superheated silica, cactus pollen, mesquite resin, the salts of long-dead seas, and exhaust fumes suspended in the motionless dry air like faint nebulae of mineral particles spiraling through rock crystal.

Fungus Man's dusty Ford Explorer stood in the row behind mine and four spaces farther west. If my psychic magnetism had been any stronger, we would have been parked bumper to bumper.

He opened the tailgate of the SUV and put in the shopping bags. He had brought a Styrofoam cooler to protect the ice cream, and he snugged both quarts in that insulated hamper.

Earlier, I had forgotten to prop the reflective sun barrier against the windshield in the Mustang. It was folded and tucked between the passenger's seat and the console. Consequently, the steering wheel had grown too hot to touch.

I started the engine, turned on the air conditioner, and used my rearview and side mirrors to monitor Fungus Man.

Fortunately, his movements were nearly as slow and methodical as the growth of mildew. By the time he backed out of his parking space, I was able to follow him without leaving scraps of blistered skin on the steering wheel.

We had not yet reached the street when I realized that none of the bodachs had accompanied the smiley man when he'd left the mall.

None were currently in the Explorer with him, and none loped after it, either.

Earlier, he had departed the Grille with an entourage of at least twenty, which had shrunk to three when he arrived at Burke Bailey's. The bodachs are usually devout in their attendance to any man who will be the source of terrible violence, and they do not desert him until the last drop of blood has been spilled.

I wondered if Fungus Man was, after all, the evil incarnation of Death that I had taken him to be.

The lake of blacktop glistened with so much stored heat that it appeared to have no more surface tension than water, and yet the Explorer cruised across it without leaving wake or wimple.

Even in the absence of bodachs, I continued to trail my quarry. My shift at the Grille was done. The rest of the afternoon as well as the evening lay ahead. No one is more restless than a short-order cook at loose ends.

CHAPTER 9

CCAMP'S END IS NOT A TOWN IN ITSELF BUT A neighborhood of Pico Mundo that is the living memory of hard times even when the rest of our community is experiencing an economic boom. More lawns are dead than not, and some are gravel. Most of the small houses need new stucco, fresh paint, and a truce with termites.

Shacks were built here in the late 1800s, when prospectors with more dreams than common sense were drawn to the area by silver and rumors of silver. They discovered rich veins of the latter.

Over time, as the prospectors became legend and could not be found anymore in the flesh, the weathered shacks were replaced by cottages, shingled bungalows, and casitas with barrel-tile roofs.

In Camp's End, however, renovation turned to ruin faster than elsewhere. Generation after generation, the neighborhood retained its essential character, an air not so much of defeat as of weary patience: the sag, the peel, the rust, the bleak and blanched but never quite hopeless spirit of a precinct in purgatory.

Hard luck seemed to seep out of the ground itself, as though the devil's rooms in Hades were directly beneath these streets, his sleeping loft so near the surface that his fetid breath, expelled with every snore, percolated through the soil.

Fungus Man's destination was a pale-yellow stucco casita with a faded blue front door. The carport leaned precipitously, as if the weight of sunshine alone might collapse it.

I parked across the street from the house, in front of an empty lot full of parched jimson weed and brambles as intricately woven as a dreamcatcher. They had caught only crumpled papers, empty beer cans, and what appeared to be a tattered pair of men's boxer shorts.

As I put down the car windows and switched off the engine, I watched Fungus Man carry his ice cream and other packages into the house. He entered by a side door in the carport shadows.

Summer afternoons in Pico Mundo are long and blistering, with little hope of wind and none of rain. Although my wristwatch and the car clock agreed on 4:48, hours of searing sunshine remained ahead.

The morning weather forecast had called for a high of 110 degrees, by no means a record for the Mojave. I suspected that this prediction had been exceeded.

When cool-climate relatives and friends are astonished to hear such temperatures, Pico Mundians put a chamber-of-commerce spin on our meteorology, noting that the humidity is a mere fifteen or twenty percent. Our average summer day, they insist, isn't like a sweltering steam bath but like a refreshing sauna.

Even in the shade of a huge old Indian laurel with roots no doubt deep enough to tap the Styx, I couldn't pretend that I was being coddled in a sauna. I felt like a child who had wandered into the gingerbread house of a Black Forest witch and had been popped into her oven with the control at SLOW BAKE.

Occasionally a car passed, but no pedestrians appeared.

No children were at play. No homeowner ventured forth to putter in a withered garden.

One dog slumped past, head low, tongue lolling, as if it were stubbornly tracking the mirage of a cat.

Soon my body provided the humidity that the air lacked, until I sat in a puddle of sweat.

I could have started the Mustang and switched on the air conditioning, but I didn't want to waste Terri's gasoline or overheat the engine. Besides, as any desert denizen knows, repeated heating and cooling may temper some metals, but it softens the human mind.

After forty minutes, Fungus Man reappeared. He locked the side door of the house, which suggested that no one remained at home, and got behind the wheel of his dust-shrouded Explorer.

I slid down in my seat, below the window, listening as the SUV drove past and left a trail of sound that dwindled into silence.

Crossing to the pale-yellow house, I didn't worry unduly about being watched from any of the sun-silvered windows along the street. Living in Camp's End inspired alienation rather than the community spirit needed to form a Neighborhood Watch committee.

Instead of going to the blue front door and making a greater spectacle of myself, I sought the shadows of the carport and knocked on the side door that Fungus Man had used. No one answered.

If the door had featured a deadbolt lock, I would have had to force a window. Confronted by a mere latch bolt, I was confident that, like other young Americans, I had been so well educated by TV cop dramas that I could slip easily into the house.

To simplify my life, I keep no bank accounts and pay only cash; therefore, I have no credit cards. California had thoughtfully issued to me a laminated driver's license stiff enough to loid the lock.

As I'd anticipated, the kitchen wasn't a shrine either to Martha Stewart decor or to cleanliness. The place couldn't be fairly called a pigsty, either; it was just plagued by a general disarray, with here and there an offering of crumbs to ants if they wished to visit.

A faint but unpleasant smell laced the well-cooled air. I could not identify the source, and at first I thought that it must be the singular fragrance of Fungus Man, for he appeared to be one who would issue strange and noxious odors if not also deadly spores.

I didn't know what I sought here, but I expected to recognize it when I saw it. Something had drawn the bodachs to this man, and I had followed in their wake with the hope of discovering a clue to the reason for their interest.

After I circled the kitchen, trying but failing to find meaning in a mug half filled with cold coffee, in a browning banana peel left on a cutting board, in the unwashed dishes in the sink, and in the ordinary contents of drawers and cupboards, I realized that the air

was not just cool but inexplicably chilly. For the most part, the sweat on my exposed skin had dried. On the nape of my neck, it felt as though it had turned to ice.

The pervasive chill was inexplicable because even in the Mojave, where air conditioning was essential, a house as old and as humble as this rarely had central cooling. Window-mounted units, each serving a single chamber, were a viable alternative to the costly retrofitting of a dwelling that didn't merit the expense.

The kitchen had no such window units.

Often in a home like this, the residents held the heat at bay only at night and only in the bedroom. Sleep might otherwise be difficult. Even in this small house, however, an air conditioner in the bedroom would not be able to cool the entire structure. Certainly it could not have made an icebox of the kitchen.

Besides, window-mounted units were noisy: the chug and hum of the compressor, the rattle of the fan. I heard none of that here.

As I stood, head cocked, listening, the house waited in silence. On consideration, I suddenly found this stillness to be unnatural.

My shoes should have teased noise from the cracked linoleum, from floorboards loosened by time, heat, and shrinking aridity. Yet when I moved, I had the stealth of a cat on pillows.

In retrospect, I realized that the drawers and the cupboard doors had opened and closed with only the softest whisper, as though constructed with frictionless slides and hinges.

When I moved toward the open doorway between the kitchen and the next room, the cold air seemed to thicken, further muffling the transmission of sound.

The sparsely furnished living room proved to be as dreary and as marked by disorder as the kitchen. Old battered paperbacks, no doubt purchased at a used-book store, and magazines littered the floor, the couch, the coffee table.

The magazines were what you might expect. Photos of nude women were featured between articles about extreme sports, fast cars, and pathetic seduction techniques, all surrounded by ads for virility herbs and for devices guaranteed to increase the size of the average man's favorite body part, by which I do not mean his brain.

My favorite body part is my heart because it is the only thing I have to give Stormy Llewellyn. Furthermore, the beat of it, when I wake each morning, is my first best evidence that I have not, during the night, joined the community of the stubbornly lingering dead.

The paperbacks surprised me. They were romance novels. Judging by the cover illustrations, these were of the more chaste variety, in which bosoms seldom heaved and bodices were not often lustily ripped open. They were stories less concerned with sex than with love, and they were a peculiar counterpoint to the magazines full of women fondling their breasts, spreading their legs, and licking their lips lasciviously.

When I picked up one of the books and thumbed through it, the riffing pages made no noise.

By this point, I seemed to be able to hear no sounds except those that had an internal origin: the thud of my heart, the rush of blood in my ears.

I should have fled right then. The eerie muffling effect of the malign atmosphere in the house ought to have alarmed me.

Because my days are characterized as much by strange experiences as by the aroma of meat smoke and the sizzle of fat on the griddle, I don't alarm easily. Furthermore, I admit to a tendency, sometimes regrettable, to surrender always to my curiosity.

Riffling the soundless pages of the romance novel, I thought that perhaps Fungus Man did not live here alone. These books might have been the preferred reading material of his companion.

This possibility turned out not to be supported by the evidence in his bedroom. The closet contained only his clothes. The unmade bed, the scatter of yesterday's underwear and socks, and a half-eaten raisin Danish on a paper plate, on the nightstand, argued against the civilizing presence of a woman.

An air conditioner, mounted in the window, wasn't running. No breeze blew from its vents.

The faint foul smell first detected in the kitchen grew stronger here, reminiscent of the malodor of a shorting electrical cord, but not quite that, with a hint of ammonia and a trace of coal dust and a whiff of nutmeg, but not quite any of those things, either.

The short hallway that served the bedroom also led to the bath. The mirror needed to be cleaned. On the counter, the toothpaste tube had not been capped. A small wastebasket overflowed with used Kleenex and other trash.

Across the hall from Fungus Man's bedroom stood another door. I assumed it led either to a closet or to a second bedroom.

At that threshold, the air grew so chilled that I could see my breath, a pale plume.

Icy against my palm, the doorknob turned. Beyond lay a vortex of silence that sucked the last sound out of my ears, leaving me for the moment deaf even to the labor of my heart.

The black room waited.

CHAPTER 10

DURING MY TWENTY YEARS, I HAVE BEEN IN MANY dark places, some lacking light and others devoid of hope. In my experience, none had been darker than that strange room in the home of Fungus Man.

Either this chamber had no windows or all the windows had been boarded over and caulked against every prying blade of sunshine. No lamps glowed. In this profound gloom, had there been a digital clock with an LED readout, the faint radiance of its numerals would have seemed like a blazing beacon.

At the threshold, I squinted into such absolute blackness that I seemed to be peering not into a room at all but into dead space in a far region of the universe where the ancient stars were burnt-out cinders. The bone-brittling cold, deeper here than elsewhere in the house, and the oppressive silence argued as well that this was some bleak way station in the interstellar vacuum.

More peculiar than anything else: The hallway light failed to penetrate even a fraction of an inch into the realm beyond the door. The demarcation of light and utter lightlessness was as sharp as a painted line at the inner edge of the threshold, up the jamb, and across the header. The perfect gloom did not merely resist the intrusion of light but foiled it entirely.

This seemed to be a wall of blackest obsidian, though obsidian that lacked polish and glimmer.

I am not fearless. Toss me in a cage with a hungry tiger, and if I should escape, I will need a bath and clean pants as surely as will the next guy.

My unique path through life has led me, however, to fear known threats but seldom the unknown, while most people fear both.

Fire scares me, yes, and earthquakes, and venomous snakes. People scare me more than anything, for I know too well the savagery of which humankind is capable.

To me, however, the most daunting mysteries of existence—death and what lies beyond—have no fright factor because I deal with the dead each day. Besides, I have faith that where I am ultimately going is not to mere oblivion.

In spooky movies, do you rail at the beleaguered characters to get the hell out of the haunted house, to get smart and *leave*? They poke into rooms with a history of bloody murder, into attics hung with cobwebs and shadows, into cellars acrawl with cockroaches and cacodemons, and when they are chopped-stabbed-gutted-beheaded-burned with the flamboyance necessary to satisfy Hollywood's most psychotic directors, we gasp and shudder, and then we say, "Idiot," for by their stupidity they have earned their fate.

I'm not stupid, but I am one of those who will never flee the haunted place. The special gift of paranormal sight, with which I was born, impels me to explore, and I can no more resist the demands of my talent than a musical prodigy can resist the magnetic pull of a piano; I am no more deterred by the mortal risks than is a fighter pilot eager to take flight into war-torn skies.

This is part of the reason why Stormy occasionally wonders if my gift might be instead a curse.

On the brink of unblemished blackness, I raised my right hand as if I were taking an oath—and pressed my palm to the apparent barrier before me. Although this darkness could fend off light, it offered no resistance whatsoever to the pressure that I applied. My hand disappeared into the tarry gloom.

By "disappeared," I mean that I could perceive not even the vaguest impression of my wiggling fingers beyond the surface of this wall of blackness. My wrist ended as abruptly as that of an amputee.

I must admit that my heart raced, though I felt no pain, and that I exhaled with relief—and without sound—when I withdrew my hand and saw that all my digits were intact. I felt as though I had survived an illusion performed by those self-proclaimed bad boys of magic, Penn and Teller.

When I stepped across the threshold, however, holding fast to the door casing with one hand, I entered not an illusion but a real place that seemed more unreal than any dream. The blackness ahead remained uncannily pure; the cold was unrelenting; and the silence cloyed as effectively as congealed blood in the ears of a head-shot dead man.

Although from the far side of the doorway I had been unable to discern one scintilla of this room, I could look out from within it and see the hallway in normal light, unobstructed. This view shed no more illumination into the room than would have a painting of a sunny landscape.

I half expected to find that Fungus Man had returned and that he was staring at the only part of me now visible from out there: my hooked fingers desperately clutching the casing. Fortunately, I was still alone.

Having discovered that I could see the exit to the hall and therefore could find my way out, I let go of the doorway. I eased entirely into this lightless chamber and, turning away from the sight of the hall, became at once as blind as I was deaf.

Without either sound or vision, I quickly grew disoriented. I felt for a light switch, found it, flicked it up and down and up again without effect.

I grew aware of a small red light that I was certain hadn't been there a moment earlier: the murderous red of a sullen and bloody eye, though it was not an eye.

My sense of spatial reality and my ability to gauge distance with accuracy abandoned me, for the tiny beacon seemed to be miles from my position, like the mast light of a ship far away on a night sea. This small house, of course, could not contain such a vastness as I imagined lay before me.

When I let go of the useless light switch, I felt as unnervingly buoyant as a hapless drunkard inflated by the fumes of alcohol. My feet seemed not quite to touch the floor as I determinedly approached the red light.

Wishing that I'd had a second scoop of coconut cherry chocolate chunk while I'd had the chance, I took six steps, ten, twenty. The beacon didn't increase in size and seemed in fact to recede from me at precisely the speed at which I approached it.

I stopped, turned, and peered back at the door. Although I had made no progress toward the light, I had traveled what appeared to be approximately forty feet.

Of more interest than the distance covered was the figure now silhouetted in the open door. Not Fungus Man. Backlit by the hallway light stood...me.

Although the mysteries of the universe do not greatly frighten me, I've not lost my capacity for astonishment, amazement, and awe. Now, across the keyboard of my mind played arpeggios of those three sentiments.

Convinced that this wasn't a mirror effect and that I was in fact gazing at another me, I nevertheless tested my certainty by waving. The other Odd Thomas didn't return my wave, as a reflection would have done.

Because I stood submerged in this swampish blackness, he could not see me, and so I tried to shout to him. In my throat, I felt the quiver of strummed vocal chords, but if sound was produced, I could not hear it. Most likely he, too, was deaf to that cry.

As tentatively as I had done, this second Odd Thomas reached into the palpable dark with one questing hand, marveling as I had done at the illusion of amputation.

This timid intrusion seemed to disturb a delicate equilibrium, and abruptly the black room shifted like the pivot mountings of a gyroscope, while the red light at the center remained fixed. Flung by forces beyond my control, much as a surfer might be tossed from his board in the collapsing barrel of a mammoth wave, I was magically churned out of that weird chamber and—

—into the drab living room.

I found myself not tumbled in a heap, as I might have expected to be, but standing approximately where I had stood earlier. I picked up one of the paperback romance novels. As before, the pages made no noise, and I could hear only those sounds of internal origin, such as my heart beating.

Glancing at my wristwatch, I convinced myself that this was, indeed, *earlier*. I had not merely been magically transported from the black room to the living room but also had been cast a few minutes backward in time.

Since I had a moment ago seen myself peering into the blackness from the hall doorway, I could assume that by the grace of some anomaly in the laws of physics, *two* of me now existed simultaneously in this house. There were the me here with a Nora Roberts novel in my hands and the other me in some nearby room.

At the start, I warned you that I lead an unusual life.

A great deal of phenomenal experience has fostered in me a flexibility of the mind and imagination that some might call madness. This flexibility allowed me to adjust to these events and accept the reality of time travel more quickly than you would have done, which does not reflect badly on you, considering that *you* would have been wise enough to get the hell out of the house.

I didn't flee. Neither did I at once retrace my original route to Fungus Man's bedroom—with its scatter of underwear and socks, the half-eaten raisin Danish on the nightstand—or to his bathroom.

Instead, I put down the romance novel and stood quite still, carefully thinking through the possible ramifications of encountering the *other* Odd Thomas, responsibly calculating the safest and most rational course of action.

Okay, that's bullshit. I could *worry* about the ramifications, but I didn't have either *enough* phenomenal experience or the brainpower to imagine all of them, let alone to figure out the best way to extract myself from this bizarre situation.

I'm less skilled at extracting myself from trouble than I am at plunging into it.

At the living-room archway, I cautiously peeked into the hallway and spotted the other me standing at the open door of the black

room. This must have been the earlier me that had not yet crossed that threshold.

If all sound had not by now been entirely suppressed within the house, I would have been able to call out to that other Odd Thomas. I'm not sure that would have been prudent, and I'm grateful that the circumstances prevented me from hailing him.

If I *had* been able to speak to him, I'm not certain what I would have said. *How's it hanging?*

Were I to walk up to him and give him a narcissistic hug, the paradox of two Odd Thomases might at once be resolved. One of us might disappear. Or perhaps both of us would explode.

Big-browed physicists tell us that two objects cannot under any circumstances occupy the same place at the same time. They warn that any effort to put two objects in the same place at the same time will have catastrophic consequences.

When you think about it, a lot of fundamental physics is the solemn statement of the absurdly obvious. Any drunk who has tried to put his car where a lamppost stands is a self-educated physicist.

Assuming that two of me could not coexist without calamity, not charmed by the prospect of exploding, I remained in the archway, watching, until the other Odd Thomas stepped across the threshold into the black room.

You no doubt suppose that upon his departure the time paradox had been resolved and that the crisis described by those doomsaying scientists was at an end, but your optimism is a result of the fact that you are happy in your world of the five standard senses. You are not, as I am, compelled to action by a paranormal talent that you do not understand and cannot fully control.

Lucky you.

As soon as that Odd Thomas stepped for the first time across the threshold into the lightless chamber, I walked directly to the door that he'd left open behind him. I could not see him, of course, out there in the mysteries of the black room, but I assumed that soon he would turn, look back, and see me—an event that in my experience had already come to pass.

When I judged that he'd spotted the sullen red light and had progressed about twenty paces toward it, when he'd had time to look back and see me standing here, I checked my wristwatch to establish the beginning of this episode, reached into the blackness with my right hand, just to be sure nothing felt different about that strange realm, and then I crossed the threshold once more.

CHAPTER 11

MY GREATEST CONCERN, ASIDE FROM EXPLODING and aside from being late for dinner with Stormy, was that I might find myself caught in a time loop, doomed to follow myself repeatedly through Fungus Man's house and through the door into the black room, over and over for all of eternity.

I'm not sure that such a thing as a time loop is possible. The average physicist might laugh smugly at my concern and charge me with ignorance. This was *my* crisis, however, and I felt free to speculate without restraint.

Rest assured that no time loop became established: The remainder of my story will not consist of endless repetitions of the events immediately heretofore described—although there are reasons that I wish it did.

Less hesitant on my second visit to the black room, I strode more boldly, yet with that same queasy-making buoyancy, toward the crimson beacon at the center of the chamber. This mysterious lamp seemed to shed a more ominous light than it had previously, though as before it did not relieve the gloom.

Twice I glanced back toward the open door to the hallway but didn't see myself on either occasion. Nevertheless, I experienced that sudden gyroscopic spin, as before, and I was again churned out of that strange chamber—

—this time into the hot July afternoon, where I found myself walking out of the shadows under the carport, into sunshine that

stabbed like fistfuls of golden needles at my eyes.

I halted, squinted against the glare, and retreated to the gloom.

The profound silence that reigned in the house did not extend beyond those walls. A dog barked lazily in the distance. An old Pontiac with a knocking engine and a squealing fan belt passed in the street.

Certain that I had spent no more than a minute in the black room, I consulted my wristwatch again. Apparently I had been not only cast out of the house but also five or six minutes into the future.

Out in the half-burnt yard and in the bristling weeds along the chain-link fence between this property and the next, cicadas buzzed, buzzed, as though the sunlit portion of the world were plagued by myriad short circuits.

Many questions arose in my mind. None of them concerned either the benefits of a career in tires or the financial strategy by which a twenty-year-old short-order cook might best begin to prepare for his retirement at sixty-five.

I wondered if a man living behind a perpetual half-wit smile, a man incapable of keeping a neat house, a man conflicted enough to split his reading time between skin magazines and romance novels, could be a closet supergenius who, with electronic components from Radio Shack, would be able to transform one room of his humble home into a time machine. Year by year, weird experience has squeezed all but a few drops of skepticism from me, but the supergenius explanation didn't satisfy.

I wondered if Fungus Man was really a man at all—or something new to the neighborhood.

I wondered how long he had lived here, who he pretended to be, and what the hell his intentions were.

I wondered if the black room might be not a time machine but something even stranger than that. The time-related occurrences might be nothing more than side effects of its primary function.

I wondered how long I was going to stand in the shade of the sagging carport, brooding about the situation instead of *doing something*.

The door between the carport and the kitchen, through which I had initially entered the house, had automatically locked behind me when I had first gone inside. Again I popped the latch bolt with my laminated driver's license, pleased to know that finally I was getting something back for the state income taxes that I had paid.

In the kitchen, the browning banana peel continued to shrivel on the cutting board. No time-traveling housemaid had attended to the dirty dishes in the sink.

Soft-core pornography and romance novels still littered the living room, but when I had crossed halfway to the hallway arch, I stopped abruptly, struck by what had changed.

I could hear normally. My footsteps had crackled the ancient linoleum in the kitchen, and the swinging door to the living room had squeaked on unoiled hinges. That vortex of silence no longer sucked all sound out of the house.

The air, which had been freezing, was now merely cool. And getting warmer.

The singular foul odor that smelled like not-exactly-burning-electrical-cord blended with not-exactly-ammonia-coal-dust-nutmeg had grown far more pungent than before but no easier to identify.

Ordinary instinct, rather than any sixth sense, told me not to proceed to the black room. In fact, I felt an urgent need to retreat from the nearby hallway arch.

I returned to the kitchen and hid behind the swinging door, holding it open two inches to see from whom, if anyone, I had fled.

Only seconds after I had reached concealment, bodachs swarmed out of the hallway into the living room.

CHAPTER 12

A GROUP OF BODACHS ON THE MOVE SOMETIMES brings to mind a pack of stalking wolves. On other occasions they remind me of a pride of slinking cats.

Pouring through the hallway arch into the living room, this particular swarm had an unnerving insectile quality. They exhibited the cautiously questing yet liquid-swift progress of a colony of cockroaches.

They came in roachlike numbers, too. Twenty, thirty, forty: They quivered into the room as silent and as black as shadows but, unlike shadows, they were untethered from any entities that might have cast them.

To the ill-fitted front door, to the poorly caulked living-room windows, they streamed as if they were billows of soot drawn by a draft. Through crack and chink, they fled the house, into the sun-drenched afternoon of Camp's End.

Still they swarmed out of the hallway: fifty, sixty, seventy, and more. I had never before encountered so many bodachs at one time.

Although, from my position in the kitchen, I couldn't see around the living-room archway and down the hall, I knew where the intruders must have entered the house. They had not arisen spontaneously from among the gray dust balls and the moldering socks under Fungus Man's unmade bed. Nor had they manifested out of a boogeyman-infested closet, out of a bathroom faucet, from

the toilet bowl. They had arrived in the house by way of the black room.

They seemed eager to leave this place behind them and to explore Pico Mundo—until one of them separated from the churning swarm. It abruptly halted in the center of the living room.

In the kitchen, I considered that no available cutlery, no toxic household cleanser, no weapon known to me would wound this beast that had no substance. I held my breath.

The bodach stood so hunched that its hands, if they were hands, dangled at its knees. Turning its lowered head from side to side, it scanned the carpet for the spoor of its prey.

No troll, crouched in the darkness beneath its bridge, relishing the scent of a child's blood, had ever looked more malevolent.

At the gap between jamb and door, my left eye felt pinched, as though my curiosity had become the serrated jaws of a vise that held me immobile even when it seemed wise to exit at a sprint.

As others of its kind continued to roil and ripple past it, my nemesis rose from its crouch. The shoulders straightened. The head lifted, turned slowly left, then right.

I regretted using peach-scented shampoo, and suddenly I could smell the meaty essence that the greasy smoke from the griddle had deposited upon my skin and hair. A short-order cook, just off work, makes easy tracking for lions and worse.

The all but featureless, ink-black bodach had the suggestion of a snout but no visible nostrils, no apparent ears, and if it had eyes, I could not discern them. Yet it searched the living room for the source of whatever scent or sound had snared its attention.

The creature appeared to focus on the door to the kitchen. As eyeless as Samson in Gaza, it nevertheless detected me.

I had studied the story of Samson in some detail, for he was a classic example of the suffering and the dark fate that can befall those who are...gifted.

Standing very erect now, taller than me, the bodach was an imposing figure in spite of its insubstantiality. Its bold poise and a quality of arrogance in the lift of its head suggested that I was to it

as the mouse is to the panther, that it had the power to strike me dead in an instant.

Pent-up breath swelled in my lungs.

The urge to flee became almost overpowering, but I remained frozen for fear that if the bodach had not for certain seen me, then even the small movement of the swinging door would bring it at a run.

Grim expectation made seconds seem like minutes—and then to my surprise, the phantom slumped into a crouch once more and loped away with the others. With the suppleness of black silk ribbon, it slipped between window sash and sill, into sunlight.

I blew out my sour breath and sucked sweet air, watching as a final score of bodachs spilled through the hallway arch.

When these last foul spirits had departed for the Mojave heat, I returned to the living room. Cautiously.

At least a hundred of them had passed through this room. More likely, there had been half again that many.

In spite of all that traffic, not one page of any magazine or romance novel had been ruffled. Their passage had left no slightest impression in the nap of the carpet.

At one of the front windows, I peered out at the blighted lawn and the sun-scorched street. As far as I could determine, none of the recently departed pack lingered in the neighborhood.

The unnatural chill in this small house had gone the way of the bodachs. The desert day penetrated the thin walls until every surface in the living room seemed to be as radiant as the coils of an electric heater.

During their passage, that tumult of purposeful shadows had left no stain on the hallway walls. No trace of the burning-electrical-cord smell remained, either.

For the third time, I stepped up to that doorway.

The black room was gone.

CHAPTER 13

BEYOND THE THRESHOLD LAY AN ORDINARY chamber, not infinite in its dimensions, as it had seemed earlier, measuring no more than twelve by fourteen feet.

A single window looked out through the branches of a lacy melaleuca that screened much of the sunlight. Nevertheless, I could see well enough to determine that no source existed for a sullen red light either in the center of this humble space or in any corner.

The mysterious power that had transformed and controlled this room—casting me minutes back, and then forward, in time—was no longer in evidence.

Apparently, this served as Fungus Man's study. A bank of four-drawer filing cabinets, an office chair, and a gray metal desk with a laminated imitation-wood-grain top were the only furnishings.

Side by side on the wall opposite the desk hung three black-and-white, poster-size photographs that appeared to have been printed on a draftsman's digital plotter. They were head shots, portraits of men—one with feverish eyes and a gleeful smile, the other two glowering in the gloom.

All three were familiar, but I could at first put a name to only the one with the smile: Charles Manson, the vicious manipulator whose fantasies of revolution and race war had exposed a cancer at the core of the flower-power generation and had led to the demise of the Age of Aquarius. He had carved a swastika on his forehead.

Whoever the other two might be, they didn't have the look of either Vegas comics or famous philosophers.

Perhaps my imagination, as much as the melaleuca-filtered sunlight, imparted a faint silvery luminescence to each man's intense gaze. This glow reminded me of the milky radiance that informs the hungry glare of animate corpses in movies about the living dead.

In part to alter the quality of those eyes, I switched on the overhead light.

The dust and disorder that characterized the rest of the house were not in evidence here. When he crossed this threshold, Fungus Man left his slovenliness behind and became a paragon of neatness.

The file cabinets proved to contain meticulously kept folders filled with articles clipped from publications and downloaded from the Internet. Drawer after drawer contained dossiers on serial killers and mass murderers.

The subjects ranged from Victorian England's Jack the Ripper to Osama bin Laden, for whom Hell had prepared a special suite of fiery rooms. Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer. Charles Whitman, the sniper who killed sixteen in Austin, Texas, in 1966. John Wayne Gacy: He liked to dress up as a clown at children's parties, had his picture taken at a political event with First Lady Rosalyn Carter, and buried numerous dismembered bodies in his backyard and under his house.

A particularly thick file had been assembled for Ed Gein, who had been the inspiration for both Norman Bates in *Psycho* and Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Gein had enjoyed eating soup from a human skull and had fashioned a fancy belt from the nipples of his victims.

The unknown dangers of the black room had not daunted me, but here was a known evil, entirely comprehensible. Cabinet by cabinet, my chest tightened with dread and my hands trembled, until I slammed shut a file drawer and resolved to open no more of them.

Memory freshened by what I'd seen in those folders, I could now put names to the poster-size photographs that flanked Charles Manson.

A portrait of Timothy McVeigh hung to the right of Manson. McVeigh had been convicted and executed for the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, where 168 people were killed in 1995.

To the left hung Mohammed Atta, who had flown an airliner into one of the World Trade Center towers, killing thousands. I had seen no evidence that Fungus Man sympathized with the cause of radical Islamic fascists. As with Manson and McVeigh, he apparently admired Atta for the terrorist's cruel vision, brutal actions, and accomplishments in the service of evil.

This room was less of a study than it was a shrine.

Having seen enough, too much, I wanted to get out of the house. I yearned to return to Tire World, breathe the scent of rubber ready for the road, and think about what to do next.

Instead, I sat in the office chair. I am not squeamish, but I cringed slightly when I put my hands on the arms of the chair where his hands might have rested.

On the desk were a computer, a printer, a brass lamp, and a day-date calendar. Not a speck of dust or lint could be seen on any surface.

From this perch, I surveyed the study, trying to understand how it could have become the black room and then could have reverted to this ordinary space again.

No residual St. Elmo's fire of supernatural energy glimmered along the metal edges of the file cabinets. No otherworldly presences revealed themselves.

For a while, this room had been transformed into...a portal, a doorway between Pico Mundo and somewhere far stranger, by which I do not mean Los Angeles or even Bakersfield. Perhaps for a while this house had been a train station between our world and Hell, if Hell exists.

Or if I had reached the bloody red light at the center of that otherwise perfect darkness, perhaps I would have found myself on a planet in a remote arm of the galaxy, where bodachs ruled. Lacking a boarding pass, I had instead been flung into the living room and the past, then into the carport and the future.

Of course I examined the possibility that what I had seen could have been mere delusion. I might be as crazy as a laboratory rat that has been fed a diet of psychosis-inducing toxins and forced to watch TV “reality” shows that explore in detail the daily lives of washed-up supermodels and aging rock stars.

From time to time, I *do* consider that I might be mad. Like any self-respecting lunatic, however, I am always quick to dismiss any doubts about my sanity.

I saw no reason to search the study for a hidden switch that might convert it again into the black room. Logic suggested that the formidable power needed to open that mysterious doorway had been projected not from here but from the other side, wherever that might be.

Most likely Fungus Man was unaware that his sanctum served not merely as a catalogued repository for his homicidal fantasies but also as a terminal admitting bodachs to a holiday of blood. Without my sixth sense, perhaps he could sit here, happily working on one of his grisly files, and not be conscious of the ominous transformation of the room or of the arriving hordes of demonic entities.

From nearby came a *tick-tick-tick*, a bone-on-bone rattle that brought to mind Halloween images of ambulatory skeletons, and then a brief scuttling sound.

I rose from the chair and listened, alert.

Tickless seconds passed. A rattle-free half minute.

A rat, perhaps, had stirred in the walls or attic, made sick and restless by the heat.

I sat once more and opened the desk drawers one by one.

In addition to pencils, pens, paper clips, a stapler, scissors, and other mundane items, I found two recent bank statements and a checkbook. All three were addressed to Robert Thomas Robertson at this house in Camp’s End.

Good-bye, Fungus Man; hello, Bob.

Bob Robertson didn’t have the necessary malevolent ring for the name of a would-be mass murderer. It sounded more like a jovial car salesman.

The four-page statement from Bank of America reported upon a savings account, two six-month certificates of deposit, a money-market account, and a stock-trading account. The combined value of all Robertson's assets at Bank of America amounted to \$786,542.10.

I scanned the figure three times, certain that I must be misreading the placement of the comma and the decimal point.

The four-page statement from Wells Fargo Bank, accounting for investments in its care, showed a combined value of \$463,125.43.

Robertson's handwriting was sloppy, but he faithfully kept a running balance in his checkbook. The current available resources in this account totaled \$198,648.21.

That a man with liquid assets of nearly one and a half million dollars should make his home in a shabby, sweltering casita in Camp's End seemed downright perverse.

If I had this much green at my command, I might continue to cook short-order now and then purely for the artistic satisfaction, but never for a living. The tire life might not in the least appeal to me any longer.

Perhaps Robertson required few luxuries because he found all the pleasure he needed in ceaseless bloody fantasies that gouted through his imagination.

A sudden frenzied flapping-rattling almost brought me up from the chair again, but then a sharp and repeated *skreek* identified the source as crows pecking out their turf on the roof. They come out early on summer mornings, before the heat is insufferable, spend the afternoon in leafy bowers, and venture out again when the gradually retreating sun begins to lose some of its blistering power.

I am not afraid of crows.

In the checkbook register, I pored back through three months of entries but found only the usual payments to utilities, credit-card companies, and the like. The sole oddity was that Robertson had also written a surprising number of checks to *cash*.

During the past month alone, he had withdrawn a total of \$32,000 in \$2,000 and \$4,000 increments. For the past two months, the total reached \$58,000.

Even with his prodigious appetite, he couldn't eat that much Burke Bailey's ice cream.

Evidently he had expensive tastes, after all. And whatever indulgence he allowed himself, it was one that he couldn't purchase openly with checks or credit cards.

Returning the financial statements to the desk drawer, I began to sense that I had stayed too long in this place.

I assumed that the engine noise of the Explorer pulling into the carport would alert me to Robertson's return and that I would be able to slip out of the front as he entered by the side door. If for any reason he parked in the street or came home on foot, however, I might find myself trapped before I discovered that he had arrived.

McVeigh, Manson, and Mohammad Atta seemed to watch me. How easily I could imagine that genuine awareness informed the intense eyes in those photographs and that they glinted now with wicked expectation.

Lingering a moment longer, I turned backward through the small, square day-date pages on the desk calendar, searching for notations of appointments or other reminders that Robertson might have written during recent weeks. All the note lines were blank.

I returned to the current date—Tuesday, August 14—and then flipped forward, into the future. The page for August 15 was missing. Nothing had been written in the calendar after that date for as far as I cared to look.

Leaving everything as I had found it, I rose from the desk and went to the door. I switched off the overhead light.

Golden sunshine, trimmed into flame shapes by the intervening bladelike leaves of the melaleuca, made a false fire on the sheer curtains, without greatly illuminating the room, and the emboldened shadows seemed to gather more heavily around the portraits of the three killers than elsewhere.

A thought occurred to me—which happens more often than some people might suppose and certainly more often than I would prefer—whereupon I switched the light on again and went to the bank of file cabinets. In the drawer labeled *R*, I checked to see if, among

these dossiers of butchers and lunatics, Fungus Man kept a file on himself.

I found one. The tab declared: ROBERTSON, ROBERT THOMAS.

How convenient it would have been if this folder had contained newspaper clippings concerning unsolved murders as well as highly incriminating items related to those killings. I could have memorized the file, replaced it, and reported my findings to Wyatt Porter.

With that information, Chief Porter could have figured a way to entrap Robertson. We could have put the creep behind bars before he had a chance to commit whatever crimes he might be currently contemplating.

The file, however, contained but a single item: the page that was missing from the desk calendar. Wednesday, August 15.

Robertson had written nothing on the note lines. Apparently, in his mind, the date itself was significant enough to include as the first item in the file.

I consulted my wristwatch. In six hours and four minutes, August 14 and August 15 would meet at the midnight divide.

And after that, what would happen? Something. Something...not good.

Returning to the living room, to the stained furniture and the dust and the litter of publications, I was struck once more by the sharp contrast between the well-cleaned and well-ordered study and the rest of the residence.

Out here, engrossed sometimes in raunchy magazines and sometimes in romances innocent enough to be read by ministers' wives, evidently oblivious of forgotten banana peels and empty coffee mugs and dirty socks long overdue for laundering, Robertson seemed to be unfocused, adrift. This was a man of half-formed clay, his identity in doubt.

By contrast, the Robertson who spent time in the study, creating and tending to those hundreds of files, surfing websites dealing with serial killers and mass murderers, knew precisely who he was—or at least who he wished to be.

CHAPTER 14

I LEFT AS I HAD ENTERED, BY THE SIDE DOOR connecting the kitchen and the carport, but I didn't immediately return to the Mustang that I had borrowed from Terri Stambaugh. Instead, I went behind the house to have a close look at the backyard.

The front lawn had been half dead, but the grass here in back had withered away long ago. The well-baked dirt had not received a drop of water since the last rain in late February, five and a half hot months ago.

If a man were in the habit of burying his victims, dismembered or not, in the backyard, a la John Wayne Gacy, he would keep the soil receptive to a shovel. This hardpan would break the point of a pick and send any midnight gravedigger in search of a jackhammer.

Fenced with open chain-link on which grew no vines or other screening vegetation, the backyard offered no privacy to a murderer with an inconvenient corpse on his hands. If they were of a ghoulish disposition, the neighbors could open a keg of beer, set up lawn chairs, and watch the interment for entertainment.

Supposing that Robertson was an actual serial killer instead of merely a wannabe, he had planted his garden elsewhere. I suspected, however, that the file he had created for himself was complete as of this date and that his debut performance would be tomorrow.

Watching from the edge of the barrel-tile roof, a crow cracked its orange beak and shrieked, as though it suspected that I had come to

poach whatever crispy beetles and other sparse fare it fed upon in this parched territory.

I thought of Poe's dire raven, perched above the parlor door, maddeningly repeating one word—*nevermore, nevermore*.

Standing there, gazing up, I didn't realize that the crow was an omen, or that Poe's famous verse would, in fact, serve as the key to unlock its meaning. Had I understood then that this shrill crow was my raven, I would have acted much differently in the hours that followed; and Pico Mundo would still be a place of hope.

Failing to understand the importance of the crow, I returned to the Mustang, where I found Elvis sitting in the passenger's seat. He wore boat shoes, khaki slacks, and a Hawaiian shirt.

All other ghosts of my acquaintance have been limited in their wardrobes to the clothes that they were wearing when they perished.

For instance, Mr. Callaway, my high-school English teacher, died on his way to a costume party, dressed as the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*. Because he had been a man of some refinement, born with dignity and poise, I found it depressing, in the months following his death, to encounter him around town in his cheap velour costume, his whiskers drooping, his tail dragging the ground after him. I was much relieved when at last he let go of this world and moved on.

In death as in life, Elvis Presley makes his own rules. He seems to be able to conjure any costume that he wore on a stage or in the movies, as well as the clothes that he wore when not performing. His attire is different from one manifestation to the next.

I have read that after downing an imprudent number of sleeping pills and depressants, he died in his underwear or maybe in his pajamas. Some say that he was found in a bathrobe as well, but some say not. He has never yet appeared to me in quite such casual dress.

For certain, he died in his bathroom at Graceland, unshaven and facedown in a puddle of vomit. This is in the coroner's report.

Happily, he always greets me clean-shaven and without a beard of upchuck.

On this occasion, when I sat behind the steering wheel and closed the car door, he smiled and nodded. His smile had an unusual melancholy quality.

He reached out and patted me on the arm, clearly expressing sympathy, if not pity. This puzzled and somewhat troubled me, for I had suffered nothing that would warrant such an expression of commiseration.

Here in the aftermath of August 15, I still cannot say how much Elvis knew then of the terrible events that were about to unfold. I suspect he foresaw all of it.

Like other ghosts, Elvis does not speak. Nor sing.

He dances sometimes if he's in a rhythmic mood. He's got some cool moves, but he's no Gene Kelly.

I started the car and punched up some random-play music on the CD box. Terri keeps the six-disc magazine stocked with the best work of her idol.

When "Suspicious Minds" came from the speakers, Elvis seemed to be pleased. With his fingertips, he tapped the rhythm on the dashboard as I drove out of Camp's End.

By the time we reached Chief Wyatt Porter's house in a better neighborhood, we were listening to "Mama Liked the Roses," from *Elvis's Christmas Album*, and the King of Rock 'n' Roll had succumbed to quiet tears.

I prefer not to see him like this. The hard-driving rocker who sang "Blue Suede Shoes" wears a cocky smile and even a sneer better than he does tears.

Karla Porter, Wyatt's wife, answered the door. Willowy, lovely, with eyes as green as lotus petals, she unfailingly projects an aura of serenity and quiet optimism that is in contrast with her husband's doleful face and mournful eyes.

I suspect Karla is the reason that Wyatt's job has not worn him down to total ruin. Each of us needs a source of inspiration in his life, a cause for hope, and Karla is Wyatt's.

"Oddie," she said, "what a pleasure to see you. Come in, come in. Wyatt is out back, getting ready to destroy some perfectly good

steaks on the barbecue. We're having a few people to dinner, we've got plenty extra, so I hope you'll stay."

As she led me through the house, unaware that Elvis accompanied us in a "Heartbreak Hotel" mood, I said, "Thank you, ma'am, that's very gracious of you, but I've got another engagement. I just stopped by to have a quick word with the chief."

"He'll be delighted to see you," she assured me. "He always is."

In the backyard, she turned me over to Wyatt, who was wearing an apron bearing the words BURNT AND GREASY GOES BETTER WITH BEER.

"Odd," Chief Porter said, "I hope you've not come here to ruin my evening."

"That's not my intention, sir."

The chief was tending to two grills—the first fired by gas for vegetables and ears of corn, the second by charcoal for the steaks.

With the sun still more than two hours above the horizon, a day of desert sunshine stored in the patio concrete, and visible waves of heat pouring off both barbecues, he should have been making enough salt water to reconstitute the long-dead sea of Pico Mundo. He was, however, as dry as the star of an antiperspirant commercial.

Over the years, I have seen Chief Porter sweat only twice. On the first occasion, a thoroughly nasty man was aiming a spear gun at the chief's crotch from a distance of just two feet, and the second occasion was much more unnerving than that.

Checking out the bowls of potato salad, corn chips, and fresh fruit salad on the picnic table, Elvis seemed to lose interest when he realized that no deep-fried banana-and-peanut-butter sandwiches would be provided. He wandered off to the swimming pool.

After I declined a bottle of Corona, the chief and I sat in lawn chairs, and he said, "You been communing with the dead again?"

"Yes, sir, off and on all day. But this isn't so much about who's dead as who might be soon."

I told him about Fungus Man at the restaurant and later at Green Moon Mall.

"I saw him at the Grille," the chief said, "but he didn't strike me as suspicious, just...unfortunate."

“Yes, sir, but you didn’t have the advantage of being able to see his fan club.” I described the disturbing size of Fungus Man’s bodach entourage.

When I recounted my visit to the small house in Camp’s End, I pretended, rather ludicrously, that the side door had been standing open and that I had gone inside under the impression that someone might be in trouble. This relieved the chief of the need to conspire with me, after the fact, in the crime of breaking and entering.

“I’m not a high-wire artist,” he reminded me.

“No, sir.”

“You expect me to walk a dangerously narrow line sometimes.”

“I have great respect for your balance, sir.”

“Son, that sounds perilously like bullshit.”

“There’s some bullshit in it, sir, but it’s mostly sincerity.”

Telling him what I found in the house, I omitted any mention of the black room and the traveling swarm. Even a man as sympathetic and open-minded as Wyatt Porter will become a skeptic if you force too much exotic detail upon him.

When I finished my story, the chief said, “What’s got your attention, son?”

“Sir?”

“You keep looking over toward the pool.”

“It’s Elvis,” I explained. “He’s behaving strangely.”

“Elvis Presley is here? Now? At my house?”

“He’s walking on the water, back and forth, and gesticulating.”

“Gesticulating?”

“Not rudely, sir, and not at us. He looks like he’s arguing with himself. Sometimes I worry about him.”

Karla Porter reappeared, this time with their first two dinner guests in tow.

Bern Eckles, in his late twenties, was a recent addition to the Pico Mundo Police Department. He had been on the force just two months.

Lysette Rains, who specialized in false fingernails, was the assistant manager at the thriving beauty shop that Karla owned on

Olive Street, around the corner and two blocks from where I worked at the Grille.

These two had not arrived as a couple, but I could see that the chief and Karla were engaged in some matchmaking.

Because he didn't know—and never would—about my sixth sense, Officer Eckles couldn't figure out what to make of me, and he had not yet decided whether he liked me. He couldn't understand why the chief always made time for me even on the busiest of days.

After the new arrivals had been served drinks, the chief asked Eckles to come to his study for a few minutes. "I'll get on the computer to the DMV while you make some phone calls for me. We need to work up a quick profile on this odd duck from Camp's End."

On his way into the house with the chief, Bern Eckles twice looked over his shoulder at me, frowning. Maybe he thought that in his absence I would try to make time with Lysette Rains.

When Karla returned to the kitchen, where she was working on the dessert, Lysette sat in the chair that the chief had occupied. With both hands, she held a glass of Coke spiked with orange vodka, from which she took tiny sips, licking her lips after each.

"How does that taste?" I wondered.

"Sort of like cleaning fluid with sugar. But sometimes I have a low energy level, and the caffeine helps."

She was wearing yellow shorts and a frilly yellow blouse. She looked like a lemon cupcake with fancy icing.

"How's your mother these days, Odd?"

"Still colorful."

"I would expect so. And your dad?"

"He's about to get rich quick."

"What with this time?"

"Selling real estate on the moon."

"How does that work?"

"You pay fifteen bucks, you get a deed to one square foot of the moon."

"Your father doesn't own the moon," Lysette said with the faintest note of disapproval.

She is a sweet person and reluctant to give offense even at evidence of flagrant fraud.

“No, he doesn’t,” I agreed. “But he realized that nobody else owned it, either, so he sent a letter to the United Nations, staking claim to it. The next day he started peddling moon property. I hear you’ve been made assistant manager of the shop.”

“It’s quite a responsibility. Especially ’cause I’ve also moved up in my specialty.”

“You’re not doing fingernails anymore?”

“Yes, I am. But I was just a nail technician, and now I’m a certified nail *artist*.”

“Congratulations. That’s really something.”

Her shy smile of pride made me love her. “It’s not so much to some people, but it’s a thrill to me.”

Elvis returned from the swimming pool and sat in a lawn chair opposite us. He was weeping again. Through his tears, he smiled at Lysette—or at her cleavage. Even in death he likes the ladies.

“Are you and Bronwen still an item?” Lysette asked.

“Forever. We have matching birthmarks.”

“I’d forgotten about that.”

“She prefers to be called Stormy.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Lysette said.

“How about you and Officer Eckles?”

“Oh, we just met. He seems nice.”

“Nice.” I winced. “The poor guy’s already struck out with you, hasn’t he?”

“Two years ago, he would’ve, yeah. But lately, I’m thinking nice would be enough. You know?”

“There’s a lot worse than nice out there.”

“For sure,” she agreed. “It takes a while to realize what a lonely world it is, and when you do...then the future looks kinda scary.”

Already in a delicate emotional condition, Elvis was wrecked by Lysette’s observation. The rillets of tears on his cheeks became twin floods, and he buried his face in his hands.

Lysette and I chatted for a while, and Elvis sobbed without making a sound, and eventually four more guests showed up.

Karla was circulating with a tray of cheese dumplings that gave new weight to the word *hors d'oeuvre*, when the chief returned with Officer Eckles. He drew me aside and walked with me to the far end of the pool, so we could talk in private.

He said, "Robertson moved into town five months ago. Paid in full for that house in Camp's End, no mortgage."

"Where's he get his money?"

"Inherited. Bonnie Chan says he moved here from San Diego after his mother's death. He was still living with his mother at thirty-four."

Bonnie Chan, a Realtor famous in Pico Mundo for her flamboyant hats, had evidently sold the residence to Robertson.

"As far as I can see at this point," the chief said, "he's got a clean record. He's never even had a speeding ticket."

"You might look into how the mother died."

"I've already put out some inquiries about that. But right now I don't have any handle to pick him up."

"All those files on all those killers."

"Even if I had a legitimate way of knowing he keeps them, it's just a sick hobby or maybe book research. There's nothing illegal about it."

"Suspicious, though."

He shrugged. "If being suspicious was enough, we'd all be in jail. You first."

"But you're gonna keep a watch on him?" I asked.

"Only because you've never been wrong. I'll park somebody over there this evening, pin a tail on this Mr. Robertson."

"I wish you could do more," I said.

"Son, this is the United States of America. Some would say it's unconstitutional to try to prevent psychopaths from fulfilling their potential."

Sometimes the chief can amuse me with that kind of cynical-cop patter. This wasn't one of those occasions.

I said, "This one's really bad, sir. This guy, when I picture his face in my mind...I get spiders down the spine."

“We’re watching him, son. Can’t do more than that. Can’t just go to Camp’s End and shoot him.” The chief gave me a peculiar look and added, “Neither can you.”

“Guns scare me,” I assured him.

The chief looked over toward the swimming pool and said, “He still walking the water?”

“No, sir. He’s standing next to Lysette, looking down her blouse and crying.”

“That’s nothing to cry about,” the chief said, and winked.

“The crying has nothing to do with Lysette. He’s just in a mood today.”

“What about? Elvis never struck me as weepy.”

“People change when they die. It’s traumatic. He’s like this from time to time, but I don’t know for sure what the trouble is. He doesn’t try to explain himself to me.”

Clearly, the chief was dismayed by the image of Presley weeping. “Is there anything I can do for him?”

“That’s thoughtful of you, sir, but I don’t see what anyone can really do. From what I’ve observed on other occasions, my sense of it is...he misses his mother, Gladys, and wants to be with her.”

“As I recall, he was especially fond of his mama, wasn’t he?”

“He adored her,” I said.

“Isn’t she dead, too?”

“Much longer than he’s been, yes.”

“Then they’re together again, aren’t they?”

“Not as long as he’s reluctant to let go of this world. She’s over there in the light, and he’s stuck here.”

“Why won’t he move on?”

“Sometimes they have important unfinished business here.”

“Like little Penny Kallisto this morning, leading you to Harlo Landerson.”

“Yes, sir. And sometimes they just love this world so much they don’t want to leave it.”

The chief nodded. “This world sure was good to him.”

“If it’s unfinished business, he’s had more than twenty-six years to take care of it,” I noted.

The chief squinted toward Lysette Rains, trying to see some smallest evidence of her spirit companion—a wisp of ectoplasm, a vague distortion of the air, a quiver of mystical radiance. “He made some great music.”

“Yes, he did.”

“You tell him he’s always welcome here.”

“I will, sir. That’s kind of you.”

“Are you sure you can’t stay for dinner?”

“Thank you, sir, but I’ve got a date.”

“With Stormy, I’m sure.”

“Yes, sir. My destiny.”

“You’re a smooth operator, Odd. She must love to hear you say that—‘my destiny.’”

“I love to hear me say it.”

The chief put his arm around my shoulders and walked me to the gate at the north side of the house. “Best thing that can happen to a man is a good woman.”

“Stormy is beyond just good.”

“I’m happy for you, son.” He lifted the latch and opened the gate for me. “Don’t you worry about this Bob Robertson. We’ll dog him, but so he doesn’t suspect we’re watching. He tries to make a wrong move, we’ll be all over him.”

“I’ll worry just the same, sir. He’s a very bad man.”

When I got to the Mustang, Elvis was already sitting in the passenger’s seat.

The dead don’t need to walk where they want to go—or ride in a car, for that matter. When they choose to walk or cruise the streets, they’re motivated by nostalgia.

From the poolside party to the Mustang, he had changed out of the clothes from *Blue Hawaii*. Now he was wearing black slacks, a dressy tweed sport coat, white shirt, black tie, and black pocket handkerchief, an outfit from (as Terri Stambaugh later told me) *It Happened at the World’s Fair*.

Driving away from the Porter house, we listened to “Stuck on You,” as infectious a tune as ever the King recorded.

Elvis rapped out the rhythm on his knees and bobbed his head, but the tears kept flowing.

CHAPTER 15

IN DOWNTOWN PICO MUNDO, AS WE WERE PASSING a church, Elvis indicated that he wanted me to pull to the curb.

When I stopped the car, he held out his right hand to me. His grip was as real and warm as Penny Kallisto's.

Instead of shaking my hand, he clasped it in both of his. Maybe he was simply thanking me, but it seemed like more than that.

He appeared to be worried about me. He gently squeezed my hand, staring intensely at me with evident concern, and then squeezed my hand again.

"It's all right," I said, although I had no idea whether that was in any way an adequate response.

He got out of the car without opening the door—just phased through it—and walked up the steps of the church. I watched until he passed through the heavy oak doors and out of sight.

My dinner date with Stormy wasn't until eight o'clock, so I had time to kill.

Keep busy, Granny Sugars used to say, even if with poker, fighting, and fast cars, because idleness will get you in worse trouble.

Even lacking Grandma's advice, I couldn't just have gone to my rendezvous point with Stormy and waited for her. With nothing else to occupy my mind, I'd dwell on Bob Robertson and his demonic files.

Cruising away from the church, I phoned P. Oswald Boone, he of the four hundred pounds and the six-fingered left hand.

Little Ozzie answered on the second ring. “Odd, my beautiful cow exploded.”

“Exploded?”

“Boom,” said Little Ozzie. “One minute all is right with the world, and the next minute your fabulous cow is blown to bits.”

“When did this happen? I haven’t heard anything about it.”

“Exactly two hours and twenty-six minutes ago. The police have been here and gone, and I believe that even they, with all their experience of criminal savagery, were shocked by this.”

“I just saw Chief Porter, and he didn’t mention it.”

“After they left here, the responding officers no doubt needed a stiff drink or two before writing their report.”

“How’re you doing?” I asked.

“I’m not bereft, because that would be a morally offensive overreaction, but I *am* sad.”

“I know how much you loved that cow.”

“I loved that cow,” he confirmed.

“I was thinking of coming over for a visit, but maybe this isn’t the best time.”

“This is the perfect time, dear Odd. Nothing is worse than being alone on the evening of the day when one’s cow has exploded.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes,” I promised.

Little Ozzie lives in Jack Flats, which fifty years ago was called Jack Rabbit Flats, an area west and downhill from the historical district. I have no idea where the rabbit went.

When the picturesque downtown commercial district began to be a tourist draw in the late 1940s, it was given a series of quaintness injections to increase its appeal. The less photogenic enterprises—muffler shops, tire stores, gun shops—were squeezed to the Flats.

Then twenty years ago, glittering new commercial centers arose along Green Moon Road and Joshua Tree Highway. They drained customers from the shabbier businesses in the Flats.

Gradually during the past fifteen years, Jack Flats has been gentrified. Old commercial and industrial buildings were bulldozed. Homes, townhomes, and upscale apartments took their place.

The first to settle in the neighborhood when few could see its future, Little Ozzie purchased a one-acre parcel on which had stood a long-out-of-business restaurant. There he built his dream home.

This two-story, Craftsman-style residence has an elevator, wide doorways, and steel-reinforced floors. Ozzie constructed it both to accommodate his proportions and to withstand the punishment that he might inflict upon it if eventually he becomes, as Stormy fears, one of those men for whom the attending mortician requires a crane and a flatbed truck.

When I parked in front of the now cowless house, I was more shocked by the carnage than I had expected to be.

Standing under one of the Indian laurels that cast long shadows in the westering sun, I stared in dismay at the giant carcass. All things of this earth eventually pass away, but sudden and premature departures are nonetheless disturbing.

The four legs, chunks of the blasted head, and slabs of the body were scattered across the front lawn, shrubbery, and walkway. In a particularly macabre touch, the inverted udder had landed on one of the gateposts in the picket fence, and the teats pointed skyward.

This black-and-white Holstein cow, approximately the size of an SUV, had previously stood atop two twenty-foot-tall steel poles, neither of which had been damaged in the explosion. The only thing left on that high perch was the cow's butt, which had shifted position until it faced the street, as if mooning passersby.

Under the plastic Holstein had once hung a sign for the steakhouse restaurant that had previously occupied the property. When he built his home, Little Ozzie had not preserved the sign, only the giant plastic bovine.

To Ozzie, the cow wasn't merely the largest lawn ornament in the world. It was art.

Of the many books that he has written, four have been about art, so he ought to know what he's talking about. In fact, because he is Pico Mundo's most famous resident (living, anyway) and perhaps its most respected, and because he was building a home in the Flats when everyone else expected it to remain a blighted zone in

perpetuity, only Little Ozzie could have argued successfully before the city building department to keep the cow, as sculpture.

As the Flats became more upscale, some of his neighbors—not most, but a highly vocal minority—objected to the giant cow on aesthetic grounds. Perhaps one of them had resorted to violence.

By the time that I navigated through the jagged shards of cow art and climbed the front porch steps, before I could ring the bell, Ozzie opened the wide door, hove across the threshold, and greeted me. “Is this not pathetic, Odd, what some ill-educated fool has done? I take solace in reminding myself that ‘art is long and critics are the insects of a day.’”

“Shakespeare?” I asked.

“No. Randall Jarrell. A wonderful poet, now all but forgotten because modern universities teach nothing but self-esteem and toe-sucking.”

“I’ll clean this up for you, sir.”

“You will not!” Ozzie declared. “Let them look at the ruin for a week, a month, these ‘venomous serpents who delight in hissing.’”

“Shakespeare?”

“No, no. W. B. Daniel, writing on critics. I’ll have the debris picked up eventually, but the ass of that fine cow will remain up there, my answer to these bomb-toting philistines.”

“So it was a bomb?”

“A very small one, affixed to the sculpture during the night, with a timer that allowed these ‘serpents who feed on filth and venom’ to be far from the crime when the blast came. That’s not Shakespeare, either. Voltaire writing on critics.”

“Sir, I’m a little worried about you,” I said.

“Don’t be concerned, lad. These cowards have barely sufficient courage to sneak up on a plastic cow in the dead of night, but they don’t have the spine to confront a fat man with forearms as thick as mine.”

“I’m not talking about them. I’m referring to your blood pressure.”

With a dismissive wave of one of his formidable arms, Little Ozzie said, “If you carried my bulk, your blood rich with cholesterol molecules the size of miniature marshmallows, you’d understand

that a little righteous outrage from time to time is the only thing that keeps your arteries from clogging shut altogether. Righteous outrage and fine red wine. Come in, come in. I'll open a bottle, and we'll toast the destruction of all critics, 'this wretched race of hungry alligators.'"

"Shakespeare?" I asked.

"For Heaven's sake, Odd, the Bard of Avon wasn't the only writer ever to put pen to paper."

"But if I just stick with him," I said, following Ozzie into the house, "I'll get one of these right sooner or later."

"Was it with such pathetic tricks that you slid through high school?"

"Yes, sir."

Ozzie invited me to make myself comfortable in his living room while he fetched the Robert Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon, and thus I found myself alone with Terrible Chester.

This cat is not fat, but he is big and fearless. I once saw him stand off an aggressive German shepherd sheerly with attitude.

I suspect that even a pit bull, gone bad and in a murdering mood, would have turned away as the shepherd did, and would have gone in search of easier prey. Like crocodiles.

Terrible Chester is the color of a rufescent pumpkin, with black markings. Judging by the black-and-orange patterns on his face, you might think he was the satanic familiar of that old rock group, Kiss.

Perched on a deep windowsill, gazing out at the front yard, he pretended for a full minute to be unaware that company had arrived.

Being ignored was fine with me. The shoes I wore had never been peed on, and I hoped to keep them that way.

Finally turning his head, he regarded me appraisingly, with contempt so thick that I expected to hear it drizzle to the floor with a spattering sound. Then he shifted his attention once more to the window.

The exploded Holstein seemed to fascinate him and to put him in a somber, contemplative mood. Perhaps he had used up eight of his lives and felt a chill of mortality.

The furniture in Ozzie's living room is custom, oversized, and built for comfort. A Persian carpet in dark jewel tones, Honduran mahogany woodwork, and shelves upon shelves of books create a cozy ambience.

In spite of the danger to my shoes, I quickly relaxed and experienced less of a sense of impending doom than at any time since finding Penny Kallisto waiting at the foot of my apartment steps earlier in the day.

Within half a minute, Terrible Chester put me on edge again with his threatening, angry hiss. All cats have this talent, of course, but Chester rivals both rattlesnakes and cobras for the intensity and the menace of his hiss.

Something outside had so disturbed him that he rose to his feet on the windowsill, arched his back, and bristled his hackles.

Although clearly I was not the cause of his agitation, I slid to the edge of my armchair, poised for flight.

Chester hissed again, then clawed the glass. The *skreeeek* of his nails on the window made the fluid quiver in the hollows of my spine.

Suddenly I wondered if the cow-demolition squad had returned in daylight to bring down the stubborn bovine butt.

When Chester raked the glass again, I got to my feet. I eased toward the window with caution, not because I feared that a Molotov cocktail would crash through it but because I didn't want the vexated cat to misunderstand my motives.

Outside, at the picket fence, facing the house, stood the Fungus Man, Bob Robertson.

CHAPTER 16

MY FIRST INSTINCT WAS TO DUCK BACK FROM the window. If Fungus Man was already following me, however, he must somehow suspect that earlier I had been in his house in Camp's End. My furtive behavior would serve to confirm my guilt.

I remained near the window, but I was grateful that Terrible Chester stood between me and Robertson. I also found it gratifying that the cat's apparent intense dislike of the man, even at such a distance as this, confirmed my distrust of him.

Until this moment, I would never have assumed that Terrible Chester and I would agree on any issue or have anything in common other than our affection for Little Ozzie.

For the first time in my experience, Robertson wore no smile, dreamy or otherwise. Standing in sunshine that the weight of the day had condensed from white glare into honey-gold, backdropped by the forms and shadows of the laurels, he looked as grim as the giant photo of Timothy McVeigh on his study wall.

From behind me, Ozzie said, "Oh, God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths, to steal away their brains."

Turning, I found him with a tray on which he offered two glasses of wine and a small plate of cubed cheese surrounded by thin white crackers.

Thanking him, I took one of the glasses and glanced outside.

Bob Robertson was not where he had been.

Risking a dangerous misunderstanding with Terrible Chester, I stepped closer to the window, looking north and south along the street.

“Well?” Ozzie asked impatiently.

Robertson had gone, and quickly, as if with an urgent purpose.

As spooked as I had been to see this strange man at the picket fence, I was still more disturbed to have lost sight of him. If he wanted to follow me, I would submit to being tailed because then I would know where he was and, knowing, would rest easier.

“Oh, God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths, to steal away their brains,” Ozzie repeated.

Turning from the window, I saw that he had put down the tray and stood now with his glass raised as if making a toast.

Struggling to recover my composure, I said, “Some days are so difficult that if we didn’t let wine steal our wits, how would we sleep?”

“Lad, I’m not asking you to debate the statement, merely to identify its source.”

Still rattled by Robertson, I said, “Sir?”

With some exasperation, Ozzie said, “*Shakespeare!* I stack the quiz to ensure you a passing grade, and still you fail. That was Cassio speaking in Act 2, Scene 3 of *Othello*.”

“I was...distracted.”

Indicating the window, where Chester no longer appeared to be agitated and had once more settled into a furry pile on the deep sill, Ozzie said, “The destruction that barbarians leave behind has a grim fascination, doesn’t it? We’re reminded how thin is the veneer of civilization.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, sir, but my thoughts weren’t running that deep. I just...I thought I saw someone I knew passing by.”

Raising the wineglass in his five-fingered hand, Ozzie said, “To the damnation of all miscreants.”

“That’s pretty strong, sir—damnation.”

“Don’t spoil my fun, lad. Just drink.”

Drinking, I glanced at the window again. Then I returned to the armchair where I had been seated before the cat hissed so

alarmingly.

Ozzie settled down, as well, but his chair made a noisier issue of it than mine did.

I looked around at the books, at the wonderful reproductions of Tiffany lamps, but the room didn't exert its usual calming influence. I could almost hear my wristwatch ticking off the seconds toward midnight and August 15.

"You've come here with a burden," Ozzie said, "and since I don't see a hostess gift, I assume the weight you carry is some trouble or other."

I told him everything about Bob Robertson. Although I'd withheld the story of the black room from Chief Porter, I shared it with Ozzie because he has an imagination big enough to encompass anything.

In addition to his nonfiction books, he has written two highly successful series of mystery novels.

The first, as you might expect, is about a fat detective of incomparable brilliance who solves crimes while tossing off hilarious bon mots. He relies on his beautiful and highly athletic wife (who utterly adores him) to undertake all the investigative footwork and to perform all the derring-do.

Those books, Ozzie says, are based on certain hormone-drenched adolescent fantasies that preoccupied him throughout his teenage years. And still linger.

The second series involves a female detective who remains a likable heroine in spite of numerous neuroses and bulimia. This character had been conceived over a five-hour dinner during which Ozzie and his editor made less use of their forks than they made of their wineglasses.

Challenging Ozzie's assertion that a fictional detective could have *any* personal problems or habits, however unpleasant, and still be a hit with the public as long as the author had the skill to make the character sympathetic, the editor had said, "No one could make a large audience want to read about a detective who stuck a finger down her throat and threw up after every meal."

The first novel featuring such a detective won an Edgar Award, the mystery genre's equivalent of an Oscar. The tenth book in the

series had been recently published to greater sales than any of the previous nine.

In solemn tones that fail to disguise his impish glee, Ozzie says that no novels in the history of literature have featured so much vomiting to the delight of so many readers.

Ozzie's success doesn't in the least surprise me. He likes people and he *listens* to them, and that love of humanity shines out of his pages.

When I finished telling him about Robertson, the black room, and the file cabinets packed with thick case histories of homicidal maniacs, he said, "Odd, I wish you would get a gun."

"Guns scare me," I reminded him.

"Your *life* scares *me*. I'm certain Wyatt Porter would issue you a permit to carry a concealed weapon."

"Then I'd have to wear a sports jacket."

"You could switch to Hawaiian shirts, carry the gun in a belt holster in the small of your back."

I frowned. "Hawaiian shirts are just not me."

"Oh, yes," he said with undisguised sarcasm, "your T-shirts and jeans are such a unique fashion statement."

"Sometimes I wear chinos."

"The depth of your wardrobe dazzles the mind. Ralph Lauren weeps."

I shrugged. "I am who I am."

"If I purchase a suitable weapon for you and personally instruct you in its use—"

"Thank you, sir, for your concern, but for sure I'd shoot off both my feet, and the next thing I knew, you'd be writing a series about a footless private investigator."

"It's already been done." He sipped his wine. "Everything's already been done. Only once in a generation does anything as fresh as a vomiting detective come along."

"There's still chronic diarrhea."

He grimaced. "I'm afraid you haven't the knack to be a popular mystery novelist. What *have* you been writing lately?"

"This and that."

“Assuming ‘this’ refers to grocery-shopping lists and ‘that’ refers to mash notes to Stormy Llewellyn, what *else* have you been writing?”

“Nothing,” I admitted.

When I was sixteen, P. Oswald Boone, then a mere 350 pounds, agreed to judge a writing contest at our high school, from which he himself had graduated some years earlier. My English teacher required each of her students to submit an entry to the contest.

Because my Granny Sugars had only recently died and because I’d been missing her, I wrote a piece about her. Unfortunately, it won first prize, making of me a minor celebrity in high school, though I preferred to keep a low profile.

For my memories of Granny, I received three hundred dollars and a plaque. I spent the money on an inexpensive but quite listenable music system.

The plaque and the music system were later smashed to bits by an angry poltergeist.

The only long-term consequence of that writing contest had been my friendship with Little Ozzie, for which I was grateful, although for five years he had harassed me to write, write, write. He said that such a talent was a gift and that I had a moral obligation to use it.

“Two gifts are one too many,” I told him now. “If I had to deal with the dead and also write something worthwhile, I’d either go stark raving mad or shoot myself in the head with that gun you want to give me.”

Impatient with my excuses, he said, “Writing isn’t a source of pain. It’s psychic chemotherapy. It reduces your psychological tumors and *relieves* your pain.”

I didn’t doubt either that this was true for him or that he had enough pain to require a lifetime of psychic chemotherapy.

Although Big Ozzie was still alive, Little Ozzie saw his father only once or twice a year. On each occasion, he required two weeks to recover his emotional equilibrium and trademark good humor.

His mother was alive, too. Little Ozzie hadn’t spoken to her in twenty years.

Big Ozzie currently weighed, at a guess, only fifty pounds less than his son. Consequently, most people assumed that Little Ozzie had inherited his obesity.

Little Ozzie, however, refused to portray himself as a victim of his genetics. He said that at the heart of him was a weakness of will that resulted in his immensity.

Over the years, he sometimes implied and I frequently inferred that his parents had broken a part of his heart that resulted in this mortal weakness of will. He never spoke of his difficult childhood, however, and refused to describe what he had endured. He just wrote mystery novel after mystery novel....

He didn't speak of his folks with bitterness. Instead, he spoke of them hardly at all and avoided them as best he could—and wrote book after book about art, music, food, and wine....

“Writing,” I told him now, “can't relieve my pain as much as it's relieved by the sight of Stormy...or by the taste of coconut cherry chocolate chunk ice cream, for that matter.”

“I have no Stormy in my life,” he replied, “but I can understand the ice cream.” He finished his wine. “What are you going to do about this Bob Robertson?”

I shrugged.

Ozzie pressed me: “You've got to do something if he knows that you were in his house this afternoon and already he's following you around.”

“All I can do is be careful. And wait for Chief Porter to get something on him. Anyway, maybe he wasn't actually following me. Maybe he heard about your exploding cow and stopped by to gawk at the ruins.”

“Odd, I would be indescribably disappointed if, having not yet employed your writing gift to any useful purpose, you wound up dead tomorrow.”

“Just think how *I'd* feel.”

“I might wish that you'd grow wiser faster, get a gun and write a book, but I won't wish anyone's life away for him. ‘How swift are the feet of the days of the years of youth.’”

Giving attribution to the quote, I said, “Mark Twain.”

“Excellent! Perhaps you aren’t a willfully ignorant young fool, after all.”

“You used that quote once before,” I admitted. “That’s how I know it.”

“But at least you remembered! I believe this reveals in you a desire, even if unconscious, to give up the griddle and make yourself a man of literature.”

“I expect I’ll switch to tires first.”

He sighed. “You’re a tribulation sometimes.” He rang his empty wineglass with one fingernail. “I should’ve brought the bottle.”

“Sit still. I’ll get it,” I said, for I could fetch the Cabernet from the kitchen in the time that he would require merely to lever himself up from his armchair.

The ten-foot-wide hallway served as a gallery for fine art, and opening off both sides of it were rooms rich with still more art and books.

At the end of the hall lay the kitchen. On a black-granite counter stood the bottle, uncorked to let the wine breathe.

Although the front rooms had been comfortably air-conditioned, the kitchen proved to be surprisingly warm. Entering, I thought for an instant that all four ovens must be filled with baking treats.

Then I saw that the back door stood open. The desert evening, still broiling in the stubborn summer sun, had sucked the coolness from the kitchen.

When I stepped to the door to close it, I saw Bob Robertson in the backyard, as pale and fungoid as ever he had looked.

CHAPTER 17

ROBERTSON STOOD FACING THE HOUSE, AS though waiting for me to see him. Then he turned and walked toward the back of the property.

For too long, I hesitated in the doorway, uncertain what I should do.

I assumed that one of his neighbors might have recognized me and might have told him that earlier I'd been snooping around during his absence. But the swiftness with which he'd tracked me down and had begun to tail me was disconcerting.

My paralysis broke with the realization that I had endangered Ozzie, had led this psychopath to his house. I left the kitchen, crossed the porch, descended the steps to a patio, stepped onto the lawn, and went after Robertson.

Ozzie's house sits at the front of his one-acre lot, and most of the property is given over to lawn and to trees that screen him from his neighbors. In the back half of the acre, the trees grow thicker than at the front, and stand close enough to qualify as a small woods.

Into this copse of laurel, podocarpus, and California pepper, Robertson strode—and disappeared from view.

The westward-dawdling sun slanted between the trees where it could find narrow gaps, but for the most part the layered branches successfully resisted it. Cooler than the sun-baked lawn, these greenery-scented shadows were nevertheless warm, and they pressed against me in stifling folds.

No less than the cloying shadows, the trunks of the many trees offered concealment. My quarry made good use of them.

I tacked quickly but warily through the woods, north to south, then south to north, first in silence, then calling his name—"Mr. Robertson?"—but he didn't answer.

The few intruding flares of sunlight inhibited rather than assisted the search. They illuminated little but were just numerous enough to prevent my eyes from adjusting well to the gloom.

Afraid of leaving the woods unsearched and therefore giving Robertson a chance to creep in behind me, I took too long to get to the gate in the back fence. I found it closed, but it was held by a gravity latch that would have engaged automatically when it fell shut behind him.

The gate opened into a picturesque brick-paved alleyway, flanked by back fences and garages, shaded here and there by queen palms and willow pepper trees. Neither Bob Robertson nor anyone else was afoot as far as I could see in either direction.

Returning through the woodlet, I half expected him to lunge at me, not gone after all but waiting to catch me with my guard down. If Robertson was hiding in that grove, he must have recognized that I remained alert, for he didn't risk an assault.

When I reached the back porch, I stopped, turned, and studied the pocket forest. Birds flew from those branches, not as if chased out by anything, but only as if taking a last flight before sunset.

In the kitchen again, I closed the door. I engaged the deadbolt lock. And the security chain.

I peered through the windowpanes in the upper half of the door. Peaceful, the woods. And still.

When I returned to the living room with the bottle of Cabernet, half the cheese had disappeared from the canape plate, and Little Ozzie was still ensconced in his commodious chair, where he himself had once said that he looked as cozy as the Toad King on his throne. "Dear Odd, I was beginning to think you'd stepped through a wardrobe into Narnia."

I told him about Robertson.

"You mean," Ozzie said, "that he was *here*, in my house?"

“Yes, I think so,” I said as I refilled his wineglass.

“Doing what?”

“Probably standing in the hall, just beyond that archway, listening to us talk.”

“That’s damn bold.”

Setting the bottle on a coaster beside his glass, striving hard to repress the palsy of fear that would have trembled my hands, I said, “No more bold than I was when I slipped into his house to poke through his drawers.”

“I suppose not. But then you’re on the side of the gods, and this bastard sounds like a giant albino cockroach on a day pass from Hell.”

Terrible Chester had moved from the windowsill to my chair. He raised his head to challenge me for possession of the seat. His eyes are as green as those of a scheming demon.

“If I were you,” Ozzie advised, “I would sit elsewhere.” He indicated the bottle of wine. “Won’t you have a second glass?”

“Haven’t quite finished my first,” I said, “and I’ve really got to be going. Stormy Llewellyn, dinner—all of that. But don’t get up.”

“Don’t tell me not to get up,” he grumped as he began the process of disengaging his bulk from armchair cushions that, like the hungry jaws of an exotic flesh-eating plant, had closed with considerable suction around his thighs and buttocks.

“Sir, it’s really not necessary.”

“Don’t tell me what’s necessary, you presumptuous pup. What’s necessary is whatever I wish to do, regardless of how *unnecessary* it might seem.”

Sometimes when he gets up after having been seated for a while, his complexion reddens with the effort, and at other times he goes sheet-white. I’m frightened to think that such a simple thing as rising from a chair should tax him so much.

Fortunately, his face neither flushed nor paled this time. Perhaps fortified by the wine and burdened by only half a plate of cheese, he was on his feet markedly faster than a desert tortoise extracting itself from a dry slough of treacherous sand.

“Now that you’re up,” I said, “I think you should lock the door behind me. And keep all the doors locked till this thing is resolved. Don’t answer the bell unless you can see who rang it.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” Ozzie declared. “My well-padded vital organs are hard to reach with either blade or bullet. And I know a few things about self-defense.”

“He’s dangerous, sir. He might have controlled himself so far, but when he cracks, he’ll be so vicious that he’ll make the evening news from Paris to Japan. *I’m* scared of him.”

Ozzie dismissed my concern with a wave of his six-fingered hand. “Unlike you, I’ve got a gun. More than one.”

“Start keeping them handy. I’m so sorry to have drawn him here.”

“Nonsense. He was just something stuck to your shoe that you didn’t know was there.”

Each time that I leave this house after a visit, Ozzie hugs me as a father hugs a beloved son, as neither of us was ever hugged by his father.

And every time, I am surprised that he seems so fragile in spite of his formidable bulk. It’s as if I can feel a shockingly thin Ozzie within the mantles of fat, an Ozzie who is being steadily crushed by the layers that life has troweled upon him.

Standing at the open front door, he said, “Give Stormy a kiss for me.”

“I will.”

“And bring her around to bear witness to my beautiful exploded cow and the villainy it represents.”

“She’ll be appalled. She’ll need wine. We’ll bring a bottle.”

“No need. I have a full cellar.”

I waited on the porch until he closed the door and until I heard the deadbolt being engaged.

As I negotiated the cow-strewn front walk and then rounded the Mustang to the driver’s door, I surveyed the quiet street. Neither Robertson nor his dusty Ford Explorer was to be seen.

In the car, when I switched on the engine, I suddenly expected to be blown up like the Holstein. I was too jumpy.

I followed a twisty route from Jack Flats to St. Bartholomew's Catholic Church in the historical district, giving a tail plenty of opportunities to reveal himself. All the traffic behind me seemed to be innocent of the intent to pursue. Yet I felt watched.

CHAPTER 18

PICO MUNDO IS NOT A SKYSCRAPER TOWN. The recent construction of a five-story apartment building made longtime residents dizzy with an unwanted sense of metropolitan crowding and led to editorials in the *Maravilla County Times* that used phrases like “high-rise blight,” and worried about a future of “heartless canyons of bleak design, in which people are reduced to the status of drones in a hive, and into which the sun never fully reaches.”

The Mojave sun is not a timid little Boston sun or even a don't-worry-be-happy Caribbean sun. The Mojave sun is a fierce, aggressive *beast* that isn't going to be intimidated by the shadows of five-story apartment buildings.

Counting its tower and the spire that sits atop the tower, St. Bartholomew's Church is by far the tallest structure in Pico Mundo. Sometimes at twilight, under the barrel-tile roofs, the white stucco walls glow like the panes in a storm lantern.

With half an hour remaining before sunset on this Tuesday in August, the western sky blazed orange, steadily deepening toward red, as though the sun were wounded and bleeding in its retreat. The white walls of the church took color from the heavens, and appeared to be full of holy fire.

Stormy waited for me in front of St. Bart's. She sat on the top step, beside a picnic hamper.

She had traded her pink-and-white Burke Bailey's uniform for sandals, white slacks, and a turquoise blouse. She had been cute

then; she was ravishing now.

With her raven hair and jet-black eyes, she might have been the bride of a pharaoh, swept forward in time from ancient Egypt. In her eyes are mysteries to rival those of the Sphinx and those of all the pyramids that ever were or ever will be excavated from the sands of the Sahara.

As if reading my mind, she said, “You left your hormone spigot running. Crank it shut, griddle boy. This is a church.”

I snatched up the picnic hamper and, as she rose to her feet, I kissed her on the cheek.

“On the other hand, that was a little *too* chaste,” she said.

“Because that was a kiss from Little Ozzie.”

“He’s sweet. I heard they blew up his cow.”

“It’s a slaughterhouse, plastic Holstein splattered everywhere you look.”

“What’s next—hit squads shooting lawn gnomes to pieces?”

“The world is mad,” I agreed.

We entered St. Bart’s through the main door. The narthex is a softly lighted and welcoming space, paneled in cherry wood stained dark with ruby highlights.

Instead of proceeding into the nave, we turned immediately to the right and stepped up to a locked door. Stormy produced a key and let us into the bottom of the bell tower.

Father Sean Llewellyn, rector of St. Bart’s, is Stormy’s uncle. He knows she loves the tower, and he indulges her with a key.

When the door fell quietly shut behind us, the sweet fragrance of incense faded, and a faint musty smell arose.

The tower stairs were dark. Unerringly, I found her lips for a quick but sweeter kiss than the first, before she switched on the light.

“Bad boy.”

“Good lips.”

“Somehow it’s too strange...getting tongue in church.”

“Technically, we’re not in the *church*,” I said.

“And I suppose technically that wasn’t tongue.”

“I’m sure there’s a more correct medical term for it.”

“There’s a medical term for *you*,” she said.

“What’s that?” I wondered as, carrying the hamper, I followed her up the spiral staircase.

“Priapic.”

“What’s it mean?”

“Perpetually horny.”

“You wouldn’t want a doctor to cure *that*, would you?”

“Don’t need a doctor. Folk medicine offers a reliable cure.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“A swift, hard blow to the source of the problem.”

I winced and said, “You are no Florence Nightingale. I’m going to start wearing a cup.”

At the top of the spiral stairs, a door opened to the belfry.

A carillon of three bronze bells, all large but of different sizes, hung from the ceiling in the center of this lofty space. A six-foot-wide catwalk encircled them.

The bells had rung for vespers at seven and would not ring again until morning Mass.

Three sides of the belfry were open above a waist-high wall, presenting splendid views of Pico Mundo, the Maravilla Valley, and the hills beyond. We stationed ourselves at the west side, the better to enjoy the sunset.

From the hamper, Stormy produced a Tupperware container filled with shelled walnuts that she had deep-fried and seasoned lightly with both salt and sugar. She fed me one. Delicious—both the walnut and being fed by Stormy.

I opened a bottle of good Merlot and poured while she held the wineglasses.

This was why earlier I had not finished the glass of Cabernet: As much as I love Little Ozzie, I would rather drink with Stormy.

We don’t eat in this perch every evening, only two or three times a month, when Stormy needs to be high above the world. And closer to Heaven.

“To Ozzie,” Stormy said, raising her glass in a toast. “With the hope that one day there’ll be an end to all his losses.”

I didn't ask what she meant by that because I thought perhaps I knew. By the affliction of his weight, there is much in life that Ozzie has been denied and may never experience.

Citrus-orange near the western horizon, blood-orange across the ascending vault, the sky darkened to purple directly overhead. In the east, the first stars of the night would soon begin to appear.

"The sky's so clear," Stormy said. "We'll be able to see Cassiopeia tonight."

She referred to a northern constellation named after a figure of classic mythology, but Cassiopeia was also the name of Stormy's mother, who had died when Stormy was seven years old. Her father had perished in the same plane crash.

With no family but her uncle, the priest, she had been placed for adoption. When in three months the adoption failed for good reason, she made it explicitly clear that she didn't want new parents, only the return of those whom she had loved and lost.

Until the age of seventeen, when she graduated from high school, she was raised in an orphanage. Thereafter, until she was eighteen, she had lived under the legal guardianship of her uncle.

For the niece of a priest, Stormy has a strange relationship with God. There is anger in it—always a little, sometimes a lot.

"What about Fungus Man?" she asked.

"Terrible Chester doesn't like him."

"Terrible Chester doesn't like anyone."

"I think Chester's even afraid of him."

"Now that is news."

"He's a hand grenade with the pin already pulled."

"Terrible Chester?"

"No. Fungus Man. Real name's Bob Robertson. The hair on his back was standing straight up like I've never seen it."

"Bob Robertson has a lot of hair on his back?"

"No. Terrible Chester. Even when he scared off that huge German shepherd, he didn't raise his hackles like he did today."

"Loop me in, odd one. How did Bob Robertson and Terrible Chester happen to be in the same place?"

“Since I broke into his house, I think maybe he’s been following me around.”

Even as I spoke the word *following*, my attention was drawn to movement in the graveyard.

Immediately west of St. Bart’s is a cemetery very much in the old style: not bronze plaques set in granite flush with the grass, as in most modern graveyards, but vertical headstones and monuments. An iron fence with spear-point pickets surrounds those three acres. Although a few California live oaks, more than a century old, shade portions of the burial ground, most of the green aisles are open to the sun.

In the fiery glow of that Tuesday twilight, the grass appeared to have a bronze undertone, the shadows were as black as char, the polished surfaces of the granite markers mirrored the scarlet sky—and Robertson stood as still as any headstone in the churchyard, not under the cover of a tree but out where he could be easily seen.

Having set her wineglass on the parapet, Stormy crouched at the hamper. “I’ve got some cheese that’s perfect with this wine.”

If Robertson had been standing with his head bowed, studying the engraving on a memorial, I would still have been disturbed to see him here. But this was worse. He had not come to pay his respects to the dead, not for *any* reason as innocent as that.

With his head tipped back, with his eyes fixed on me where I stood at the belfry parapet, the singular intensity of his interest all but crackled from him like arcing electricity.

Past the oaks and beyond the iron fence, I could see parts of two streets that intersected at the northwest corner of the cemetery. As far as I could tell, no marked or unmarked police vehicle was parked along either avenue.

Chief Porter had promised to assign a man at once to watch the house in Camp’s End. If Robertson hadn’t been home yet, however, that officer could not have established surveillance.

“You want crackers with the cheese?” Stormy asked.

Crimson had seeped down the summer sky, closer to the horizon, staining the western swathe of bright orange until it narrowed to a

swatch. The air itself seemed to be stained red, and the shadows of trees and tombstones, already soot-black, grew even blacker.

Robertson had arrived with nightfall.

I set my wineglass beside Stormy's. "We've got a problem."

"Crackers aren't a problem," Stormy said, "just a choice."

A sudden loud flapping-fluttering startled me.

Turning to see three pigeons swooping into the belfry and to their roost in the rafters above the bells, I bumped into Stormy as she rose with two small containers. Crackers and wedges of cheese spilled across the catwalk.

"Oddie, what a mess!" She stooped, set the containers aside, and began to gather the crackers and cheese.

Down on the darkening grass, Robertson had thus far stood with his arms at his sides, a slump-shoulder hulk. Aware that I was as fixated on him as he was on me, he now raised his right arm almost as if in a Nazi salute.

"Are you going to help me here," Stormy asked, "or are you going to be a typical man?"

Initially I thought he might be shaking his fist at me, but in spite of the poor—and rapidly fading—light, I soon saw that the gesture was even less polite than it had seemed at first. His middle finger was extended, and he thrust it toward me with short, angry jabs.

"Robertson's here," I told her.

"Who?"

"Fungus Man."

Suddenly he was on the move, walking between the headstones, toward the church.

"We better forget dinner," I said, drawing Stormy to her feet with the intention of hustling her out of the belfry. "Let's get down from here."

Resisting me, she turned to the parapet. "I don't let anyone intimidate me."

"Oh, I do. If they're crazy enough."

"Where is he? I don't see him."

Leaning out, peering down, I couldn't see him either. Apparently he had reached the front or the back of the church and had turned a

corner.

“The door at the bottom of the steps,” I said, “did it lock behind us automatically when we came into the tower?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

I didn’t like the idea of being trapped at the top of the tower, even though we could shout for help and surely be heard. The belfry door had no lock, and I doubted that the two of us could hold it shut against him if, in a rage, he was determined to open it.

Grabbing her by the hand, pulling to impress on her the need for urgency, I hurried along the catwalk, stepping over the cheese and crackers, around the bells. “Let’s get out of here.”

“The hamper, our dinner—”

“Leave it. We’ll get it later, tomorrow.”

We had left the lights on in the tower. But the spiral stairs were enclosed, and I couldn’t see all the way to the bottom, only as far as the continuously curving walls allowed.

Below, all was quiet.

“Hurry,” I urged Stormy, and without using the handrail, I preceded her down those steep steps, setting a pace too fast to be safe.

CHAPTER 19

DOWN, DOWN, AROUND AND DOWN, I LED AND she followed, striking too much noise from the Mexicantile steps, unable to hear Robertson if he was climbing to meet us.

At the halfway point I wondered if this haste might be an overreaction. Then I remembered his upraised fist, the extended finger, the glowering photos in his study.

I plunged even faster, around and around, unable to block from my mind the image of him waiting below with a butcher knife on which I might impale myself before I could stop.

When we reached the bottom without encountering him, we found the lower door unlocked. I opened it cautiously.

Contrary to my expectations, he wasn't waiting for us in the softly lighted narthex.

Descending the tower stairs, I had let go of Stormy's hand. Now I seized it again to keep her close to me.

When I opened the centermost of three front doors, I saw Robertson climbing the church steps from the sidewalk. Although not racing toward me, he approached with the grim implacability of a tank crossing a battlefield.

In the apocalyptic crimson light, I could see that his creepy but previously reliable smile had deserted him. His pale-gray eyes borrowed a bloody cast from the sunset, and his face wrenched into a knot of murderous wrath.

Terri's Mustang waited at the curb. I wouldn't be able to reach it without going through Robertson.

I will fight when I have to, against opponents who dwarf me if I must. But I turn to physical conflict neither as a first resort nor as a matter of misguided principle.

I'm not vain, but I like my face just the way it is. I prefer that it not be stomped.

Robertson was bigger than me, but soft. Had his anger been that of an ordinary man, perhaps pumped up by one beer too many, I might have confronted him and would have been confident of taking him down.

He was a lunatic, however, an object of fascination to bodachs, and an idolizer of mass murderers and serial killers. I had to assume that he carried a gun, a knife, and that in the middle of a fight, he might begin to bite like a dog.

Perhaps Stormy would have tried to kick his ass—such a response is not alien to her—but I didn't give her that option. Turning from the entrance, I held fast to her hand and encouraged her through one of the doors between the narthex and the nave.

In the deserted church, low pathlights marked the center aisle. The enormous crucifix behind the altar glowed in a soft spotlight directed on it from above. Flames flickered in ruby-colored glasses on the votive-candle racks.

Those points of light and the fading red sunset behind the stained-glass windows in the western wall failed to press back the congregation of shadows that filled the pews and the side aisles.

We hurried down the center aisle, expecting Robertson to slam with charging-bull fury through one of the doors from the narthex. Having heard nothing by the time we reached the communion railing, we paused and looked back.

As far as I could tell, Robertson had not arrived. If he had entered the nave, surely he would have come directly after us, along the center aisle.

Although logic argued against my hunch and no evidence supported it, I suspected that he was with us. The prickled skin on

my arms suggested that I should speak in a honk, have webbed feet, and be covered with feathers.

Stormy's instinct was in sync with mine. Surveying the geometric shadows of pews, aisles, and colonnades, she whispered, "He's closer than you think. He's very close."

I pushed open the low gate in the communion railing. We passed through, moving in all but absolute silence now, not wanting to mask any sounds of Robertson's approach.

As we passed the choir enclosure and ascended the ambulatory toward the high altar, I glanced back less and proceeded with greater caution. Inexplicably, in opposition to my head, my heart said danger lay in front of us.

Our stalker couldn't have slipped around us unseen. Besides, there was no reason for him to have done so instead of assaulting us directly.

Nevertheless, with every step I took, the tension increased in the cords of muscle at the back of my neck, until they felt as tight as key-wound clock springs.

From the corner of my eye, I glimpsed movement past the altar, twitched toward it, and drew Stormy closer to my side. Her hand clutched mine tighter than before.

The crucified bronze Christ moved, as if metal miraculously had become flesh, as if He would pull loose from the cross and step down to resume the earthly mantle of messiah.

A large scallop-winged moth flew away from the hot lens of the overhead spotlight. The illusion of movement—which the insect's exaggerated, fluttering shadow had imparted to the bronze figure—was at once dispelled.

Stormy's tower-door key would also unlock the door at the back of the sanctuary. Beyond waited the sacristy, in which the priest readied himself before every Mass.

I glanced back at the sanctuary, the nave. Silence. Stillness but for the moth's shadow play.

After using and returning Stormy's key, I pushed the paneled door inward with some trepidation.

This particular fear had no rational basis whatsoever. Robertson wasn't a magician able to appear by legerdemain inside a locked room.

Nevertheless, my heart played knock-and-rattle with my ribs.

When I felt for the light switch, my hand was *not* pinned to the wall by either a stiletto or a hatchet. The overhead light revealed a small, plain room but no large psychopath with yellow yeast-mold hair.

To the left stood the *prie-dieu*, where the priest knelt to offer his private devotions before saying Mass. To the right were cabinets containing the sacred vessels and the vestments, and a vesting bench.

Stormy closed the sanctuary door behind us and with a thumb-turn engaged the deadbolt.

We quickly crossed the room to the outer sacristy door. I knew that beyond lay the east churchyard, the one without tombstones, and a flagstone path leading to the rectory where her uncle lived.

This door also was locked.

From within the sacristy, the lock could be released without a key. I gripped the thumb-turn...but hesitated.

Perhaps we had not heard or seen Robertson enter the nave from the narthex for the simple reason that he'd never come into the front of the church after I had glimpsed him ascending the steps.

And perhaps, anticipating that we would try to flee from the back of the church, he had circled the building to wait for us outside the sacristy. This might explain why I had sensed that we were moving *toward* danger rather than away from it.

"What's wrong?" Stormy asked.

I shushed her—a fatal mistake in any circumstances but these—and listened at the crack between the door and the jamb. The thinnest breath of a warm draft tickled my ear, but with it came no sounds from outside.

I waited. I listened. I grew increasingly uneasy.

Stepping away from the outer door, I whispered to Stormy, "Let's go back the way we came."

We returned to the door between the sacristy and the sanctuary, which she had locked behind us. But I hesitated again with my fingers on the deadbolt release.

Putting my ear against the crack between *this* door and jamb, I listened to the church beyond. No teasing draft spiraled down my auditory canal, but no telltale stealthy sounds came to me, either.

Both sacristy doors had been locked from the inside. To get at us, Robertson would need a key, which he didn't possess.

"We're not going to wait here till morning Mass," Stormy said, as though she could scroll through my thoughts as easily as through a document on her computer.

My cell phone was clipped to my belt. I could have used it to call Chief Porter and explain the situation to him.

The possibility existed, however, that Bob Robertson had been overcome by second thoughts about the wisdom of assaulting me in such a public place as the church, even though at this moment there were no worshipers or witnesses present. Having reined in his rampant anger, he might have gone away.

If the chief dispatched a patrol car to St. Bart's or if he came himself, only to find no smiley psychopath, my credibility would take a hit. Over the years, I had banked enough good will with Wyatt Porter to afford to make a withdrawal or two from my account, but I was reluctant to do so.

It is human nature to want to believe in the wizardry of the magician—but also to turn against him and to scorn him the moment that he commits the slightest error that reveals his trickery. Those in the audience are embarrassed to have been so easily astonished, and they blame the performer for their gullibility.

Although I employ no sleight of hand, though what I offer is truth glimpsed by supernatural means, I am aware not only of the magician's vulnerability but also of the danger of being the boy who cried wolf—or in this case, the boy who cried Fungus Man.

Most people desperately desire to believe that they are part of a great mystery, that Creation is a work of grace and glory, not merely the result of random forces colliding. Yet each time that they are given but one reason to doubt, a worm in the apple of the heart

makes them turn away from a thousand proofs of the miraculous, whereupon they have a drunkard's thirst for cynicism, and they feed upon despair as a starving man upon a loaf of bread.

As a miracle worker of sorts, I walk a wire, too high to make one misstep and survive.

Chief Porter is a good man, but he is human. He would be slow to turn against me, but if he was made to feel foolish and gullible more than once, that turn would surely occur.

I could have used my cell phone to call Stormy's uncle, Father Sean, in the rectory. He would come to our aid without delay and without too many awkward questions.

Robertson, however, was a human monster, not one of supernatural origin. If he was lurking in the churchyard, he would not be deterred from violence by the sight of a Roman collar or by the brandishing of a crucifix.

Having put Stormy in jeopardy, I shrank at once from the idea of endangering her uncle, as well.

Two sacristy doors. The outer led to the churchyard. The inner led to the sanctuary.

Having heard nothing at either exit, I had to rely on intuition. I chose the door to the sanctuary.

Apparently the bouncing ball of Stormy's intuition hadn't yet rattled to a stop on any number. She put her hand atop mine as I took hold of the lock.

Our eyes met for a moment. Then we turned our heads to stare at the outer door.

This was an instance when the card that we had drawn from that carnival fortune-telling machine and our matching birthmarks seemed indisputably to be meaningful.

Without exchanging a word, we arrived at a plan that we both understood. I remained at the door to the sanctuary. Stormy returned to the churchyard door.

If when I unlocked my door, Robertson lunged for me, Stormy would throw open the outer door and bolt from the sanctuary, shouting for help. I would attempt to follow her—and stay alive.

CHAPTER 20

THAT MOMENT IN THE SACRISTY DISTILLED THE essence of my entire existence: always between two doors, between a life with the living and a life with the dead, between transcendence and terror.

Across the room, Stormy nodded.

On the *prie-dieu*, a small book of prayers waited for a kneeling priest.

No doubt bottles of sacramental wine were stored in one of the cabinets. I could have used a little spiritual fortification.

I leaned hard against the sanctuary door to brace it. When I disengaged the lock, the bolt made a thin sound reminiscent of a razor sharpening against a strop.

Had Robertson been poised to burst in upon me, he ought to have reacted to the deadbolt retracting from the striker plate in the door frame. Of course he might be less of a hothead and more cunning than he had appeared to be when he'd stood in the graveyard, flipping us the finger.

Perhaps he suspected that I was wedging the door shut with my body and that I would snap the lock in place the instant that he tried to shove into the sacristy. Insane as he might be, he would nonetheless have some intuition of his own.

The Bob Robertson who left his kitchen strewn with dirty dishes, banana peels, and crumbs was too sloppy to be a wise strategist. The Robertson who kept the neat study and maintained the meticulous files in those cabinets of dread was, however, a different man from

the one whose living room had featured drifts of sleazy magazines and well-read paperback romances.

I couldn't know *which* Bob Robertson might be, at this moment, beyond the door.

When I glanced at Stormy, she made a gesture that meant either "get on with it" or "up yours."

Leaning against the door with undiminished purpose, I turned the knob all the way to the left. It squeaked. I would have been amazed if it hadn't.

I shifted my weight and let the door ease open half an inch...an inch...and all the way.

If Robertson waited at either entrance to the sacristy, he was outside in the churchyard. Standing in the ruddy reduction of the last red light, he must have looked like something that belonged under a granite headstone.

Stormy stepped away from her station. Together we quickly returned to the sanctuary from which we had been so eager to flee only two minutes ago.

The moth danced across the light, and again Christ seemed to twist upon the cross.

The lingering incense smelled not sweet, as before, but had a new astringency, and the votive flames throbbed with the urgency of arterial aneurysms about to burst.

Down the ambulatory, past the choir enclosure, through the gate in the communion railing, I half expected Robertson to spring at us from unlikely cover. He had grown into such a menacing figure in my mind that I would not have been surprised if he had dropped upon us from the vaulted ceiling, suddenly having sprouted wings, a furious dark angel with death upon his breath.

We were in the main aisle when a great crash and shattering of glass shook away the churchly silence behind us. We spun, we looked, but saw no wreckage.

The sacristy had been windowless, and there'd been no glass in the door to the churchyard. Nevertheless, that chamber, which we'd just left, seemed to be the source of these sounds of destruction. They rose again, louder than before.

I heard what might have been the vesting bench slamming against the vestment closets, heard wine bottles smashing, heard the silver chalice and other sacred vessels ricocheting off walls and cabinets with a reverberant metallic clatter.

In our haste to escape, we had left the light on in that room. Now, through the open door, secondhand movement was visible: a farrago of leaping shadows and flares of shimmery light.

I didn't know what was happening, and I didn't intend to return to the sacristy for a look. Holding Stormy's hand again, I ran with her along the center aisle, the length of the nave, and through a door into the narthex.

Out of the church, down the steps, we fled into a twilight that had nearly bled to death, had little red left to give, and had begun to pull purple shrouds over the streets of Pico Mundo.

For a moment I couldn't fit the trembling key in the Mustang's ignition. Stormy urged me to hurry, as if hurrying weren't already my intention, and finally the key mated as it should, and the engine roared to life.

Leaving a significant offering of rubber in front of St. Bart's, we traveled a block and a half on smoking tires, so fast that we almost seemed to have teleported, before I had the breath to say, "Call the chief."

She had a cell phone of her own, and she entered Wyatt Porter's home number as I gave it to her. She waited as it rang, said, "Chief, it's Stormy," listened, and said, "Yeah, it does sound like a weather report, doesn't it. Odd needs to speak to you."

I took the phone and blurted, "Sir, if you send a car to St. Bart's real quick, you might catch that Robertson guy trashing the sacristy, maybe more than the sacristy, maybe the whole church."

He put me on hold and made a call on another line.

Three blocks from St. Bartholomew's, I pulled the Mustang off the street, into a Mexican fast-food franchise.

"Dinner?" I asked Stormy.

"After all that in the church?"

I shrugged. "The entire rest of our lives will be after all that in the church. Personally, I intend to eat again, and the sooner the better."

“It’s not going to be the equal of my tower feast.”

“What could be?”

“I *am* starved.”

Holding the phone to my ear and driving with one hand as if that were still legal, I swung the Mustang into the line of vehicles waiting to get to the drive-up service window.

When Chief Porter came back, he said, “Why is he vandalizing St. Bart’s?”

“Don’t have a clue, sir. He tried to trap me and Stormy in the church belfry—”

“What were you doing in the belfry?”

“Having a picnic, sir.”

“I suppose that makes sense to you.”

“Yes, sir. It’s nice. We have dinner up there a couple times a month.”

“Son, I don’t ever want to catch you having dinner on the courthouse flagpole.”

“Maybe just hors d’oeuvres, sir, but never dinner.”

“If you want to come by here, we can still feed you two from the barbecue. Bring Elvis.”

“I left him at the Baptist church, sir. I’m with Stormy—in line to have some tacos, but thanks just the same.”

“Tell me about Robertson. I have a man watching his house in Camp’s End, but he hasn’t gone home yet.”

I said, “He was down in the graveyard, saw us up in the belfry. He gave us the rude number one with lots of emphasis and then came after us.”

“You think he knows you were in his house?” the chief asked.

“If he hasn’t been home since I was there, I don’t see how he could know, but he must. Excuse me a second, sir.”

We had reached the menu board.

“Swordfish tacos with extra salsa, fried corn fritters, and a large Coke, please,” I told the sombrero-wearing donkey that holds the order microphone in its mouth. I looked at Stormy. She nodded. “Make that two of everything.”

“Are you at Mexicali Rose?” the chief asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“They have fantastic churros. You should try some.”

I took his advice and placed a double order with the donkey, which, as before, thanked me in the voice of a teenage girl.

As the line of cars crept forward, I said, “When we gave Robertson the slip in the church, he must’ve been angry. But why he decided to take it out on the building, I don’t know.”

“Two cars are on the way to St. Bart’s, no sirens. They might even be there now. But vandalism—that doesn’t measure up to the horrors you said he’s going to commit.”

“No, sir. Not close. And there’s less than three hours till August fifteenth.”

“If we can park his butt in jail overnight for vandalism, we’ll have an excuse to poke around in his life. Maybe that’ll give us a chance to figure out the bigger thing he’s up to.”

After wishing the chief luck, I pressed END and returned the phone to Stormy.

I checked my watch. Midnight—and August 15—seemed like a tsunami, building height and power, racing toward us with silent but deadly force.

CHAPTER 21

WAITING TO HEAR FROM THE CHIEF THAT THEY had nailed Robertson in the act of vandalism, Stormy and I ate dinner in the Mexicali Rose parking lot, with the windows of the Mustang rolled down, hoping to catch a breeze. The food was tasty, but the hot night air smelled of exhaust fumes.

“So you broke into Fungus Man’s house,” Stormy said.

“Didn’t smash any glass. Just used my driver’s license.”

“Does he keep severed heads in his refrigerator?”

“I didn’t open his refrigerator.”

“Where else would you expect to find severed heads?”

“I wasn’t looking for any.”

She said, “That creepy smile of his, those weird gray eyes...*First* thing I’d look for is a collection of knickknacks with ears. These tacos are fabulous.”

I agreed. “And I like all the colors in the salsa. Yellow and green chiles, the red of the chopped tomatoes, the little purple flecks of onion...sort of looks like confetti. You should do it this way when you make salsa.”

“What—you were bitten by Martha Stewart, now you’re a walking-dead lifestyle guru? So tell me what you found if you didn’t find heads?”

I told her about the black room.

Licking corn-fritter crumbs off her elegant fingers, she said, “Listen to me, odd one.”

“I’m all ears.”

“They’re big, but they’re not all of you. Open them wide now and hear this: Don’t go in that black room again.”

“It doesn’t exist anymore.”

“Don’t even go looking for it, hoping it’ll come back.”

“That never even crossed my mind.”

“Yes, it did,” she said.

“Yes, it did,” I admitted. “I mean, I’d like to understand it—what it is, how it works.”

To emphasize her objection, she poked a corn fritter in my direction. “It’s the gate to Hell, and you’re not meant for that neighborhood.”

“I don’t think it’s the gate to Hell.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s the gate to Hell. If you go looking for it, and you find it, and you wind up in Hell, I’m not going to go down there looking for you and pull your ass out of the fire.”

“Your warning is duly noted.”

“It’s hard enough being married to a guy who sees dead people and goes chasing after them every day, and just *too* hard if he goes on some quest to find the gate to Hell.”

“I don’t go chasing after them,” I said, “and since when are we married?”

“We will be,” she said, and finished her final fritter.

On more than one occasion, I have asked her to marry me. Though we both agree that we are soul mates and that we will be together forever, she has always shied from my proposals with something like, *I love you madly, desperately, Oddie, so madly that I would cut off my right hand for you, if that made any sense as a proof of love. But as for this marriage thing—let’s put a pin in it.*

Understandably, dribbles of swordfish taco fell out of my mouth when I heard that we were going to be taking vows. I plucked those morsels off my T-shirt and ate them, buying time to think furiously, before I said, “So...you mean you’re accepting my proposal?”

“Silly, I accepted it ages ago.” Off my look of bewilderment, she said, “Oh, not with a conventional ‘Yes, darling, I’m yours,’ but I accepted in so many words.”

“I didn’t interpret ‘put a pin in it’ as meaning *yes*.”

Brushing swordfish crumbs off my shirt, she said, “You have to learn to listen with more than your ears.”

“What orifice do you suggest I listen with?”

“Don’t be crude. It doesn’t become you. I mean, sometimes you have to listen with your heart.”

“I’ve listened with my heart for so long I’ve periodically had to swab earwax out of my aortal valve.”

“Churros?” she asked, opening a white pastry bag and at once filling the car with a delicious, cinnamony, dough-nutlike aroma.

I said, “How can you think about dessert at a time like this?”

“You mean at *dinner* time?”

“I mean at talking-about-getting-married time.” My heart raced as if I were chasing someone or being chased, but with luck that part of the day was over. “Listen, Stormy, if you really mean it, then I will do something big to improve my financial situation. I’ll give up the short-order job at the Grille, and I don’t just mean for tires. Something bigger.”

Her look of amused speculation was so heavy that the weight of it tilted her head. Cocking one eye at me, she said, “And from your perspective, what could be bigger than tires?”

I gave it some thought. “Shoes.”

“What kind of shoes?”

“All kinds. Retail shoe sales.”

She looked dubious. “That’s bigger than tires?”

“Sure. How often do you buy tires? Not even once a year. And you need only one set of tires per vehicle. But people need more than one pair of shoes. They need all types. Brown dress shoes, black dress shoes, running shoes, sandals—”

“Not you. All you have is three pairs of the same sneakers.”

“Yes, but I’m not like other people.”

“Not in the least,” she agreed.

“Another thing to consider,” I said, “is that not every man, woman, and child has a car, but everyone has feet. Or nearly everyone. A family of five might have two cars, but they have *ten* feet.”

“There are so many reasons to love you, Oddie, but this is maybe my favorite thing about you.”

Stormy no longer tilted her head or cocked one eye. She stared at me directly. Her eyes were galactic: as deep as the darkness between any two stars in the sky. Her expression had softened with affection. She seemed sincere and genuinely touched by something that I said, and this perception was supported by the fact that she had still not taken a churro out of the bag.

Unfortunately, I must have been listening with only my ears, because I didn't know what she meant. “Your favorite thing about me? You mean...my analysis of shoe retailing?”

“You're as smart as anyone I've ever known...and yet so simple. It's a lovely combination. Brains and innocence. Wisdom and naivete. Sharp wit and genuine sweetness.”

“That's your favorite thing about me?”

“At the moment, yes.”

“Well, gee, it's not something I can work on.”

“Work on?”

“Things you like about me, I want to do them even better. Say instead you liked my grooming or my taste in clothes, or my pancakes. I'm always improving my pancakes, just ask Terri—they're light and fluffy yet full of taste. But I don't know how to be smart and simple at the same time better than I am now. In fact, I'm not even sure I know what you mean.”

“Good. It's nothing you should think about. It's nothing you can work on. It's just who you are. Anyway, when I marry you, it won't be for money.”

She offered a churro to me.

Considering how fast my heart was racing and my mind was spinning, the last thing that I needed was sugar, but I took the pastry.

We ate in silence for a minute, and then I said, “So this marriage—when do you think we should order the cake?”

“Soon. I can’t wait much longer.”

With relief and delight, I said, “Too much delayed gratification can be a bad thing.”

She grinned. “You see what’s happening here?”

“I guess I’m just looking with my eyes. What should I see?”

“What’s happening is—I want a second churro, and I’m going to have it now instead of next Thursday.”

“You’re a wild woman, Stormy Llewellyn.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

This had been a bad day, what with Harlo Landerson and Fungus Man and the black room and the bodachs everywhere and Elvis in tears. Yet as I sat with Stormy, eating churros, for the moment all was right with the world.

The moment didn’t last long. My cell phone rang, and I wasn’t surprised to hear Chief Porter’s voice.

“Son, the sacristy at St. Bart’s gives new meaning to the word *trashed*. Someone went purely berserk in there.”

“Robertson.”

“I’m sure you’re right. You always are. It was probably him. But he was gone by the time my men reached the church. You haven’t seen him again?”

“We’re sort of hiding out here but...no, not a sign of him.” I surveyed the parking lot, the continuous traffic coming in and out of Mexicali Rose’s drive-up service lane, and the street beyond, looking for Bob Robertson’s dusty Ford Explorer.

The chief said, “We’ve had a watch on his house for a few hours, but now we’re actively looking for him.”

“I might give psychic magnetism a chance,” I said, referring to my ability to locate just about anyone by cruising at random for half an hour.

“Is that wise, son? I mean, with Stormy being in the car?”

“I’ll take her home first.”

Stormy quashed that idea: “Like hell you will, Mulder.”

“I heard that,” said Chief Porter.

“He heard that,” I told Stormy.

“What do I care?” she said.

Chief Porter seemed tickled: “She calls you Mulder, like on *The X-Files*?”

“Not often, sir. Only when she thinks I’m being paternalistic.”

“Do you ever call her Scully?”

“Only when I’m in the mood to be bruised.”

“You ruined that show for me,” the chief said.

“How’d I do that, sir?”

“You made all that weird stuff too real. I didn’t find the supernatural to be entertaining anymore.”

“Me neither,” I assured him.

By the time Chief Porter and I finished talking, Stormy had gathered all our dinner wrappings and containers, and had stuffed them into one bag. When we left Mexicali Rose, she dropped them in a trash can that was stationed along the exit lane.

As I turned left into the street, she said, “Let’s stop by my place first, so I can get my pistol.”

“That’s a home-defense gun. You’re not licensed to carry.”

“I’m not licensed to breathe, either, but I do it anyway.”

“No gun,” I insisted. “We’ll just cruise and see what happens.”

“Why’re you afraid of guns?”

“They go bang.”

“And why is that a question you always avoid answering?”

“I don’t always avoid answering it.”

“Why’re you afraid of guns?” she persisted.

“I was probably shot to death in a past life.”

“You don’t believe in reincarnation.”

“I don’t believe in taxes, either, but I pay them.”

“Why are you afraid of guns?”

“Maybe because I’ve had a prophetic dream in which I was shot.”

“Have you had a prophetic dream in which you were shot?”

“No.”

She can be relentless. “Why’re you afraid of guns?”

I can be stupid. As soon as I spoke, I regretted my words: “Why’re you afraid of sex?”

From the suddenly icy and distant perch of the passenger's seat, she gave me a long, hard, marrow-freezing look.

For a moment I tried to pretend that I didn't realize the impact that my words had on her. I tried to focus on the street ahead as if I were nothing if not always a responsible driver.

I have no talent for pretense. Sooner than later, I looked at her, felt terrible, and said, "I'm so sorry."

"I'm not afraid of sex," she said.

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm an idiot."

"I just want to be sure—"

I tried to hush her.

She persisted: "I just want to be sure the reason why you're in love with me has less to do with *that* than with other things."

"It does," I assured her, feeling small and mean. "A thousand other things. You know that."

"When we're together, I want it to be right and clean and beautiful."

"So do I. And it will be, Stormy. When the time is right. We have plenty of time."

Stopping for a red traffic light, I held out my right hand to her. I was relieved when she took it, touched when she held it so tightly.

The light changed to green. I drove with only one hand on the wheel.

After a while, in a voice soft with emotion, she said, "I'm sorry, Oddie. That was my fault."

"It wasn't your fault. I'm an idiot."

"I pushed you into a corner about why you're afraid of guns, and when I kept pushing, you pushed back."

That was the truth, but the truth didn't make me feel any better about what I'd done.

Six months after the deaths of her mother and father, when Stormy was seven and a half years old and still Bronwen, she was adopted by a childless, well-to-do couple in Beverly Hills. They lived on a fine estate. The future looked bright.

One night during her second week with her new family, her adoptive father came to her room and woke her. He exposed himself

to her and touched her in ways that frightened and humiliated her.

Still grieving her birth parents, afraid, desperately lonely, confused, ashamed, she endured this man's sick advances for three months. Finally, she reported him to a social worker who was making a follow-up house call for the adoption agency.

Thereafter, she lived in St. Bart's Orphanage, untouched, until her high-school graduation.

She and I became an item when we were juniors. We have been together—and each other's best friend—for more than four years.

In spite of all that we had been to each other and all that we hoped to achieve together in the years to come, I had been able to hurt her—*Why're you afraid of sex?*—when she pushed me too hard about my fear of guns.

A cynic once said that the most identifying trait of humanity is our ability to be inhumane to one another.

I am an optimist about our species. I assume God is, too, for otherwise He would have scrubbed us off the planet a long time ago and would have started over.

Yet I can't entirely dismiss that cynic's sour assessment. I harbor a capacity for inhumanity, glimpsed in my cruel retort to the person I love most in all the world.

We sailed the blacktop rivers for a while, not finding Fungus Man, but slowly finding our way back to each other.

In time she said, "I love you, Oddie."

My voice was thick when I replied. "I love you more than life."

"We'll be okay," she said.

"We *are* okay."

"We're weird and screwed-up, but we're okay," she agreed.

"If someone invented a thermometer that measured weirdness, it would melt under my tongue. But you—you're cool."

"So you deny me weirdness but agree that I'm screwed-up."

"I see your problem. Certain kinds of weirdness can be hip, but screwed-upness never is."

"Exactly."

"It wasn't gentlemanly of me to deny you your weirdness."

"Apology accepted."

We cruised for a while, using the car as a dowser uses his rod to seek water, until I found myself pulling into the parking lot of Green Moon Lanes. This is a bowling alley half a mile from the mall where earlier in the day I had visited Stormy at the ice-cream shop.

She knows about the recurring dream that has disturbed my sleep once or twice a month for the past three years. It features dead bowling-alley employees: gut-shot, limbs shattered, faces hideously disfigured not by a few bullets but by *barrages*.

“He’s here?” Stormy asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Is it coming true now, tonight—the dream?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know. Maybe.”

The fish tacos were swimming the acidic currents of my stomach, churning a bitter backwash into my throat.

My palms were damp. And cold. I blotted them on my jeans.

I almost wanted to drive back to Stormy’s place and get her gun.

CHAPTER 22

THE BOWLING-CENTER PARKING LOT WAS TWO-THIRDS full. I circled, searching for Robertson's Explorer, but I couldn't find it.

Finally I parked and switched off the engine.

Stormy opened the passenger's door, and I said, "Wait."

"Don't make me call you Mulder," she warned.

Staring at the green and blue neon letters that spelled out GREEN MOON LANES, I hoped to get a sense of whether the slaughter I had foreseen was imminent or still some distance in the future. The neon failed to speak to my sixth sense.

The architect for the bowling center had designed it with a responsible awareness of the expense involved in air-conditioning a large building in the Mojave. The squat structure, which featured low ceilings inside, thwarted heat transfer by using a minimum of glass. Pale beige stucco walls reflected the sun during the day and cooled quickly with the coming of night.

In the past this building had not seemed ominous; its character impressed me only because of the efficiency of design, for it had the clean lines and the plain facade of most modern buildings in the desert. Now it reminded me of a munitions bunker, and I sensed that a tremendous explosion might soon occur within its walls. Munitions bunker, crematorium, tomb...

"The employees here wear black slacks and blue cotton shirts with white collars," I told Stormy.

"So?"

“In my dream, the victims all wear tan slacks and green polo shirts.”

Still in her seat but with one leg out of the Mustang, one foot on the blacktop, she said, “Then this isn’t the place. There’s some other reason you cruised here. It’s safe to go inside, see if we can figure out why we’re here.”

“Over at Fiesta Bowl,” I said, referring to the only other bowling center in Pico Mundo and surrounding environs, “they wear gray slacks and black shirts with their names stitched in white on the breast pockets.”

“Then your dream must be about something that’s going to happen outside Pico Mundo.”

“That’s never been the case before.”

I have lived my entire life in the relative peace of Pico Mundo and the territory immediately encircling it. I have not even seen the farther reaches of Maravilla County, of which our town is the county seat.

If I were to live to be eighty, which is unlikely and which is a prospect that I view with despondency if not despair, I might one day venture into the open countryside and even as far as one of the smaller towns in the county. But perhaps not.

I don’t desire a change of scenery or exotic experiences. My heart yearns for familiarity, stability, the comfort of home—and my sanity depends upon it.

In a city the size of Los Angeles, with so many people crammed atop one another, violence occurs daily, hourly. The number of bloody encounters in a single year might be greater than those in the entire history of Pico Mundo.

The aggressive whirl of Los Angeles traffic produces death as surely as a bakery produces muffins. Earthquakes, apartment-house fires, terrorist incidents...

I can only imagine how many lingering dead people haunt the streets of that metropolis or any other. In such a place, with so many of the deceased turning to me for justice or consolation, or just for silent companionship, I would no doubt quickly seek escape in autism or suicide.

Not yet either dead or autistic, however, I had to face the challenge of Green Moon Lanes.

“All right,” I said, able to summon resignation if not bravado, “let’s go in and have a look around.”

With nightfall, the blacktop pavement returned the heat that it had borrowed from the sun during the day, and with the heat came a faint tarry smell.

So low and large that it seemed to be falling toward us, the moon had risen in the east: a dire yellow countenance, the vague cratered sockets of its timeless blind gaze.

Perhaps because Granny Sugars had been seriously superstitious about yellow moons and believed that they were an omen of bad cards in poker, I surrendered to an irrational urge to escape from the sight of that leprous and jaundiced celestial face. Taking Stormy’s hand, I hurried her toward the front doors of the bowling center.

Bowling is one of the oldest sports in the world and in one form or another was played as early as 5,200 B.C.

In the United States alone, over 130,000 lanes await action in more than 7,000 bowling centers.

Total annual bowling revenues in America are approaching five billion dollars.

With the hope of clarifying my recurring dream and understanding the meaning of it, I had researched bowling. I knew a thousand facts about the subject, none of them particularly interesting.

I also rented shoes and played eight or ten games. I am no good at the sport.

Watching me play, Stormy had once said that if I were to become a regular bowler, I would spend far more time in the gutter than would the average alcoholic hobo.

Over sixty million people in the United States go bowling at least once each year. Nine million of them are diehards who belong to bowling leagues and regularly compete in amateur tournaments.

When Stormy and I entered Green Moon Lanes that Tuesday night, a significant percentage of those millions were rolling balls

down polished lanes toward more spares than splits, but more splits than strikes. They were laughing, cheering one another, eating nachos, eating chili-cheese fries, drinking beer, and having such a good time that it was difficult to imagine Death choosing this place to harvest a sudden crop of souls.

Difficult but not impossible.

I must have been pale, because Stormy said, “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Okay. I’m good.”

The low thunder of rolling balls and the clatter of tenpins had never previously struck me as fearsome sounds; but this irregular series of rumbles and crashes strummed my nerves.

“What now?” Stormy asked.

“Good question. No answer.”

“You want to just wander around, scope the scene, see if you get any bad vibes?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Scope the scene. Bad vibes.”

We didn’t wander far before I saw something that made my mouth go dry. “Oh, my God.”

The guy behind the shoe-rental counter had not come to work in the usual black slacks and blue cotton shirt with white collar. He wore tan slacks and a green polo shirt, like the dead people in my bowling dream.

Stormy turned, surveying the long busy room, and pointed toward two additional employees. “They’ve all gotten new uniforms.”

Like every nightmare, this one of mine was vivid and yet not rich in detail, more surreal than real, not specific as to place or time or circumstances. The faces of the murder victims were twisted in agony, distorted by terror and shadow and strange light, and when I woke, I could never describe them well.

Except for one young woman. She would be shot in the chest and throat, but her face would remain remarkably untouched by violence. She would have shaggy blond hair, green eyes, and a small beauty mark on her upper lip, near the left corner of her mouth.

As Stormy and I proceeded farther into Green Moon Lanes, I saw the blonde from the dream. She stood behind the bar, drawing draft beer from one of the taps.

CHAPTER 23

STORMY AND I SAT AT A TABLE IN THE BAR ALCOVE, but we didn't order drinks. I was already half drunk with fear.

I wanted to get her out of the bowling alley. She didn't want to leave.

"We've got to deal with this situation," she insisted.

The only way that I could deal with it was to phone Chief Wyatt Porter and tell him, with little explanation, that when Bob Robertson had his coming-out party to celebrate his status as a full-fledged murderous psychopath, the site of his debutante ball was likely to be Green Moon Lanes.

For a man tired from a day of hard work, bloated with barbecue and beer, and ready for bed, the chief responded with admirable quickness and clarity of mind. "How late are they open?"

Phone to my right ear, finger in my left ear to block the alley noise, I said, "I think until midnight, sir."

"A little more than two hours. I'll dispatch an officer right now, have him stand security, be on the lookout for Robertson. But, son, you said this might go down August fifteenth—tomorrow, not today."

"That's the date on the calendar page in his file. I'm not sure what it means. I won't be certain it couldn't happen today until today is over and he hasn't shot anyone."

"Any of these things you call bodachs there?"

"No, sir. But they could show up when he does."

“He hasn’t returned home to Camp’s End yet,” the chief said, “so he’s out and about. How were the churros?”

“Delicious,” I told him.

“After the barbecue, we had a difficult choice between mud pie and homemade peach pie. I thought it through carefully and had some of both.”

“If ever I had a glimpse of Heaven, sir, it was a slice of Mrs. Porter’s peach pie.”

“I’d have married her for the peach pie alone, but fortunately she was smart and beautiful, too.”

We said good-bye. I clipped the cell phone to my belt and told Stormy we needed to get out of there.

She shook her head. “Wait. If the blond bartender isn’t here, the shooting won’t happen.” She kept her voice low, leaning close to be heard over the clash and clatter of bowlers bowling. “So somehow we get her to leave.”

“No. A premonition in a dream isn’t in every detail a picture of *exactly* what will happen. She could be home safe, and the shooter could show up here anyway.”

“But at least *she* will have been saved. One less victim.”

“Except that somebody else who *wouldn’t* have died might be shot in her place. Like the bartender who replaces her. Or me. Or you.”

“*Might* be.”

“Yes, *might* be, but how can I save one if there’s a likelihood that it means condemning another?”

Three or four bowling balls slammed into pin setups in quick succession. The racket sounded a little like automatic gunfire, and though I knew it *wasn’t* gunfire, I twitched anyway.

I said, “I’ve got no right to decide that someone else should die in her place.”

Prophetic dreams—and the complex moral choices they present—come to me only rarely. I’m grateful for that.

“Besides,” I said, “what’s her reaction going to be if I walk over to the bar and tell her she’s going to be shot to death if she doesn’t get out of here?”

“She’ll think you’re eccentric or dangerous, but she might go.”

“She won’t. She’ll stay there. She won’t want to jeopardize her job. She won’t want to appear fearful, because that makes her look weak, and these days women don’t want to seem weak any more than men do. Later she might ask someone to walk with her to her car, but that’s all.”

Stormy stared at the blonde behind the bar while I surveyed the room for any bodachs that might precede the executioner. Nobody here but us humans.

“She’s so pretty, so full of life,” Stormy said, meaning the bartender. “So much personality, such an infectious laugh.”

“She seems more alive to you because you know she might be fated to die young.”

“It just seems wrong to walk out and leave her there,” Stormy said, “without warning her, without giving her a *chance*.”

“The best way to give her a chance, to give *all* the potential victims a chance, is to stop Robertson before he does anything.”

“What’s the likelihood you’ll stop him?”

“Better than if he’d never come into the Grille this morning and I’d never gotten a look at him with his bodach entourage.”

“But you can’t be sure you’ll stop him.”

“Nothing’s for sure in this world.”

Searching my eyes, she thought about what I’d said, and then reminded me: “Except us.”

“Except us.” I pushed my chair away from the table. “Let’s go.”

Still staring at the blonde, Stormy said, “This is so hard.”

“I know.”

“So unfair.”

“What death isn’t?”

She rose from her chair. “You won’t let her die, will you, Oddie?”

“I’ll do what I can.”

We went outside, hoping to be gone before the promised police officer arrived and became curious about my involvement.

No cops on the Pico Mundo force understand my relationship with Chief Porter. They sense that something’s different about me, but they don’t realize what I see, what I know. The chief covers well for me.

Some think that I hang around Wyatt Porter because I'm a cop wannabe. They assume that I yearn for the glamour of the police life, but that I don't have quite the smarts or the guts to do the job.

Most of them believe that I regard the chief as a father figure because my real father is such a hopeless piece of work. This view contains some truth.

They are convinced that the chief took pity on me when at the age of sixteen I could no longer live with either my father or my mother, and found myself turned out into the world. Because Wyatt and Karla were never able to have children, people think that the chief has a fatherly affection for me and regards me as a surrogate son. I am deeply comforted by the fact that this seems to be true.

Being cops, however, the members of the Pico Mundo PD sense instinctively that they lack some crucial knowledge to be able to fully understand our relationship. Likewise, although I appear uncomplicated and even simple, they regard me as a puzzle with more than one missing piece.

When Stormy and I stepped out of Green Moon Lanes at ten o'clock, an hour after nightfall, the temperature in Pico Mundo remained over a hundred degrees. By midnight the air might cool below triple digits.

If Bob Robertson was intent on making Hell on Earth, we had the weather for it.

Walking toward Terri Stambaugh's Mustang, still thinking about the death-marked blond bartender, Stormy said, "Sometimes I don't know how you can live with all the things you see."

"Attitude," I told her.

"Attitude? How's that work?"

"Better some days than others."

She would have pressed me for a further explanation, but the patrol car arrived, pinning us in its headlights before we reached the Mustang. Certain that I would have been recognized, I waited hand-in-hand with Stormy for the cruiser to stop beside us.

The responding officer, Simon Varner, had been on the force only three or four months, which was longer than Bern Eckles, who had regarded me with suspicion at the chief's barbecue, but not long

enough for the sharp edge to have been worn off his curiosity about me.

Officer Varner had a face as sweet as that of any host of a children's TV program, with heavy-lidded eyes like those of the late actor Robert Mitchum. He leaned toward the open window, his burly arm resting on the door, looking like the model for a sleepy bear in some Disney cartoon.

"Odd, pleasure seeing you. Miss Llewellyn. What should I be looking for here?"

I was certain that the chief had not used my name when he had dispatched Officer Varner to the bowling center. When I was involved in a case, he made a point of keeping me as invisible as possible, never alluding to information acquired by preternatural means, the better not only to protect my secrets but also to ensure that no defense attorney could easily spring a murderer by claiming that the entire case against his client had been built upon the word of a flaky, self-proclaimed psychic.

On the other hand, because of my intrusion at the barbecue that resulted in the effort by the chief and Bern Eckles to put together a quick profile of Robertson, Eckles knew that I had some connection to the situation. If Eckles knew, then word would get around; it might already be on the police-department grapevine.

Still, it seemed best to play dumb. "What should you be looking for? Sir, I don't understand."

"I see you, I figure you told the chief something that makes him send me out here."

"We were just watching some friends bowl," I said. "I'm no good at it myself."

Stormy said, "He *owns* the gutter."

From the car seat beside him, Varner produced a computer-printed blow-up of Bob Robertson's driver's-license photograph. "You know this guy, right?"

I said, "I've seen him twice today. I don't really know him."

"You didn't tell the chief he might show up here?"

"Not me. How would I know where he'd show up?"

“Chief says if I see him coming but I can’t see both his hands, don’t figure he’s just getting a breath mint from his pocket.”

“I wouldn’t second-guess the chief.”

A Lincoln Navigator pulled in from the street and paused behind Varner’s cruiser. He stuck his arm all the way out of the window and waved the SUV around him.

I could see two men in the Navigator. Neither was Robertson.

“How do you know this guy?” Varner asked.

“Before noon, he came in the Grille for lunch.”

The lids lifted slightly from those sleepy-bear eyes. “That’s all? You cooked his lunch? I thought...something went down between you and him.”

“Something. Not much.” I compressed the day, leaving out what Varner didn’t need to know: “He was weird at the Grille. The chief was there at the time, saw him being weird. So then this afternoon, I’m off work, out and about, minding my own business, and this Robertson flips me off, gets aggressive with me.”

Varner’s heavy lids became hoods, narrowing his eyes to slits of suspicion. Instinct told him that I was withholding information. He wasn’t as slow as he looked. “Aggressive how?”

Stormy saved me from a rough lie with a smooth one: “The creep made a crude pass at me, and Odd told him to back off.”

Fungus Man didn’t look like the kind of macho stud who thought every woman was panting for him.

Stormy, however, is so strikingly good-looking that Varner, already in a suspicious mood, seemed inclined to believe that even a schlump like Bob Robertson would work up enough hormones to try his luck with her.

He said, “Chief thinks this guy vandalized St. Bart’s. You know about that, I guess.”

Deflecting this dogged Sherlock, Stormy said, “Officer Varner, curiosity is killing me. Do you mind my asking—what’s your tattoo mean?”

He wore a short-sleeve shirt, exposing his massive forearms. On his left arm, above his watch, were three block letters: *POD*.

“Miss Llewellyn, I’m sorry to say that as a teenager I was one screwed-up puppy. Got myself involved in gangs. Turned my life around before it was too late. I thank the Lord Jesus for that. This tattoo was a gang thing.”

“What do the letters stand for?” she asked.

He seemed embarrassed. “It’s a crude obscenity, miss. I’d rather not say.”

“You could have it removed,” she said. “They’ve gotten a lot better at that in recent years.”

Varner said, “Thought about doing just that. But I keep it to remind me how far off the right path I once went and how easy it was to take that first wrong step.”

“That’s so fascinating and so admirable,” she said, leaning closer to the window as if to get a better look at this paragon of virtue. “Lots of people rewrite their past rather than face up to it. I’m glad to know we’ve got men like you looking out for us.”

She poured this verbal syrup so smoothly that it sounded sincere.

While Officer Varner was basking in her flattery as happily as a waffle in whipped butter, she turned to me and said, “Odd, I’ve got to get home. I have an early morning.”

I wished Officer Varner good luck, and he made no attempt to continue grilling me. He seemed to have forgotten his suspicions.

In the car, I said to her, “I never realized you had such a talent for deceit.”

“Oh, that’s too serious a word for it. I just manipulated him a little.”

“After we’re married, I’m going to be on the lookout for that,” I warned her as I started the car.

“What do you mean?”

“In case you ever try to manipulate *me* a little.”

“Good heavens, odd one, I manipulate you every day. And fold and spindle you, as well.”

I couldn’t tell if she was serious. “You do?”

“Gently, of course. Gently and with great affection. And you always like it.”

“I do?”

“You have numerous little tricks to get me to do it.”

I put the car in gear but kept my foot on the brake. “You’re saying I *invite* manipulation?”

“Some days I think you thrive on it.”

“I can’t tell if you’re serious.”

“I know. You’re adorable.”

“Puppies are adorable. I’m not a puppy.”

“You and puppies. Totally adorable.”

“You *are* serious.”

“Am I?”

I studied her. “No. No, you’re not.”

“Aren’t I?”

I sighed. “I can see the dead, but I can’t see through you.”

When we drove out of the parking lot, Officer Varner was parked near the front entrance to Green Moon Lanes.

Instead of running a quiet surveillance of the place with the hope of nabbing Robertson before violence could be committed, he was making himself highly visible, as a deterrent. This interpretation of his assignment was most likely not one the chief would have approved.

As we passed him, Officer Varner waved at us. He appeared to be eating a doughnut.

Granny Sugars always railed against negative thinking because she superstitiously believed that when we worry about being afflicted by one evil or another, we are in fact inviting in the very devil that we fear and are assuring the occurrence of the event we dread. Nevertheless, I could not help but think how easily Bob Robertson might approach the cruiser from behind and shoot Simon Varner in the head while he noshed on his Krispy Kremes.

CHAPTER 24

VIOLA PEABODY, THE WAITRESS WHO HAD served lunch to me and Terri at the Grille just eight eventful hours ago, lived only two blocks from Camp's End, but because of her tireless gardening and painting and carpentry, her home seemed to be a world away from those dreary streets.

Although small and simple, the house resembled a fairy-tale cottage in one of those romantic paintings by Thomas Kinkade. Under the gibbous moon, its walls glowed as softly as backlit alabaster, and a carriage lamp revealed the crimson petals of the flowers on the trumpet vine festooning the trellis that flanked and overhung the front door.

Without any apparent surprise that we arrived unannounced at this hour, Viola greeted Stormy and me graciously, with a smile and with an offer of coffee or iced tea, which we declined.

We sat in the small living room where Viola herself had stripped and refinished the wood floor. She had woven the rag rug. She had sewn the chintz curtains and the slipcovers that made old upholstered furniture look new.

Perched on the edge of an armchair, Viola was as slim as a girl. The travails and burdens of her life had left no mark on her. She did not look old enough or harried enough to be the single mother of the five-and six-year-old daughters who were asleep in a back room.

Her husband, Rafael, who'd left her and who'd contributed not one penny to his children's welfare, was a fool of such dimensions

that he should have been required to dress like a jester, complete with silly hat and curled-toe shoes.

The house lacked air conditioning. The windows were open, and an electric fan sat on the floor, the oscillating blades imparting an illusion of coolness to the air.

Leaning forward with her hands braced on her knees, Viola traded her smile for a look of solemn expectation, for she knew why I must have come. "It's my dream, isn't it?" she said softly.

I spoke quietly, too, in respect of the sleeping children. "Tell me again."

"I saw myself, a hole in my forehead, my face...broken."

"You think you were shot."

"Shot dead," she confirmed, folding her hands together between her knees, as if in prayer. "My right eye bloodshot and swollen all ugly, half out of the socket."

"Anxiety dreams," Stormy said, meaning to reassure. "They don't have anything to do with the future."

"We've been over this territory," Viola told her. "Odd...he was of that same opinion this afternoon." She looked at me. "You must have changed your mind, or you wouldn't be here."

"Where were you in the dream?"

"No place. You know, a dream place...all fuzzy, fluid."

"Do you ever go bowling?"

"That takes money. I have two colleges to save for. My girls are going to be somebody."

"Have you ever been inside Green Moon Lanes?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Did anything in the dream suggest the place might have been a bowling alley?"

"No. Like I said, it wasn't *any* real place. Why do you say the bowling alley? You have a dream, too?"

"I did, yes."

"People dead?" Viola asked.

"Yes."

"You ever have dreams come true?"

"Sometimes," I admitted.

“I knew you’d understand. That’s why I asked you to read me.”

“Tell me more about your dream, Viola.”

She closed her eyes, striving to remember. “I’m running from something. There are these shadows, some flashes of light, but none of it is anything.”

My sixth sense is unique in its nature and its clarity. But I believe that many people have less dramatic and undiscovered supernatural perceptions that manifest from time to time throughout their lives: presentiments that come sometimes in the form of dreams, as well as other moments of uncanny awareness and insight.

They fail to explore these experiences in part because they believe that acknowledging the supernatural would be irrational. They are also frightened, often unconsciously, by the prospect of opening their minds and hearts to the truth of a universe far more complex and meaningful than the material world that their education tells them is the sum of all things.

I was not surprised, therefore, that Viola’s nightmare, which earlier in the day had seemed likely to be of no consequence, had proved to be a matter of importance, after all. “Do your dreams have voices, sounds?” I asked her. “Some people’s don’t.”

“Mine do. In the dream, I can hear myself breathing. And this crowd.”

“Crowd?”

“A roaring crowd, like the sound in a stadium.”

Baffled, I said, “Where would such a place be in Pico Mundo?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a Little League game.”

“Not such a big crowd at one of those,” Stormy noted.

“Wasn’t necessarily thousands of voices. Could’ve been a couple hundred,” Viola said. “Just a crowd, all roaring.”

I said, “And then, how is it that you see yourself shot?”

“Don’t see it happen. The shadows, the flashes of light, I’m running, and I stumble, fall on my hands and knees...”

Viola’s eyes twitched behind their lids as though she were asleep and experiencing the nightmare for the first time.

“...on my hands and knees,” she repeated, “hands in something slippery. It’s blood. Then shadows whirl away and light whirled in,

and I'm looking down at my own dead face.”

She shuddered and opened her eyes.

Tiny beads of sweat stippled her forehead and her upper lip.

In spite of the electric fan, the room was warm. But she hadn't been sweating before she began to recall the dream.

“Is there anything else, any other details?” I asked. “Even the smallest thing might help me. What were you...I mean your dead body...what was it lying on? A floor of some kind? Grass? Blacktop?”

She thought for a moment, shook her head. “Can't say. The only other thing was the man, the dead man.”

I sat up straighter on the sofa. “You mean another...corpse?”

“Next to me...next to my body. He was sort of tumbled on his side, one arm twisted behind his back.”

“Were there other victims?” Stormy asked.

“Maybe. I didn't see any but him.”

“Did you recognize him?”

“Didn't get a look at his face. It was turned away from me.”

I said, “Viola, if you could try hard to remember—”

“Anyway, I wasn't interested in him. I was too scared to wonder who he was. I looked in my own dead face, and I tried to scream, but I couldn't, and I tried harder, and then I was sitting up in bed, the scream squeezing out of me but, you know, only just the wheeze of a scream.”

The memory agitated Viola. She started to get up from the chair. Maybe her legs were weak. She sat down again.

As though she were reading my mind, Stormy asked, “What was he wearing?”

“What—him in the dream? One foot bent back, the shoe half off. A loafer.”

We waited while Viola searched her memory. Dreams that are as rich as cream while they unfold are skim milk when we wake, and in time they wash out of our minds, leaving as little residue as water filtered through cheesecloth.

“His pants were splattered with blood,” Viola said. “Khakis, I think. Tan pants, anyway.”

The slowly swiveling fan stirred the leaves of a potted palm in one corner of the room, raising from its fronds a dry rustling that made me think of cockroaches scurrying, and rats, and nothing good.

Reading the last details of her dream that yet remained in the cheesecloth of memory, Viola said, “A polo shirt...”

I got up from the sofa. I needed to move. I realized that the room was too small for pacing, but I remained on my feet.

“Green,” Viola said. “A green polo shirt.”

I thought of the guy behind the shoe-rental counter at Green Moon Lanes, the blonde drawing beer behind the bar—both in their new work uniforms.

Her voice growing even quieter, Viola said, “Tell me the truth, Odd. Look at my face. Do you see death in me?”

I said, “Yes.”

CHAPTER 25

ALTHOUGH I'M UNABLE TO READ FACES TO DISCOVER either a person's future or the secrets of her heart, I could not look a moment longer at Viola Peabody's face, for I imagined what I couldn't truly read, and in my mind's eye saw her motherless daughters standing at her grave.

I went to one of the open windows. Beyond lay a side yard overhung by pepper trees. Out of the warm darkness came the sweet fragrance of jasmine that had been planted and tended by Viola's caring hands.

Ordinarily, I have no fear of the night. I feared this one, however, because the change from August 14 to August 15 was coming express-train fast, as if the rotation of the earth had drastically gained speed by the flicking of a godly finger.

I turned to Viola, who still sat on the edge of her armchair. Her eyes, always large, were owlish now, and her brown face seemed to have a gray undertone. I said, "Isn't tomorrow your day off?"

She nodded.

Because she had a sister who could baby-sit her daughters, Viola worked at the Grille six days a week.

Stormy said, "Do you have plans? What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I figured I'd work around the house in the morning. Always things to do here. In the afternoon...that's for the girls."

“You mean Nicolina and Levanna?” I asked, naming her daughters.

“Saturday—that’s Levanna’s birthday. She’ll be seven. But the Grille is busy Saturdays, good tips. I can’t miss work. So we were going to celebrate early.”

“Celebrate how?”

“That new movie, it’s a big hit with all the kids, the one with the dog. We were going to the four-o’clock show.”

Before Stormy spoke, I knew the essence of what she would say. “Might be more of a crowd in a cool theater on a summer afternoon than at a Little League game.”

I asked Viola, “What did you plan after the movie?”

“Terri said bring them to the Grille, dinner on her.”

The Grille could be noisy when all the tables were filled, but I didn’t think that the enthusiastic conversation of the patrons in our little restaurant could be mistaken for the roar of a crowd. In dreams, of course, everything can be distorted, including sounds.

With the open window at my back, I suddenly felt vulnerable to an extent that made the skin pucker on the nape of my neck.

I looked out into the side yard again. All appeared to be as it had been a minute ago.

The graceful branches of the peppers hung in the breathless, jasmine-scented night air. Shadows and shrubs plaited their different darknesses, but as far as I could tell, they didn’t give cover to Bob Robertson or anyone else.

Nevertheless, I stepped away from the window, to the side of it, when I turned once more to Viola. “I think you ought to change your plans for tomorrow.”

By saving Viola from this destiny, I might be sentencing someone else to die horribly in her place, just as might have been the case if I had warned off the blond bartender at the bowling alley. The only difference was that I didn’t know the blonde...and Viola was a friend.

Sometimes complex and difficult moral choices are decided less by reason and by right than by sentiment. Perhaps such decisions

are the paving stones on the road to Hell; if so, my route is well paved, and the welcoming committee already knows my name.

In my defense, I can only say that I sensed, even then, that saving Viola meant saving her daughters, too. Three lives, not one.

“Is there any hope...” Viola touched her face with the trembling fingers of one hand, tracing the bones of jaw and cheek and brow, as if discovering not her skull but instead Death’s countenance in the process of replacing her own. “...any hope this can pass from me?”

“Fate isn’t one straight road,” I said, becoming the oracle that earlier in the day I had declined to be for her. “There are forks in it, many different routes to different ends. We have the free will to choose the path.”

“Do whatever Oddie says,” Stormy advised, “and you’ll be all right.”

“It’s not that easy,” I said quickly. “You can change the road you take, but sometimes it can bend back to lead you straight to that same stubborn fate.”

Viola regarded me with too much respect, perhaps even awe. “I was just *sure* you knew about such things, Odd, about all that’s Otherly and Beyond.”

Uneasy with her admiration, I went to the other open window. Terri’s Mustang stood under a streetlamp in front of the house. All quiet. Nothing to be alarmed about. Nothing and everything.

We had taken steps to be sure we weren’t being followed from the bowling center. I remained concerned, anyway, because Robertson’s appearance at Little Ozzie’s house and again in the churchyard had surprised me, and I could not afford to be surprised a third time.

“Viola,” I said, turning to her once more, “changing all your plans for tomorrow isn’t enough. You’ll also need to remain vigilant, alert to anything that seems...wrong.”

“I’m already as jumpy as a cricket.”

“That’s no good. Jumpy isn’t the same as vigilant.”

She nodded. “You’re right.”

“You need to be as calm as possible.”

“I’ll try. I’ll do my best.”

“Calm and observant, prepared to react fast to any threat but calm enough to see it coming.”

Poised on the edge of the chair, she still appeared to be as ready to leap as any cricket.

“In the morning,” Stormy said, “we’ll bring you a photo of a man you ought to be on the lookout for.” She glanced at me. “Can you get her a good picture of him, Oddie?”

I nodded. The chief would provide me with a computer-printed blow-up of the photo of Robertson that the DMV had released to him.

“What man?” Viola asked.

As vividly as possible, I described Fungus Man, who had been at the Grille during the first shift, before Viola had arrived for work. “If you see him, get away from him. You’ll know the worst is coming. But I don’t think anything will happen tonight. Not here. From all indications, he’s intending to make headlines in a public place, lots of people....”

“Tomorrow, don’t go to the movies,” Stormy said.

“I won’t,” Viola assured her.

“And not out to dinner, either.”

Although I didn’t understand what could be gained from having a look at Nicolina and Levanna, I suddenly knew that I should not leave the house without checking on them. “Viola, may I see the girls?”

“Now? They’re sleeping.”

“I won’t wake them. But it’s...important.”

She rose from the chair and led us to the room that the sisters shared: two lamps, two nightstands, two beds, and two angelic little girls sleeping in their skivvies, under sheets but without blankets.

One lamp had been set at the lowest intensity on its three-way switch. The apricot-colored shade cast a soft, inviting light.

Two windows were open to the hot night. As insubstantial as a spirit, a translucent white moth beat its wings insistently against one of the screens, with the desperation of a lost soul fluttering against the gates of Heaven.

Mounted on the inside of the windows, with an emergency-release handle that couldn't be reached from outside, were steel bars that would prevent a man like Harlo Landerson from getting at the girls.

Screens and bars could foil moths and maniacs, but neither could keep out bodachs. Five of them were in the room.

CHAPTER 26

TWO SINISTER SHAPES STOOD AT EACH BED, VISITORS from one hell or another, travelers out of the black room.

They hunched over the girls and appeared to be studying them with keen interest. Their hands, if they had hands, floated a few inches above the sheets, and seemed slowly to trace the shrouded contours of the children's bodies.

I couldn't know for sure what they were doing, but I imagined that they were drawn to the very life energy of Nicolina and Levanna—and were somehow basking in it.

These creatures seemed to be unaware that we had entered the room. They were enthralled if not half hypnotized by some radiance that the girls emitted, a radiance invisible to me but evidently dazzling to them.

The fifth beast crawled the bedroom floor, its movements as fluid and serpentine as those of any reptile. Under Levanna's bed it slithered, seemed to coil there, but a moment later emerged with a salamandrian wriggle, only to glide under Nicolina's bed and whip itself silently back and forth, like a thrashing snake in slow-mo.

Unable to repress a shudder, I sensed that this fifth intruder must be savoring some exquisite spoor, some ethereal residue left by the passage of the little girls' feet. And I imagined—or hope I did—that I saw this squirming bodach repeatedly lick the carpet with a cold thin tongue.

When I would not venture far past the doorway, Viola whispered, “It’s all right. They’re deep sleepers, both of them.”

“They’re beautiful,” Stormy said.

Viola brightened with pride. “They’re such good girls.” Seeing in my face a faint reflection of the abhorrence that gripped my mind, she said, “What’s wrong?”

Glancing at me as I summoned an unconvincing smile, Stormy at once suspected the truth. She squinted into the shadowy corners of the room—left, right, and toward the ceiling—hoping to catch at least a fleeting glimpse of whatever supernatural presence revealed itself to me.

At the beds, the four hunched bodachs might have been priests of a diabolic religion, Aztecs at the altar of human sacrifice, as their hands moved sinuously and ceaselessly in ritualistic pantomime over the sleeping girls.

When I failed to answer Viola’s question at once, she thought that I’d seen something wrong with her daughters, and she took a step toward the bed.

Gently I gripped her arm and held her back. “I’m sorry, Viola. Nothing’s wrong. I just wanted to be sure the girls were safe. And with those bars on the windows, they are.”

“They know how to work the emergency release,” she said.

One of the entities at Nicolina’s bedside appeared to rise out of its swoon and recognize our presence. Its hands slowed but did not entirely stop their eerie movements, and it raised its wolfish head to peer in our direction with disturbing, eyeless intensity.

I was loath to leave the girls alone with those five phantoms, but I could do nothing to banish them.

Besides, from everything that I have seen of bodachs, they can experience this world with some if not all of the usual five senses, but they don’t seem to have any *effect* on things here. I have never heard them make a sound, have never seen them move an object or, by their passage, disturb so much as the dust motes floating in the air.

They are of less substance than an ectoplasmic wraith drifting above the table at a seance. They are dream creatures on the wrong

side of sleep.

The girls would not be harmed. Not here. Not yet.

Or so I hoped.

I suspected that these spirit travelers, having come to Pico Mundo for ringside seats at a festival of blood, were entertaining themselves on the eve of the main event. Perhaps they took pleasure in studying the victims before the shots were fired; they might be amused and excited to watch innocent people progress all unknowing toward imminent death.

Pretending to be unaware of the nightmarish intruders, putting one finger to my lips as if suggesting to Viola and Stormy that we be careful not to wake the girls, I drew both women with me, out of the room. I pushed the door two-thirds shut, just as it had been when we'd arrived, leaving the bodachs to slither on the floor, to sniff and thrash, to weave their patterns of sinuous gesticulations with mysterious purpose.

I worried that one or more of them would follow us to the living room, but we reached the front door without a supernatural escort.

Speaking almost as quietly as in the girls' bedroom, I said to Viola, "One thing I better clarify. When I tell you not to go to the movies tomorrow, I mean the girls shouldn't go, either. Don't send them out with a relative. Not to the movies, not anywhere."

Viola's smooth satin brow became brown corduroy. "But my sweet babies...they weren't shot in the dream."

"No prophetic dream reveals everything that's coming. Just fragments."

Instead of merely sharpening her anxiety, the implications of my statement hardened her features with anger. Good. She needed fear *and* anger to stay sharp, to make wise decisions in the day ahead.

To stiffen her resolve, I said, "Even if you *had* seen your girls shot...God forbid, dead...you might've blocked it from your memory when you woke."

Stormy rested her hand on Viola's shoulder. "You wouldn't have wanted those images in your mind."

Tense with determination, Viola said, "We'll stay home, have a little party, just ourselves."

“I’m not sure that’s wise, either,” I said.

“Why not? I don’t know what place that was in my dream, but I’m sure it wasn’t this house.”

“Remember...different roads can take you to the same stubborn fate.”

I didn’t want to tell her about the bodachs in her daughters’ room, for then I would have to reveal all my secrets. Only Terri, the chief, Mrs. Porter, and Little Ozzie know most of the truth about me, and only Stormy knows all of it.

If too many people are brought into my innermost circle, my secret will leak out. I’ll become a media sensation, a freak to many people, a guru to some. Simplicity and quiet hours will be forever beyond my reach. My life will be too complicated to be worth living.

I said to Viola, “In your dream, this house wasn’t where you were gunned down. But if you were destined to be shot at the movies, and now you aren’t going to the theater...then maybe Fate comes here to find you. Not likely. But not impossible.”

“And in *your* dream, tomorrow is the day?”

“That’s right. So I’d feel better if you were *two* steps removed from the future you saw in your nightmare.”

I glanced toward the back of the house. Still no bodachs had ventured after us. I *think* they have no effect on this world.

Nevertheless, taking no chances with the girls’ lives, I lowered my voice further. “Step one—don’t go to the movies or the Grille tomorrow. Step two—don’t stay here, either.”

Stormy asked, “How far away does your sister live?”

“Two blocks. Over on Maricopa Lane.”

I said, “I’ll come by in the morning, between nine and ten o’clock, with the photo I promised. I’ll take you and the girls to your sister’s.”

“You don’t have to do that, Odd. We can get there ourselves.”

“No. I want to take you. It’s necessary.”

I needed to be certain that no bodachs followed Viola and her daughters.

Lowering my voice to a whisper, I said, “Don’t tell Levanna and Nicolina what you’re going to do. And don’t call your sister to say you’re coming. You could be overheard.”

Viola surveyed the living room, worried but also astonished. “Who could hear?”

By necessity, I was mysterious: “Certain...forces.” If the bodachs overheard her planning to move the kids to her sister’s house, Viola might not have taken two safe steps away from her dreamed-of fate, after all, but only one. “Do you really believe, like you said, that I know about all that’s Otherly and Beyond?”

She nodded. “Yes. I believe that.”

Her eyes were so wide with wonder that they scared me, for they reminded me of the staring eyes of corpses.

“Then trust me on this, Viola. Get some sleep if you can. I’ll come around in the morning. By tomorrow night, this’ll have been all just a nightmare, nothing prophetic about it.”

I didn’t feel as confident as I sounded, but I smiled and kissed her on the cheek.

She hugged me and then hugged Stormy. “I don’t feel so alone anymore.”

Lacking an oscillating fan, the night outside was hotter than the warm air in the little house.

The moon had slowly ascended toward the higher stars, shedding its yellow veils to reveal its true silver face. A face as hard as a clock, and merciless.

CHAPTER 27

LITTLE MORE THAN AN HOUR BEFORE MIDNIGHT, worried about a new day that might bring children in the line of gunfire, I parked the Mustang behind the Pico Mundo Grille.

When I doused the headlights and switched off the engine, Stormy said, “Will you ever leave this town?”

“I sure hope I’m not one of those who insists on hanging around after he’s dead, like poor Tom Jedd out there at Tire World.”

“I meant will you ever leave it while you’re alive.”

“Just the idea gives me hives on the brain.”

“Why?”

“It’s big out there.”

“Not all of it is big. Lots of towns are smaller and quieter than Pico Mundo.”

“I guess what I mean is...everything out there would be *new*. I like what I know. Considering everything else I have to deal with...I can’t at the same time handle a lot of new stuff. New street names, new architecture, new smells, all new people...”

“I’ve always thought it would be nice to live in the mountains.”

“New weather.” I shook my head. “I don’t need new weather.”

“Anyway,” she said, “I didn’t mean leave town permanently. Just for a day or two. We could drive to Vegas.”

“That’s your idea of a smaller, quieter place? I’ll bet that’s a place with *thousands* of dead people who won’t move on.”

“Why?”

“People who lost everything they owned at the craps tables, the roulette wheels, then went back to their rooms and blew their brains out.” I shivered. “Suicides always hang around after they’re dead. They’re afraid to move on.”

“You have a melodramatic view of Las Vegas, odd one. The average hotel maid doesn’t turn up a dozen suicides every morning.”

“Bunch of guys murdered by the mob, their bodies dumped in the fresh concrete footings of new hotels. You can bet your ass *they* have unfinished business and plenty of postmortem rage. Besides, I don’t gamble.”

“That doesn’t sound like the grandson of Pearl Sugars.”

“She did her best to turn me into a card hustler, but I’m afraid I disappointed her.”

“She taught you poker, didn’t she?”

“Yeah. We used to play for pennies.”

“Even just for pennies is gambling.”

“Not when I played with Granny Sugars.”

“She let you win? That’s sweet.”

“She wanted me to travel the Southwest poker circuit with her. Grandma said, ‘Odd, I’m going to grow old on the road, not in a rocking chair on some damn retirement-home porch with a gaggle of farting old ladies, and I’m going to die facedown in my cards in the middle of a game, not of boredom at a tea dance for toothless retirees trying to cha-cha in their walkers.’”

“On the road,” Stormy said, “would have been too much new.”

“Every day, new and more new.” I sighed. “But we sure would have had fun. She wanted me along to share the laughs...and if she died in the middle of a particularly rough game, she wanted me to be sure the other players didn’t split her bankroll and leave her carcass in the desert as a coyote buffet.”

“I understand why you didn’t go on the road, but why don’t you gamble?”

“Because even if Granny Sugars didn’t play sloppy to give me an edge, I almost always won anyway.”

“You mean because of your...gift?”

“Yeah.”

“You could see what cards were coming?”

“No. Nothing that dramatic. I just have a feeling for when my hand is stronger than those of other players and when it’s not. The feeling proves to be right nine times out of ten.”

“That’s a *huge* advantage at cards.”

“It’s the same with black jack, any card game.”

“So it’s not really gambling.”

“Not really. It’s just...harvesting cash.”

Stormy understood at once why I’d given up cards. “It would be pretty much the same as stealing.”

“I don’t need money that bad,” I said. “And I never will as long as people want to eat what’s been fried on a griddle.”

“Or as long as they have feet.”

“Yeah. Assuming I make the move into shoe retailing.”

“I said Vegas not because I want to gamble,” she explained.

“It’s a long way to go for an all-you-can-eat buffet.”

“I said Vegas because we could be there in maybe three hours, and the wedding chapels are open around the clock. No blood tests required. We could be married by dawn.”

My heart did one of those funny gyrations that only Stormy can make it do. “Wow. That’s almost enough to give me the nerve to travel.”

“Only almost, huh?”

“We can have our blood tests tomorrow morning, get a marriage license Thursday, get hitched by Saturday. And our friends can be there. I want our friends there, don’t you?”

“Yes. But I want married more.”

I kissed her and said, “After all the hesitation, why the sudden rush?”

Because we had sat for a while in that unlighted alley, our eyes were thoroughly dark-adapted. Otherwise I would not have fully recognized the depth of concern in her face, her eyes; in fact, she seemed to be gripped not by mere anxiety but by a quiet terror.

“Hey, hey,” I assured her, “everything’s going to be all right.”

Her voice didn’t quaver. She’s too tough for easy tears. But in the softness of her speech, I could hear a haunted woman: “Ever since

we were sitting on the edge of the koi pond and that man came along the promenade...”

When her voice trailed away, I said, “Fungus Man.”

“Yeah. That creepy sonofabitch. Ever since I saw him...I’ve been scared for you. I mean, I’m always scared for you, Oddie, but I don’t usually make anything of it because the last thing you need, on top of everything else on your mind, is a weepy dame always nagging you to be careful.”

“‘Weepy dame’?”

“Sorry. I must’ve flashed back to a prior life in the 1930s. But it’s true, the last thing you need is some hysterical bitch always on your case.”

“I liked ‘weepy dame’ a lot better. Listen, I think this guy is maximum sick, he’s ten megatons of blast power with a fast-ticking timer, but the chief and I are on his case, and we’re going to pluck his fuse before he blows.”

“Don’t be so sure. Please, Oddie, don’t be so sure. Being too sure with this guy will get you killed.”

“I’m not going to be killed.”

“I’m scared for you.”

“By tomorrow night,” I told her, “Bob Robertson, alias Fungus Man, is going to be wearing a jail-issued orange jumpsuit, and maybe he’ll have hurt some people, or maybe we’ll have stopped him right before he pulls a trigger, but whatever the situation, I’m going to be with you for dinner, and we’ll be planning our wedding, and I’ll still have both legs, both arms—”

“Oddie, stop, don’t say any more—”

“—still have the same stupid head you’re looking at now—”

“*Please* stop.”

“—and I won’t be blind, because I really *need* to see you, and I won’t be deaf because how can we plan our wedding if I can’t hear you, and I won’t be—”

She punched me in the chest. “Don’t tempt fate, dammit!”

In a sitting position, she couldn’t get enough swing behind her fist to land a solid blow. I was hardly winded by the punch.

With as little wheeze as I could manage, I drew a breath and said, "I'm not worried about tempting fate. I'm not superstitious that way."

"Maybe I am."

"Well, get over it."

I kissed her. She kissed back.

How *right* the world was then.

I put an arm around her and said, "You silly, weepy dame. Bob Robertson might be so psychotic he wouldn't even qualify to manage the Bates Motel, but he's still just a mug. He has nothing going for him except sixteen wheels of craziness spinning in his head. I will come back to you with no punctures, no scrapes, no dents. And none of my federally mandated stuffing-identification tags will have been ripped off."

"My Pooh," she said, as sometimes she does.

Having somewhat calmed her nerves and partially settled her fears, I felt quite manly, like one of those stouthearted and rock-ribbed sheriffs in old cowboy movies, who with a smile sets the minds of the ladyfolk at ease and sweeps legions of gunfighters off the streets of Dodge City without smudging his white hat.

I was the worst kind of fool. When I look back on that August night, changed forever by all my wounds and all my suffering, that undamaged Odd Thomas seems like a different human being from me, immeasurably more confident than I am now, still able to hope, but not as wise, and I mourn for him.

I am told not to let the tone of this narrative become too dark. A certain 400-pound muse will park his 150-pound ass on me by way of editorial comment, and there is always the threat of his urine-filled cat.

CHAPTER 28

WHEN WE GOT OUT OF THE MUSTANG, THE FAMILIAR alleyway dwindled north and south into deeper gloom than I recalled from other nights, little-revealed by moonlight, obscured by moonshadows.

Above the back entrance to the restaurant kitchen, a security lamp glowed. Yet the darkness seemed to press toward it rather than to shrink away.

Uncovered stairs led to a second-floor landing and the door to Terri Stambaugh's apartment. Light shone behind the curtains.

At the top of the steps, Stormy pointed at the northern sky. "Cassiopeia."

Star by star, I identified the points of the constellation.

In classic mythology, Cassiopeia was the mother of Andromeda. Andromeda was saved from a sea monster by the hero Perseus, who also slew the Gorgon Medusa.

No less than the fabled Andromeda, Stormy Llewellyn, daughter of another Cassiopeia, is stellar enough to deserve a constellation named for her. I have slain no Gorgons, however, and I am no Perseus.

Terri answered the door when I knocked, accepted the car keys, and insisted that we come in for coffee or a nightcap.

Light from two candles throbbled pleasantly over the kitchen walls as cool drafts of conditioned air teased the flames. Terri had been

sitting at the table when I knocked. A small glass of peach brandy stood on the red-and-white-checkered oilcloth.

As always, the background music of her life was Elvis: this time, “Wear My Ring Around Your Neck.”

We had known that she would expect us to visit for a while, which is why Stormy hadn’t waited at the bottom of the stairs.

Terri sometimes suffers from insomnia. Even if sleep slips upon her with ease, the nights are long.

When the CLOSED sign is hung on the front door of the Grille at nine o’clock and after the last customer leaves between nine and ten, whether Terri is drinking decaf coffee or something stronger, she opens as well a bottle of loneliness.

Her husband, Kelsey, her high-school sweetheart, has been dead for nine years. His cancer had been relentless, but being a fighter of uncommon determination, he had taken three years to die.

When his malignancy was diagnosed, he swore that he would not leave Terri alone. He possessed the will but not the power to keep that oath.

In his final years, because of the unfailing good humor and the quiet courage with which Kelsey waged his long mortal battle, Terri’s love and respect for him, always deep, had grown profound.

In a way, Kelsey had kept his promise never to leave her. His ghost does not linger around the Grille or anywhere else in Pico Mundo. He lives vividly in her recollections, however, and his memory is etched on her soul.

After three or four years, her grief had matured into a settled sorrow. I think she has been surprised that even after arriving at an acceptance of her loss, she has had no desire to mend the tear in her heart. The hole that Kelsey left has become more comforting to her than any patch with which she could close it.

Her fascination with Elvis, his life and music, began nine years ago, when she was thirty-two, the same year that Kelsey died.

The reasons for her intense interest in Presley are numerous. Without a doubt, however, among them is this one: As long as she has an Elvis collection—music, memorabilia, biographical facts—to

build and maintain, she has no time to be attracted to a living man and can remain emotionally true to her lost husband.

Elvis is the door that she closes in the face of romance. The architecture of his life is her mountain retreat, her high redoubt, her nunnery.

Stormy and I sat at the table. Terri subtly steered us away from the fourth chair, the one that Kelsey had always occupied when alive.

The subject of our impending wedding came up before we properly settled in our seats. With the peach brandy that she poured for us, Terri raised a toast to our enduring happiness.

Every autumn, she brews crocks full of peach skins into this elixir: ferments, strains, bottles it. The flavor is irresistible, and the brandy packs a punch best handled in small glasses.

Later, as Stormy and I were finishing our second servings, and as the King was singing "Love Me Tender," I told Terri about taking Elvis for a ride in her car. She was thrilled at first, but then saddened to hear that he had wept throughout our travels.

"I've seen him cry a few times before," I said. "Since his death, he seems emotionally fragile. But this was the worst he's ever been in my experience."

"Of course," Terri said, "there's no mystery why he would be a total mess today of all days."

"Well, it's a mystery to me," I assured her.

"It's August fourteenth. At three-fourteen in the morning on August 14, 1958, his mama died. She was only forty-six."

"Gladys," Stormy said. "Her name was Gladys, wasn't it?"

There is movie-star fame like that enjoyed by Tom Cruise, rock-star fame like that of Mick Jagger, literary fame, political fame.... But mere fame has grown intoreal legend when people of different generations remember your *mother's* name a quarter of a century after your death and nearly half a century after hers.

"Elvis was in the service," Terri recalled. "August twelfth, he flew home to Memphis on emergency leave and went to his mother's bedside in the hospital. But the sixteenth of August is a bad day for him, too."

“Why?”

“That’s when he died,” Terri said.

“Elvis himself?” Stormy asked.

“Yes. August 16, 1977.”

I had finished the second peach brandy.

Terri offered the bottle.

I wanted more but didn’t need it. I covered my empty glass with my hand and said, “Elvis seemed concerned about me.”

“How do you mean?” Terri asked.

“He patted me on the arm. Like he felt sympathy for me. He had this...this melancholy look, as if he was taking pity on me for some reason.”

This revelation alarmed Stormy. “You didn’t tell me this. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrugged. “It doesn’t mean anything. It was just Elvis.”

“So if it doesn’t mean anything,” Terri asked, “why did you mention it?”

“It means something to *me*,” Stormy declared. “Gladys died on the fourteenth. Elvis died on the sixteenth. The fifteenth, smack between them—that’s when this Robertson sonofabitch is going to go gunning for people. *Tomorrow*.”

Terri frowned at me. “Robertson?”

“Fungus Man. The guy I borrowed your car to find.”

“Did you find him?”

“Yeah. He lives in Camp’s End.”

“And?”

“The chief and I...we’re on it.”

“This Robertson is a toxic-waste mutant out of some psycho movie,” Stormy told Terri. “He came after us at St. Bart’s, and when we gave him the slip, he trashed some of the church.”

Terri offered Stormy more peach brandy. “He’s going to go gunning for people, you said?”

Stormy doesn’t drink heavily, but she accepted another round. “Your fry cook’s recurring dream is finally coming true.”

Now Terri looked alarmed. “The dead bowling-alley employees?”

“Plus maybe a lot of people in a movie theater,” Stormy said, and then she tossed back her peach brandy in one swallow.

“Does this also have something to do with Viola’s dream?” Terri asked me.

“It’s too long a story for now,” I told her. “It’s late. I’m whipped.”

“It has everything to do with her dream,” Stormy told Terri.

“I need some sleep,” I pleaded. “I’ll tell you tomorrow, Terri, after it’s all over.”

When I pushed my chair back, intending to get up, Stormy seized my arm and held me at the table. “And now I find out Elvis Presley himself has warned Oddie that he’s going to die tomorrow.”

I objected. “He did no such thing. He just patted me on the arm and then later, before he got out of the car, he squeezed my hand.”

“Squeezed your hand?” Stormy asked in a tone implying that such a gesture could be interpreted only as an expression of the darkest foreboding.

“It’s no big deal. All he did was just clasp my right hand in both of his and squeeze it twice—”

“Twice!”

“—and he gave me that look again.”

“That look of *pity*?” Stormy demanded.

Terri picked up the bottle and offered to pour for Stormy.

I put my hand over the glass. “We’ve both had enough.”

Grabbing my right hand and holding it in both of hers as Elvis had done, Stormy said insistently, “What he was trying to tell you, Mr. Macho Psychic Batman Wannabe, is that his mother died on August fourteenth, and he died on August sixteenth, and *you’re* going to die on August fifteenth—the three of you like a hat trick of death—if you don’t *watch your ass*.”

“That isn’t what he was trying to tell me,” I disagreed.

“What—you think he was just *hitting* on you?”

“He doesn’t have a romantic life anymore. He’s dead.”

“Anyway,” Terri said, “Elvis wasn’t gay.”

“I didn’t claim he was gay. Stormy made the inference.”

“I’d bet the Grille,” Terri said, “and my left butt cheek that he wasn’t gay.”

I groaned. “This is the craziest conversation I’ve ever had.”

Terri demurred: “Gimme a break—I’ve had a hundred conversations with you a *lot* crazier than this.”

“Me too,” Stormy agreed. “Odd Thomas, you’re a fountain of crazy conversations.”

“A geyser,” Terri suggested.

“It’s not me, it’s just my *life*,” I reminded them.

“You better stay out of this,” Terri worried. “Let Wyatt Porter handle it.”

“I *am* going to let him handle it. I’m not a cop, you know. I don’t pack a gun. All I can do is advise him.”

“Don’t even advise this time,” Stormy said. “Just this one time, stay out of it. Go to Vegas with me. Now.”

I wanted to please her. Pleasing her pleases me, and then the birds sing sweeter than usual and the bees make better honey and the world is a place of rejoicing—or so it seems from my perspective.

What I *wanted* to do and the *right* thing to do were not one and the same. So I said, “The problem is that I was put here for this work, and if I walk away from the job, it will only follow me, one way or another.”

I picked up my glass. I’d forgotten it was empty. I put it down again.

“When I’ve got a specific target, my psychic magnetism works in two directions. I can cruise at random and find who I need to find... in this case Robertson...or he’ll be drawn to me if he wants to be, sometimes even if he doesn’t. And in the second case, I have less control and I’m more likely to be...unpleasantly surprised.”

“That’s just a theory,” Stormy said.

“It’s nothing I can prove, but it’s true. It’s something I know in my gut.”

“I’ve always figured you don’t think with your head,” Stormy said, her tone changing from one of insistent—and almost angry—persuasion to one of resignation and affection.

Terri said to me, “If I were your mother, I’d box your ears.”

“If you were my mother, I wouldn’t be here.”

These were the two most important women in the world to me; I loved each of them in a different way, and declining to do what they wanted, even in the interest of doing the right thing, was difficult.

The candlelight burnished their faces to the same golden glow, and they regarded me with an identical anxiety, as though by virtue of their female intuition they knew things that I could not perceive even with my sixth sense.

From the CD player, Elvis crooned, “Are You Lonesome Tonight?”

I consulted my wristwatch. “It’s August fifteenth.”

When I tried to get to my feet, Stormy didn’t restrain me as she had done previously. She, too, rose from her chair.

I said, “Terri, I guess you’ll have to cover for me on the first shift—or get Poke to come in if he’s willing.”

“What—you can’t cook and save the world at the same time?”

“Not unless you want the bacon burnt. Sorry to give you such short notice.”

Terri accompanied us to the door. She hugged Stormy, then me. She boxed one of my ears. “You be here day after tomorrow, on time, at the griddle, flippin’ those cakes, or I’m going to demote you to fountain jockey.”

CHAPTER 29

ACCORDING TO THE BIG DIGITAL SIGN AT THE Bank of America, the temperature had fallen to a comparatively chilly ninety degrees here on the side of midnight when broomsticks are licensed to fly.

A lazy breeze stirred through town, repeatedly dying and rising again, as though rust inhibited the mechanisms of the wind gods. Hot and dry, it traveled in crisp and fitful whispers among ficuses, palms, and jacarandas.

The streets of Pico Mundo were quiet. When the breeze held its breath, I could hear the click of the switches in the traffic-signal control boxes as the lights changed from green to yellow to red at the intersections.

As we walked to Stormy's apartment, we remained alert, half expecting Bob Robertson to pop like a jack-in-the-box from behind a parked car, out of a doorway.

Other than the wind-licked leaves, the only movement was the dart-and-swoop of a swarm of bats pursuing a flurry of moths through the glow of a streetlamp, to the moon, and then out past Cassiopeia.

Stormy lives three blocks from the Pico Mundo Grille. We held hands and walked in silence.

My course was set irrevocably. In spite of her objections, she knew as well as I did that I had no choice but to do whatever I could to help Chief Porter stop Robertson before he committed the slaughter that had drenched my dreams for three years.

Anything that could be said on the subject now would be useless repetition. And here on the dark side of a threatening dawn, small talk had no charm.

The old, two-story Victorian house had been divided into four apartments. Stormy lives in the ground-floor unit on the right.

We didn't expect Robertson to be waiting there for us. Though he had somehow learned who I was, it didn't follow that he would easily discover Stormy's address.

If he was lying in wait for me, my apartment over Rosalia Sanchez's garage was a better bet than Stormy's place.

Prudence, however, made us cautious as we entered the foyer and then her apartment. Inside, the cool air had a faint peach scent. We left the Mojave far behind us when we closed the door.

She has three rooms, a bath, and a kitchen. Switching on lights, we went directly to her bedroom, where she keeps her 9-mm pistol.

She ejected the magazine, checked it to be sure that it was fully loaded, and snapped it back into the weapon.

I am wary of any gun, anywhere, anytime—except when it's in Stormy's hand. She could sit with her finger on the detonation button of a nuclear weapon, and I would feel safe enough to nap.

A quick check of the windows revealed that they were locked, as she had left them.

No boogeyman had taken up residence in any of the closets.

While Stormy brushed her teeth and changed for bed, I called Green Moon Lanes and listened to a recorded message regarding their hours, services, and prices. They opened for business at 11:00 A.M. Thursday through Sunday, and at 1:00 P.M. Monday through Wednesday.

The earliest that Robertson could walk into the bowling center with murder in mind was when they unlocked the doors at one o'clock.

Two multiplex cinemas with a total of twenty screens serve the greater Pico Mundo area. By phone, I learned that the movie to which Viola had intended to take her daughters was playing at two theaters in only one multiplex. I made a mental note of the show times, the earliest of which was 1:10 P.M.

In the bedroom, I turned down the bedclothes, took off my shoes, and stretched out atop the thin blanket, waiting for Stormy.

She has furnished her humble home with items from thrift shops run by Goodwill and the Salvation Army; however, the look is neither shabby nor without character. She has a talent for eclectic design and for discerning the magic in objects that others might see as merely old or peculiar, or even grotesque.

Floor lamps featuring silk shades with beaded fringes, chairs in the Stickley style paired with plump Victorian footstools upholstered in tapestries, Maxfield Parrish prints, colorful carnival-glass vases and bibelots: The mix should not work, but it does. Her rooms are the most welcoming that I have ever seen.

Time seems suspended in this place.

In these rooms I am at peace. I forget my worries. The problems of pancakes and poltergeists are lifted from me.

Here I cannot be harmed.

Here I know my destiny and am content with it.

Here Stormy lives, and where she lives, I flourish.

Above her bed, behind glass, in a frame, is the card from the fortune-telling machine: **YOU ARE DESTINED TO BE TOGETHER FOREVER.**

Four years ago, on the midway of the county fair, a gaudy contrivance called Gypsy Mummy had waited in a shadowy back corner of an arcade tent filled with unusual games and macabre attractions.

The machine had resembled an old-fashioned phone booth and had stood seven feet high. The lower three feet were entirely enclosed. The upper four feet featured glass on three sides.

In the glass portion sat a dwarfish female figure attired in a Gypsy costume complete with garish jewelry and colorful headscarf. Her gnarled, bony, withered hands rested on her thighs, and the green of her fingernails looked less like polish than like mold.

A plaque at her feet claimed that this was the mummified corpse of a Gypsy dwarf. In eighteenth-century Europe, she had been renowned for the accuracy of her prognostications and foretellings.

The mottled skin of her face stretched tight over the skull. The eyelids were stitched shut with black thread, as were her lips.

Most likely this was not the art of Death working in the medium of flesh, as claimed, but instead the product of an artist who had been clever with plaster, paper, and latex.

As Stormy and I arrived at Gypsy Mummy, another couple fed a quarter to the machine. The woman leaned toward a round grill in the glass and asked her question aloud: “Gypsy Mummy tell us, will Johnny and I have a long and happy marriage?”

The man, evidently Johnny, pushed the ANSWER button, and a card slid into a brass tray. He read it aloud: “A cold wind blows, and each night seems to last a thousand years.”

Neither Johnny nor his bride-to-be regarded this as an answer to their question, so they tried again. He read the second card: “The fool leaps from the cliff, but the winter lake below is frozen.”

The woman, believing that Gypsy Mummy had misheard the question, repeated it: “Will Johnny and I have a long and happy marriage?”

Johnny read the third card: “The orchard of blighted trees produces poisonous fruit.”

And the fourth: “A stone can provide no nourishment, nor will sand slake your thirst.”

With irrational persistence, the couple spent four more quarters in pursuit of an answer. They began bickering on receipt of the fifth card. By the time Johnny read number eight, the cold wind predicted by the first fortune was blowing at gale-force between them.

After Johnny and his love departed, Stormy and I took our turn with Gypsy Mummy. A single coin produced for us the assurance that we were destined to be together forever.

When Stormy tells this story, she claims that after granting to us what the other couple had wanted, the mummified dwarf winked.

I didn't see this wink. I don't understand how a sewn-shut eye could perform such a trick and yet fail to pop a single stitch. The image of a winking mummy resonates with me nonetheless.

Now, as I waited under the Gypsy Mummy's framed card, Stormy came to bed. She wore plain white cotton panties and a SpongeBob SquarePants T-shirt.

All the models in the Victoria's Secret catalogue, in thongs and skimpy teddies and peekaboo bras, collectively possess a fraction of the erotic allure of Stormy in schoolgirl briefs and SpongeBob top.

Lying on her side, cuddling against me, she put her head upon my chest to listen to my heart. She got an earful.

She often likes to be held in this way until she falls asleep. I am the boatman she trusts to row her into restful dreams.

After a silence, she said, "If you want me...I'm ready now."

I am no saint. I have used my driver's license to trespass in homes to which I've not been invited. I answer violence with violence and never turn the other cheek. I have had enough impure thoughts to destroy the ozone layer. I have often spoken ill of my mother.

Yet when Stormy offered herself to me, I thought of the orphaned girl, then known to the world as Bronwen, alone and afraid at the age of seven, adopted and given safe harbor, only to discover that her new father wanted not a daughter but a sex toy. Her confusion, her fear, her humiliation, her shame were too easy for me to imagine.

I thought also of Penny Kallisto and the seashell that she had handed to me. From the glossy pink throat of that shell had come the voice of a monster speaking the language of demented lust.

Though I didn't confuse my clean passion with Harlo Landerson's sick desire and savage selfishness, I could not purge from memory his rough breathing and bestial grunts. "Saturday is almost here," I told Stormy. "You've taught me the beauty of anticipation."

"What if Saturday never comes?"

"We'll have this Saturday and thousands more," I assured her.

"I need you," she said.

"Is that something new?"

"God, no."

"It's not new for me, either."

I held her. She listened to my heart. Her hair feathered like a raven's wing against her face, and my spirits soared.

Soon she murmured to someone she seemed pleased to see in her sleep. The boatman had done his job, and Stormy drifted on dreams.

I eased off the bed without waking her, drew the top sheet and thin blanket over her shoulders, and switched the bedside lamp to its lowest setting. She doesn't like to wake in darkness.

After slipping into my shoes, I kissed her forehead and left her with the 9-mm pistol on her nightstand.

I turned out the lights elsewhere in the apartment, stepped into the public hall, and locked her door with a key she'd given to me.

The front door of the apartment house featured a large oval of leaded glass. The beveled edges of the mosaic pieces presented a fragmented and distorted view of the porch.

I put one eye to a flat piece of glass to see things more clearly. An unmarked police van stood at the curb across the street.

Law enforcement in Pico Mundo involves few clandestine operations. The police department owns only two unmarked units.

The average citizen wouldn't recognize either vehicle. Because of the assistance that I've provided to the chief on numerous cases, I have ridden in and am familiar with both.

Of the beige van's identifying features, the stubby shortwave antenna spiking from the roof at the back was the clincher.

I had not asked the chief to grant protection to Stormy; she would have been angry at the implication that she couldn't take care of herself. She has her pistol, her certificate of graduation from a self-defense course, and her pride.

The danger to her, if any, would seem to exist only when I was with her. Bob Robertson had no beef with anyone but me.

This chain of logic brought me to the realization that Chief Porter might be providing protection not to Stormy but to me.

More likely, it wasn't protection but surveillance. Robertson had tracked me to Little Ozzie's place and had found me again later at St. Bart's. The chief might be keeping a watch on me in the hope that Robertson would sniff out my trail once more, whereupon he could be taken into custody for questioning about the vandalism at the church.

I understood his thinking, but I resented being used as bait without first being asked politely if I minded having a hook in my ass.

Besides, in the course of meeting the responsibilities of my supernatural gift, I sometimes resort to tactics frowned upon by the police. The chief knows this. Being subjected to police surveillance and protection would inhibit me and, if I acted in my usual impulsive fashion, would make Chief Porter's position even more difficult.

Instead of leaving by the main entrance, I walked to the end of the public hall and departed by the back door. A small moonlit yard led to a four-car garage, and a gate beside the garage opened into an alleyway.

The officer in the van thought that he was running surveillance on me, but now he served as Stormy's guardian. And she couldn't get angry with me because I had never asked that she be provided with protection.

I was tired but not ready to sleep. I went home anyway.

Maybe Robertson would be waiting for me and would try to kill me. Maybe I would survive, subdue him, call the chief, and thereby put an end to this.

I had high hopes of a violent encounter with a satisfactory conclusion.

CHAPTER 30

THE MOJAVE HAD STOPPED BREATHING. THE dead lungs of the desert no longer exhaled the lazy breeze that had accompanied Stormy and me on our walk to her apartment.

By streets and alleyways, along a footpath bisecting a vacant lot, through a drainage culvert dry for months, and then to streets again, I made my way home at a brisk pace.

Bodachs were abroad.

First I saw them at a distance, a dozen or more, racing on all fours. When they passed through dark places, they were discernible only as a tumult of shadows, but street-lights and gatepost lamps revealed them for what they were. Their lithe motion and menacing posture brought to mind panthers in pursuit of prey.

A two-story Georgian house on Hampton Way was a bodach magnet. As I passed, staying to the far side of the street, I saw twenty or thirty inky forms, some arriving and others departing by cracks in window frames and chinks in door jambs.

Under the porch light, one of them thrashed and writhed as if in the throes of madness. Then it funneled itself through the keyhole in the front door.

Two others, exiting the residence, strained themselves through the screen that covered an attic vent. As comfortable on vertical surfaces as any spider, they crawled down the wall of the house to the porch roof, crossed the roof, and sprang to the front lawn.

This was the home of the Takuda family, Ken and Micali, and their three children. No lights brightened any windows. The Takudas were asleep, unaware that a swarm of malevolent spirits, quieter than cockroaches, crawled through their rooms and observed them in their dreaming.

I could only assume that one of the Takudas—or all of them—were destined to die this very day, in whatever violent incident had drawn the bodachs to Pico Mundo in great numbers.

Experience had taught me that these spirits often gathered at the site of forthcoming horror, as at the Buena Vista Nursing Home before the earthquake. In this case, however, I didn't believe that the Takudas would perish in their home any more than I expected that Viola and her daughters would die in their picturesque bungalow.

The bodachs were not concentrated in one place this time. They were all over town, and from their unusually wide disbursement and their behavior, I deduced that they were visiting the potential victims prior to gathering at the place where the bloodshed would occur. Call this the pregame show.

I hurried away from the Takuda house and didn't glance back, concerned that the slightest attention I paid to these creatures would alert them to the fact that I could see them.

On Eucalyptus Way, other bodachs had invaded the home of Morris and Rachel Melman.

Since Morrie had retired as the superintendent of the Pico Mundo School District, he'd stopped resisting his circadian rhythms and had embraced the fact that he was a night lover by nature. He spent these quiet hours in the pursuit of various hobbies and interests. While Rachel slept in the dark upstairs, warm light brightened the lower floor.

The distinctive shadowy shapes of bodachs in their erect but hunch-shouldered posture were visible at every ground-floor window. They appeared to be in ceaseless, agitated movement through those rooms, as though the scent of impending death stirred in them a violent and delirious excitement.

To one degree or another, this silent frenzy marked their behavior wherever I had seen them since walking to work less than twenty-four hours ago. The intensity of their malignant ecstasy fueled my dread.

In this infested night, I found myself glancing warily at the sky, half expecting to see bodachs swarming across the stars. The moon wasn't veiled by spirit wings, however, and the stars blazed unobstructed from Andromeda to Vulpecula.

Because they have no apparent mass, the bodachs should not be affected by gravity. Yet I have never seen them fly. Although supernatural, they seem to be bound by many, though not all, of the laws of physics.

When I reached Marigold Lane, I was relieved that the street on which I lived appeared to be free of these beasts.

I passed the spot where I had stopped Harlo Landerson in his Pontiac Firebird 400. How easily, by comparison, the day had begun.

With her killer named and prevented from assaulting other girls, Penny Kallisto had made her peace with this world and moved on. This success gave me hope that I might prevent or minimize the pending carnage that had drawn legions of bodachs to our town.

No lights glowed at Rosalia Sanchez's house. She is always early to bed, for she rises in advance of the dawn, eager to hear if she remains visible.

I didn't approach her garage by the driveway. I crossed the side lawn from one oak tree to the next, stealthily scouting the territory.

When I determined that neither Robertson nor any other enemy had stationed himself in the yard, I circled the garage. Although I didn't find anyone lying in wait, I flushed a frightened rabbit from a lush bed of liriopé, and when it shot past me, I achieved a personal best in the vertical-jump-and-gasp event.

Climbing the exterior stairs to my apartment, I watched the windows above, alert for the telltale movement of a blind.

The teeth of the key chattered faintly across the pin-tumblers in the lock. I turned the bolt and opened the door.

When I switched on the light, I saw the gun before anything else.
A pistol.

With Chief Porter as my friend, with Stormy as my fiancé, I would know the difference between a pistol and a revolver even if my mother hadn't instructed me in various fine points of firearms on numerous harrowing occasions.

The pistol had not merely been dropped on the floor but appeared to have been arranged as surely as a diamond necklace on a jeweler's black-velvet display board, positioned to catch the lamplight in such a way that its contours had an almost erotic quality. Whoever left it there had hoped to entice me to pick it up.

CHAPTER 31

MY SALVAGE-YARD FURNITURE (TOO SCARRED and tacky to meet the standards of the thrift shops that sold to Stormy), my paperback books neatly arranged on shelves made of stacked bricks and boards, my framed posters of Quasimodo as played by Charles Laughton and Hamlet as played by Mel Gibson and ET from the movie of the same name (three fictional characters with whom I identify for different reasons), the cardboard Elvis perpetually smiling...

From the open doorway in which I stood, everything appeared to be as it had been when I'd left for work Tuesday morning.

The door had been locked and bore no signs of a forced entry. Circling the building, I had noticed no broken windows.

Now I was torn between leaving the door open to facilitate a hasty exit and locking it to prevent anyone from entering at my back. After too long a hesitation, I quietly closed the door and engaged the deadbolt.

Except for the occasional chirr-and-coo of a night bird that filtered through two screened windows I'd left open for ventilation, the hush was so profound that a drop of water, in the kitchenette, fell from faucet to sink pan with a *plonk* that quivered my eardrums.

Certain that I was meant to pick up the gun, easily resisting its allure, I stepped over the weapon.

One of the benefits of living in a single room—the armchair a few steps from the bed, the bed a few steps from the refrigerator—is that

the search for an intruder takes less than a minute. Your blood pressure hasn't the time to rise to stroke-inducing levels when you need only look behind the sofa and in a single closet to clear all possible hiding places.

Only the bathroom remained to be searched.

That door was closed. I had left it open.

After a shower, I always leave it open because the bathroom has a single small window, hardly more than a porthole, and an exhaust fan that makes all the noise of—but stirs less air than—a drum set hammered by a heavy-metal musician. If I didn't leave the door open, the bath would be ruled by aggressive mutant molds with a taste for human flesh, and I would be forced henceforth to bathe in the kitchen sink.

Unclipping the phone from my belt, I considered calling the police to report an intruder.

If officers arrived and found no one in the bathroom, I would look foolish. And scenarios occurred to me in which I might appear worse than merely foolish.

I glanced at the gun on the floor. If it had been placed with careful calculation, with the intent that I should pick it up, *why* did someone want me to have possession of it?

After putting the phone on the breakfast counter, I stepped to one side of the bathroom door and listened intently. The only sounds were the periodic song of the night bird and, after a long pause, the *plonk* of another water drop in the kitchen sink.

The knob turned without resistance. The door opened inward.

Someone had left a light on.

I am diligent about conserving electricity. The cost may be only pennies, but a short-order cook who hopes to marry cannot afford to leave lights burning or music playing for the pleasure of the spiders and spirits that might visit his quarters in his absence.

With the door open wide, the small bathroom would offer nowhere for an intruder to hide except in the bathtub, behind the closed shower curtain.

I always close the curtain after taking a shower, because if I left it drawn to one side, it would not dry properly in that poorly vented

space. Mildew would at once set up housekeeping in the damp folds.

Since I'd left Tuesday morning, someone had pulled the curtain aside. That person or another was at this moment facedown in the bathtub.

He appeared to have fallen into the tub or to have been tumbled there as a dead weight. No living person would lie in such an awkward position, face pressed to the drain, his right arm twisted behind his body at a torturous angle that suggested a dislocated shoulder or even a torn rotator cuff.

The fingers of the exposed, pale hand were curled into a rigid claw. They did not twitch; neither did they tremble.

Along the far rim of the tub, a thin smear of blood had dried on the porcelain.

When blood is spilled in quantity, you can smell it: This is not a foul odor when fresh, but subtle and crisp and terrifying. I couldn't detect the faintest scent of it here.

A glistening spill of liquid soap on the tile counter around the sink and thick soap scum in the bowl suggested that the killer had washed his hands vigorously after the deed, perhaps to scrub away blood or traces of incriminating gunpowder.

After drying, he had tossed the hand towel into the tub. It covered the back of the victim's head.

Without conscious intent, I had backed out of the bathroom. I stood just beyond the open door.

My heart played an inappropriate rhythm for the melody of the night bird.

I glanced toward the gun on the carpet, just inside the front door. My instinctive reluctance to touch the weapon had proven to be wise, although I still didn't grasp the full meaning of what had transpired here.

My cell phone lay on the breakfast counter, and the apartment phone was on the nightstand beside my bed. I considered those whom I *should* call and those I *could* call. None of my options appealed to me.

To better understand the situation, I needed to see the face of the corpse.

I returned to the bathroom. I bent over the tub. Avoiding the hooked and twisted fingers, I clutched handfuls of his clothing and, with some struggle, wrestled the dead man onto his side, and then onto his back.

The towel slid off his face.

Still a washed-out gray but devoid now of their characteristic eerie amusement, Bob Robertson's eyes were more sharply focused in death than in life. His gaze fixed intently on a distant vision, as though in the final instant of existence, he had glimpsed something more startling and far more terrifying than just the face of his killer.

CHAPTER 32

FOR A MOMENT I EXPECTED FUNGUS MAN TO blink, to grin, to grab me and drag me into the tub with him, to savage me with those teeth that had served him so well during his gluttony at the counter in the Pico Mundo Grille.

His unexpected death left me with no immediate monster, with my plan derailed and my purpose in doubt. I had assumed that he was the maniacal gunman who shot the murdered people in my recurring dream, not merely another victim. With Robertson dead, this labyrinth had no Minotaur for me to track down and slay.

He had been shot once in the chest at such close range that the muzzle of the gun might have been pressed against him. His shirt bore the gray-brown flare of a scorch mark.

Because the heart had stopped functioning in an instant, little blood had escaped the body.

Again I retreated from the bathroom.

I almost pulled the door shut. Then I had the strange notion that behind the closed door, in spite of his torn heart, Robertson would rise quietly from the tub and stand in wait, taking me by surprise when I returned.

He was stone dead, and I *knew* that he was dead, and yet such irrational worries tied knots in my nerves.

Leaving the bathroom door open, I stepped to the kitchen sink and washed my hands. After drying them on paper towels, I almost washed them again.

Although I had touched only Robertson's clothes, I imagined that my hands smelled of death.

Lifting the receiver from the wall phone, I unintentionally rattled it against the cradle, almost dropped it. My hands were shaking.

I listened to the dial tone.

I knew Chief Porter's number. I didn't need to look it up.

Finally I racked the phone again without entering a single digit on the keypad.

Circumstances had altered my cozy relationship with the chief. A dead man awaited discovery in my apartment. The gun that had killed him was here, as well.

Earlier I had reported an unsettling encounter with the victim at St. Bartholomew's. And the chief knew that I had illegally entered Robertson's house on Tuesday afternoon and had thereby given the man reason to confront me.

If this pistol was registered to Robertson, the most obvious assumption on the part of the police would be that he had come here to demand to know what I'd been doing in his house and perhaps to threaten me. They would assume that we had argued, that the argument had led to a struggle, and that I had shot him with his own gun in self-defense.

They wouldn't charge me with murder or with manslaughter. They probably wouldn't even take me into custody for questioning.

If the pistol *wasn't* registered to Robertson, however, I'd be as stuck as a rat on a glue-board trap.

Wyatt Porter knew me too well to believe that I could kill a man in cold blood, when my life was not at risk. As the chief, he set the policies for the department and made important procedural decisions, but he wasn't the only cop on the force. Others would not be so quick to declare me innocent under questionable circumstances, and if for no reason but appearances, the chief might have to park me in a cell for a day, until he could find a way to resolve matters in my favor.

In jail, I would be safe from whatever bloody catastrophe might be descending on Pico Mundo, but I would be in no position to use my gift to prevent the tragedy. I couldn't escort Viola Peabody and

her daughters from their house to the safer refuge of her sister's home. I couldn't find a way to induce the Takuda family to change their Wednesday plans.

I had hoped to follow the bodachs to the site of the impending crime as Wednesday morning gave way to afternoon, when this event seemed destined to occur. Those malevolent spirits would gather in advance of the bloodshed, perhaps giving me enough time to change the fates of *all* those who were unwittingly approaching their deaths at that as yet unknown place.

Odysseus in chains, however, cannot lead the way back to Ithaca.

I include this literary allusion solely because I know Little Ozzie will be amused that I would have the audacity to compare myself to that great hero of the Trojan War.

"Give the narrative a lighter tone than you think it deserves, dear boy, lighter than you think that you can bear to give it," he instructed before I began to write, "because you won't find the truth of life in morbidity, only in hope."

My promise to obey this instruction has become more difficult to fulfill as my story progresses relentlessly toward the hour of the gun. The light recedes from me, and the darkness gathers. To please my massive, six-fingered muse, I must resort to tricks like the Odysseus bit.

Having determined that I couldn't turn to Chief Porter for help in these circumstances, I switched off all the lights except the one in the bathroom. I couldn't bear to be entirely in the dark with the corpse, for I sensed that, even though dead, he still had surprises in store for me.

In the gloom, I quickly found my way through the cluttered room with as much confidence as if I had been born sightless and raised here since birth. At one of the front windows, I twisted the control rod to open the Levolor.

To the right, I could see the moonlit stairs framed in slices by the slats of the blind. No one was ascending toward my door.

Directly ahead lay the street, but because of the intervening oaks, I didn't have an unobstructed view. Nevertheless, between the

branches I could see enough of Marigold Lane to be certain that no suspicious vehicles had parked at the curb since my arrival.

Judging by the evidence, I wasn't under observation, but I felt certain that whoever had whacked Bob Robertson would be back. When they knew that I had come home and discovered the cadaver, they would either pop me, too, and make the double murder look like murder-suicide, or more likely place an anonymous call to the police and land me in the cell that I was determined to avoid.

I knew a set-up when I saw one.

CHAPTER 33

AFTER CLOSING THE LEVOLOR AT THE WINDOW, leaving the lights off, I went to the bureau, which was near the bed. In this one room, everything could be found near the bed, including the sofa and the microwave.

In the bottom drawer of the bureau I kept my only spare set of bed linens. Under the pillowcases, I found the neatly pressed and folded top sheet.

Although without a doubt the situation warranted the sacrifice of good bedclothes, I regretted having to give up that sheet. Well-made cotton bedding is not cheap, and I am mildly allergic to many of the synthetic fabrics commonly used for such items.

In the bathroom, I opened the sheet on the floor.

Being dead and therefore indifferent to my problems, Robertson could not be expected to make my job easier; however, I was surprised when he resisted being hauled out of the tub. This wasn't the active counterforce of conscious opposition, but the passive resistance of rigor mortis.

He proved to be as stiff and difficult to manage as a pile of boards nailed together at odd angles.

Reluctantly, I put a hand to his face. He felt colder than I'd expected that he would.

Perhaps adjustments needed to be made in my understanding of the events of the previous evening. Unthinkingly, I had made certain assumptions that Robertson's condition didn't support.

To learn the truth, I had to examine him further. Because he had been lying facedown in the tub when I'd found him, before I'd turned him over, I now unbuttoned his shirt.

This task filled me with loathing and repugnance, which I had anticipated, but I wasn't prepared for the abhorrent sense of intimacy that spawned a slithering nausea.

My fingers were damp with sweat. The pearlized buttons proved slippery.

I glanced at Robertson's face, certain that his gaze would have refocused from some otherworldly sight to my fumbling hands. Of course his expression of shock and terror had not changed, and he continued staring at something beyond the veil that separates this world and the next.

His lips were slightly parted, as though with his last breath he had greeted Death or had spoken an unanswered plea.

Looking at his face had only made my heebie-jeebies worse. When I lowered my head, I imagined that his eyes tracked the shifting of my attention to the stubborn buttons. If I had felt a fetid breath exhaled against my brow, I might have screamed, but I wouldn't have been surprised.

No corpse had ever creeped me out as badly as this one. For the most part, the deceased with whom I interact are apparitions, and I am spared too much familiarity with the messy biological aspect of death.

In this instance, I was troubled less by the scents and sights of early-stage corruption than by the physical peculiarities of the dead man, mostly that spongy fungoid quality that had marked him in life, but also by his extraordinary fascination—as revealed in his files—for torture, brutal murder, dismemberment, decapitation, and cannibalism.

I undid the final button. I folded back his shirt.

Because he wore no undershirt, I saw the advanced lividity at once. After death, blood settles through the tissues to the lowest points of the body, giving those areas a badly bruised appearance. Robertson's flabby chest and sagging belly were mottled, dark, and repulsive.

The coolness of his skin, the rigor mortis, and the advanced lividity suggested that he had not died within the past hour or two but much earlier. The warmth of my apartment would have accelerated the deterioration of the corpse, but not to this extent.

Very likely, in St. Bart's cemetery, when Robertson had given me the finger as I'd looked down on him from the bell tower, he had not been a living man but an apparition.

I tried to recall if Stormy had seen him. She had been stooping to retrieve the cheese and crackers from the picnic hamper. I had accidentally knocked them from her hands, spilling them across the catwalk....

No. She hadn't seen Robertson. By the time she got up and leaned against the parapet to look down at the graveyard, he had gone.

Moments later, when I opened the front door of the church and encountered Robertson ascending the steps, Stormy had been behind me. I had let the door fall shut and had hustled her out of the narthex, into the nave, toward the front of the church.

Before going to St. Bart's, I'd seen Robertson twice at Little Ozzie's place in Jack Flats. The first time, he had been standing on the public sidewalk in front of the house, later in the backyard.

In neither instance had Ozzie been in a position to confirm that this visitor was a real, live person.

From his perch on the windowsill, Terrible Chester had seen the man at the front fence and had strongly reacted to him. But this did not mean that Robertson had been there in the flesh.

On many occasions, I have witnessed dogs and cats responding to the presence of spirits—though they don't see bodachs. Usually animals do not react in any dramatic fashion, only subtly; they seem to be totally cool with ghosts.

Terrible Chester's hostility was probably a reaction not to the fact that Robertson was an apparition but to the man's abiding aura of evil, which characterized him both in life and death.

The evidence suggested that the last time I'd seen Robertson alive had been when he'd left his house in Camp's End, just before I had loided the lock, gone inside, and found the black room.

He had haunted me since, and angrily. As though he blamed me for his death.

Although he'd been murdered in my apartment, he must know that I hadn't pulled the trigger. Facing his killer, he'd been shot from a distance of no more than a few inches.

What he and his killer had been doing in my apartment, I could not imagine. I needed more time and calmer circumstances to think.

You might expect that his pissed-off spirit would have lurked in my bathroom or kitchenette, waiting for me to come home, eager to threaten and harass me as he had done at the church. You would be wrong because you forget that these restless souls who linger in this world do so because they cannot accept the truth of their deaths.

In my considerable experience, the *last* thing they want to do is hang around their dead bodies. Nothing is a more poignant reminder of one's demise than one's oozing carcass.

In the presence of their own lifeless flesh, the spirits feel more sharply the urge to be done with this world and to move on to the next, a compulsion that they are determined to resist. Robertson might visit the place of his death eventually, but not until his body had been removed and every smear of blood had been scrubbed away.

That suited me fine. I didn't need all the hullabaloo associated with a visitation by an angry spirit.

The vandalism in St. Bart's sacristy had not been the work of a living man. That destruction had been wrought by a malevolent and infuriated ghost in full poltergeist mode.

In the past, I'd lost a new music system, a lamp, a clock radio, a handsome bar stool, and several plates during a tantrum by such a one. A short-order cook can't afford to play host to their kind.

This is one reason why my furnishings are thrift-shop rejects. The less that I have, the less I can lose.

Anyway, I looked at the lividity in Robertson's flabby chest and sagging belly, quickly made the aforementioned deductions, and tried to button his shirt without looking directly at his bullet wound. Morbid interest got the best of me.

In the soft and livid chest, the hole was small but ragged, wet—and strange in some way that I didn't immediately grasp and that I didn't want to contemplate further.

The nausea crawling the walls of my stomach slithered faster, faster. I felt as if I were four years old again, with a dangerously virulent case of the flu, feverish and weak, staring down the barrel of my own mortality.

Because I had enough of a mess to clean up without reenacting Elvis's historic last spew, I clenched my teeth, repressed my gorge, and finished buttoning the shirt.

Although I surely know more than the average citizen about how to read the condition of a corpse, I am not a specialist in forensic medicine. I couldn't accurately determine, to the half hour, the exact time of Robertson's death.

Logic put it between 5:30 and 7:45. During that period, I had searched his Camp's End house and explored the black room, had driven Elvis to the chief's barbecue and subsequently to the Baptist church, and had cruised alone to Little Ozzie's house.

Chief Porter and his guests could verify my whereabouts for part of that time, but no court would look favorably on the claim that the ghost of Elvis could provide me with an alibi for another portion of it.

The extent of my vulnerability became clearer by the moment, and I knew that time was running out. When a knock at the door eventually came, it would most likely be the police, sent here by an anonymous tip.

CHAPTER 34

A SENSE OF URGENCY BORDERING ON PANIC gave me new strength. With much grunting and the invention of a few colorful obscenities, I hauled Robertson out of the bathtub and flopped him onto the sheet that I'd spread on the bathroom floor.

Remarkably little blood had spilled in the tub. I cranked on the shower and washed the stains off the porcelain with steaming-hot water.

I'd never be able to take a bath here again. I would either have to go unwashed for the rest of my life or find a new place to live.

When I turned out Robertson's pants pockets, I found a wad of cash in each: twenty crisp hundred-dollar bills in the left pocket, twenty-three in the right. Clearly, he hadn't been killed for money.

I returned those bankrolls to his pockets.

His billfold contained more cash. I stuffed that money in one of his pockets, as well, but kept the wallet with the hope that it might contain a clue to his murderous intentions when I had time to examine its remaining contents.

The corpse gurgled alarmingly as I wrapped it in the sheet. Bubbles of phlegm or blood popped in its throat, disturbingly like a belch.

I twisted the ends shut at the head and feet, and tied them as securely as possible with the white laces that I stripped out of a spare pair of shoes.

This package looked like an enormous doobie. I don't do drugs, not even pot, but that's what it looked like, anyway.

Or maybe a cocoon. A giant larva or pupa inside, changing into something new. I didn't want to dwell on what that might be.

Using a plastic shopping bag from a bookstore as a suitcase, I packed a change of clothes, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste, electric razor, cell phone, flashlight, scissors, a package of foil-wrapped moist towelettes—and a roll of antacids, which I was going to need to get through the rest of the night.

I dragged the body out of the bathroom, across my dark room, to the larger of the two south-facing windows. If I had lived in an ordinary apartment house, with neighbors below, the tenants' committee would have met first thing in the morning to draft a new rule forbidding corpse-hauling after 10:00 P.M.

The body weighed far too much for me to carry it. Tumbling it down the outside stairs would have been a noisy proposition—and a memorable spectacle if someone happened to be passing in the street at an inopportune moment.

A half-size dinette table and two chairs stood in front of the window. I moved them aside, raised the lower sash, removed the bug screen, and leaned out to be sure I correctly remembered that the backyard could not be seen from neighboring houses.

A board fence and mature cottonwood trees provided privacy. If a narrow line of sight between branches gave neighbors a sliver of a view, the moonlight alone didn't brighten the scene enough to lend credibility to their testimony in a courtroom.

I muscled the sheet-wrapped cadaver off the floor, into the open window. I shoved him out feetfirst because though he was inarguably dead, I felt squeamish about dropping him on his head. Halfway out the window, the sheet hung up on a protruding nail head, but with determination, I maneuvered him far enough to let gravity take over.

The drop from the windowsill to the ground measured twelve or thirteen feet. Not far. Yet the impact produced a brutal, sickening sound that seemed instantly identifiable as a dead body plummeting to hard earth from a height.

No dogs barked. No one said, *Did you hear something, Maude?* No one said, *Yes, Clem, I heard Odd Thomas drop a corpse out his window.* Pico Mundo slept on.

Using paper towels to avoid leaving fingerprints, I plucked the pistol off the carpet. I added the gun to the contents of the plastic shopping bag.

In the bathroom once more, I checked to be sure that I hadn't missed anything obvious during the cleanup. Later I would need to do a more thorough job than I had time for now: vacuum for incriminating hairs and fibers, wipe every surface to eliminate Bob Robertson's prints....

I wouldn't be helping the killer get away with the crime. By all indications, he was a cool professional who would have been too smart and too self-aware to have left fingerprints or any other evidence of his presence.

When I consulted my wristwatch, what I saw surprised me. One-thirty-eight A.M. The night had seemed to be *racing* toward dawn. I'd thought it must be two-thirty or later.

Nonetheless, time was running out for me. My watch was digital, but I could hear my opportunity for action tick-tick-ticking away.

After turning off the bathroom light, I went to the front window once more, cracked the blind, and studied the street. If anyone was standing vigil, I still couldn't spot him.

Carrying the shopping bag, I went outside and locked the front door behind me. Descending the steps, I felt as intently watched as a Miss America contestant during the swimsuit competition.

Although pretty much certain that no eyes were on me, I balanced a load of guilt that made me self-conscious. I nervously scanned the night, looking everywhere but at the steps in front of me; it's proof of miracles that I didn't fall and break my neck and leave a second body for the police to puzzle over.

You might wonder what I had to feel guilty about, considering that I hadn't killed Bob Robertson.

Well, I never need a good reason to embrace guilt. Sometimes I feel responsible for train wrecks in Georgia, terrorist bombs in distant cities, tornadoes in Kansas....

A part of me believes that if I worked more aggressively to explore my gift and to develop it, instead of merely *coping* with it on a day-by-day basis, I might be able to assist in the apprehension of more criminals and spare more lives from both bad men and brutal nature, even in places far removed from Pico Mundo. I know this is not the case. I know that to pursue much greater involvement with the supernatural would be to lose touch with reality, to spiral down into a genteel madness, whereafter I would be no good to anyone. Yet that chastising part of me weighs my character from time to time and judges me inadequate.

I understand why I am such an easy mark for guilt. The origins lie with my mother and her guns.

Recognizing the structure of your psychology doesn't mean that you can easily rebuild it. The Chamber of Unreasonable Guilt is part of my mental architecture, and I doubt that I will ever be able to renovate that particular room in this strange castle that is me.

When I reached the bottom of the steps without anyone rushing forward to shout *J'accuse!*, I started around the side of the garage—then stopped, struck by the sight of the nearby house and the thought of Rosalia Sanchez.

I intended to use her Chevy, which she herself seldom drives, to move Robertson's body, then return the vehicle to the garage without her being the wiser. I didn't need a key. As a high-school student, I may not have paid as much attention in math class as would have been advisable, but long ago I had learned to hot-wire a car.

My sudden concern about Rosalia had nothing to do with the possibility of her seeing me at this nefarious bit of work, and everything to do with her safety.

If another man, with murder on his mind, had gone with Robertson into my apartment between 5:30 and 7:45, they'd done so in daylight. Bright Mojave daylight.

I suspected that the two men had arrived as conspirators and that Robertson thought they were engaged on a bit of nasty business aimed at me. Perhaps he believed they were going to lie in wait for

me. He must have been surprised when his companion drew a gun on him.

Once Robertson was dead and I'd been set up for murder, the killer would not have hung around to try on my underwear and sample the leftovers in my refrigerator. He would have left quickly, also in daylight.

Surely he had worried that someone in the nearby house might have seen him entering with his victim or departing alone.

Unwilling to risk a witness, he might have knocked on Rosalia's back door after he had dealt with Robertson. A gentle widow, living alone, would have been an easy kill.

In fact, if he were a thorough and cautious man, he probably would have visited her *before* bringing Bob Robertson here. He would have used the same pistol in both instances, framing me for two murders.

Judging by the swiftness and boldness with which he had acted to eliminate a compromised associate, this unknown man was thorough, cautious, and much more.

Rosalia's house stood silent. No lights shone at any of her windows, only a ghostly face that was, in fact, merely the reflection of the westering moon.

CHAPTER 35

I STARTED ACROSS THE DRIVEWAY TOWARD Rosalia's back porch before I realized that I had begun to move. After a few steps, I halted.

If she was dead, I could do nothing for her. And if Robertson's killer had visited her, he had surely *not* left her alive.

Until now I had thought of Robertson as a lone gunman, a mental and moral freak scheming toward his bloody moment in history, like so many of those infamous scum in his exquisitely maintained files.

He might have been exactly that at one time, but he had become that and more. He had met another who thrilled to the same fantasies of mindless slaughter, and together they had grown into a beast with two faces, two hateful hearts, and four busy hands to do the devil's work.

The clue had hung on the study wall in Robertson's house, but I had not understood it. Manson, McVeigh, and Atta. None of them had worked alone. They had conspired with others.

In the files were case histories of numerous serial killers and mass murderers who acted alone, but the three faces in his shrine were men who had found meaning in a brotherhood of evil.

My illegal visit to Robertson's residence in Camp's End had somehow become known to him. Maybe cameras were hidden in the house.

Sociopaths are frequently paranoids, as well. If he chose to do so, Robertson had financial resources large enough to equip his home

with well-concealed, state-of-the-art videocams.

He must have told his murderous friend that I had prowled his rooms. His kill buddy might then have decided that he himself was at risk if his association with Robertson became known.

Or because of my nosing around, Robertson might have grown nervous about their plans for August 15. He might have wanted to postpone the slaughter that they had been prepared to commit.

Perhaps his psychotic friend had been too excited to accept a delay. Having for so long contemplated this delicious violence, he now had a hunger for it, a *need*.

I turned away from Rosalia's house.

If I went in there and discovered that she had been murdered as a consequence of my actions, I doubted that I would have the will to deal with Robertson's body. At the very thought of discovering her corpse—*Odd Thomas, can you see me? Odd Thomas, am I still visible?*—I felt a loosening occur in the hinges of my reason, and I knew that I was at risk of coming apart emotionally if not psychologically.

Viola Peabody and her daughters were depending on me.

Unknown numbers of people currently destined to die in Pico Mundo before the next sunset might be saved if I could stay out of jail, if I could learn the place and the time of the planned atrocity.

As if magic suddenly overruled physics, the moonlight seemed to acquire weight. I felt the burden of that lunar radiance with every step that I took to the back of the garage, where the corpse waited in its white wrapping.

The rear door of the garage was unlocked. That interior darkness smelled of tire rubber, motor oil, old grease, and a raw-wood aroma baked from the exposed rafters by the summer heat. I set my shopping bag inside.

Grimly aware that the day had taken both a mental and a physical toll from me, I dragged the body across the threshold and closed the door. Only then did I fumble for the light switch.

This detached garage contained two stalls, plus a home workshop where a third car might otherwise have been parked. Currently one stall was empty, and Rosalia's Chevy stood in the space nearest the house.

When I tried the car trunk, I found it locked.

The thought of loading the corpse in the rear seat and driving with it behind my back disturbed me.

In my twenty years, I have seen many strange things. One of the more bizarre was the ghost of President Lyndon Johnson disembarking from a Greyhound at the Pico Mundo bus terminal. He arrived from Portland, Oregon, by way of San Francisco and Sacramento, only to board at once an outbound Greyhound destined for Phoenix, Tucson, and points in Texas. Because he had died in a hospital, he wore pajamas, no slippers, and he looked forlorn. When he realized that I could see him, he glared angrily, then pulled down his pajamas and mooned me.

I have never seen a corpse restored to life, however, nor have I encountered any corpse animated by evil sorcery. Yet the thought of turning my back on Robertson's cadaver and chauffeuring it to a lonely corner of Pico Mundo filled me with dread.

On the other hand, I couldn't prop him, fully wrapped, on the front passenger's seat and drive around with what appeared to be a 250-pound doobie.

Getting the corpse into the back of the Chevy taxed both my strength and my stomach. In his cocoon, Robertson felt loose, soft... *ripe*.

Repeatedly, the vivid memory of the ragged, wet bullet hole in his chest rose in my mind: the flabby and livid flesh around it, the dark custardy ooze that had drooled from it. I had not peered closely at the wound, had quickly glanced away, yet that image kept rising like a dark sun in my mind.

By the time I loaded the corpse in the car and closed the back door, sweat streamed from me as though some giant had wrung me out like a washcloth. That's how I felt, too.

Outside, at two o'clock in the morning, the temperature had fallen to a brisk eighty-five. Here in the windowless garage, the climate was ten degrees more desperate.

Blinking the perspiration out of my eyes, I fumbled under the dashboard and found the wires that I needed. Shocking myself only once, I got the engine started.

Through all of this, the dead man on the backseat did not stir.

I turned out the garage light and put my plastic shopping bag on the passenger's seat. I got behind the wheel and used the remote control to raise the garage door.

Blotting my face on a handful of Kleenex plucked from the box in the console, I realized that I hadn't given a thought about where to unload my cargo. Neither the town dump nor a Goodwill Industries collection box seemed like a good idea.

If Robertson were found too soon, Chief Porter would have hard questions for me that might interfere with my attempts to deflect whatever horror was soon to descend on Pico Mundo. Ideally, the body would lie quietly decomposing for at least twenty-four hours before someone found it and had a new love for Jesus scared into him.

Then I thought of the perfect hiding place: the Church of the Whispering Comet Topless Bar, Adult Bookstore, and Burger Heaven.

CHAPTER 36

THE CHURCH OF THE WHISPERING COMET HAD been erected more than twenty years ago, off the state highway and a few hundred yards past the town limits of Pico Mundo, on a tract of desert scrub.

Even when it had been a house of unusual worship, it had not resembled a church. Here in the clear and starry night, the main building—a two-hundred-foot-long, sixty-foot-wide, semicylindrical, corrugated-metal Quonset hut with porthole windows—looked like a spaceship, minus its nose cone, half buried in the earth.

Nestled among dead and dying trees, more than half concealed by a mottling camouflage of shadows and pale moonlight, smaller Quonsets ringed the perimeter of the property. These had been barracks for the true believers.

The founder of the church, Caesar Zedd Jr., preached that he received whispered messages, mostly in dreams but also sometimes when awake, from alien intelligences aboard a spacecraft traveling toward Earth inside a comet. These aliens claimed to be the gods who had created human beings and all species on the planet.

Most people in Pico Mundo had assumed that the services at the Church of the Whispering Comet would one day culminate in a communion with poisoned Kool-Aid and hundreds of deaths. Instead, the sincerity of Zedd's religious faith came under question when he and his entire clergy were indicted and convicted of

operating the largest Ecstasy production-and-distribution ring in the world.

After the church ceased to exist, an outfit calling itself the First Amendment Protection Society, Inc.—the largest operator of adult bookstores, topless bars, Internet porn sites, and karaoke cocktail lounges in the United States—intimidated Maravilla County into giving it a business license. They remade the property into a cheesy, sex-theme amusement park, converting the original church sign to neon and extending it to read CHURCH OF THE WHISPERING COMET TOPLESS BAR, ADULT BOOKSTORE, AND BURGER HEAVEN.

Rumor has it that the burgers and fries were excellent and that the promise of free soft-drink refills was generously honored. Yet this establishment never succeeded in winning over the family-dining crowd or the upscale professional couples who are so essential to any restaurant operation.

The enterprise, known locally as the Whispering Burger, turned a handsome profit even after covering its food-service losses. The topless bar, the bookstore (which stocked no books, but offered thousands of videotapes), and the whorehouse (not mentioned in the original business-license application) brought oceans of money to this desert oasis.

Although the corporation's lawyers, courageous defenders of the Constitution, managed to keep the doors open through ten convictions for operation of a prostitution ring, the Whispering Burger imploded following the gunning down of three prostitutes by a naked customer strung out on PCP and excessive doses of Viagra.

In lieu of unpaid taxes and fines, the property had fallen into the hands of the county. During the past five years, cessation of all maintenance and the relentless repossession efforts of the desert had reduced a once-proud house of alien gods to rust and ruin.

The church grounds had been landscaped as a tropical paradise, with lush lawns, several varieties of palm trees, ferns, bamboo, and flowering vines. Without daily watering, the brief rainy season in the desert wasn't sufficient to preserve this Eden.

Having switched off my headlights when I turned in from the state highway, I drove through the shaggy moonshadows cast by dead palm trees. The cracked and potholed blacktop driveway led to the back of the main building, and then farther to the arc of smaller Quonset huts.

I was reluctant to leave the car with the engine running, but I wanted to be able to make a quick getaway. Without keys, I could not start the engine quickly enough in a crisis.

With the flashlight I'd packed in my shopping bag, I set out to find a suitable place to stash an inconvenient corpse.

The Mojave had recovered its breath again. A lazy exhalation blew out of the east, smelling of dry brush, hot sand, and the strange life of the desert.

Each of the ten Quonset huts used as barracks by the church had housed sixty cult members in the cramped fashion of opium-den bunks. When the church was replaced by a bordello with burgers, a few of these structures were gutted, partitioned, and redecorated to serve as cozy cribs for the hookers who delivered what the topless dancers in the bar only promised.

In the years since the property had been abandoned, morbidly curious people had explored and vandalized the main building and all the barracks. Doors had been broken open. Some had fallen off their corroded hinges.

At the third barracks that I inspected, the spring latch on the door still worked well enough to hold it closed.

I didn't want to leave the corpse in a space to which coyotes could easily gain access. Robertson had been a monster; I remained convinced of that; however, regardless of what he might have done or might have been capable of doing, I couldn't consign his remains to the indignity that Granny Sugars had feared might befall her if she dropped dead in a poker game with hardhearted players.

Maybe coyotes weren't carrion eaters. Maybe they would eat only meat they killed.

The desert, however, teemed with more life than could be seen at casual inspection. Much of it would be pleased to dine on a carcass as fleshy as Robertson's.

After pulling the Chevy as close to the chosen building as possible—about ten feet from the door—I required a minute to summon the nerve to deal with the corpse. I chewed two antacid tablets.

During the drive from town, Bob Robertson had not once asked, *Are we there yet?* Nevertheless, and against all reason, I didn't trust him to stay dead.

Hauling him out of the car proved easier than getting him into it, except that at one point, when his big gelatinous body quivered inside the bedsheet shroud, I felt as if I were handling a bag full of live snakes.

After I dragged him to the door of the Quonset hut, which I had wedged open with the flashlight, I paused to wipe the sweat from my dripping brow—and saw the yellow eyes. Low to the ground, twenty or thirty feet away, they watched me with unmistakable hunger.

I snatched up the flashlight and focused the beam on the very thing I had feared: a coyote that had come in from the open range, exploring among the abandoned buildings. Big, sinewy, rough-hewn, sharp of brow and jaw, it was less wicked by nature than are many human beings, but at that moment it looked like a demon that had slipped through the gates of Hell.

The flashlight didn't frighten it off, which suggested that it had become dangerously certain of itself in the presence of people—and that it might not be alone. I swept the immediate night with the flashlight and discovered another slouching beast to the right of and behind the first.

Until recent years, coyotes rarely savaged children and never adults. As human settlements encroached on their hunting grounds, they had become bolder, more aggressive. Within the past five years, several adults in California had been stalked and even attacked.

These two didn't appear to find me in the least intimidating, only savory.

I searched the ground near my feet, seeking a stone, and settled for a chunk of concrete that had broken off the edge of the walkway. I hurled it at the nearest predator. The missile struck the

blacktop six inches wide of the target and bounced away into the darkness.

The coyote shied from the point of impact but did not run. The second stalker took its cue from the first and stood its ground.

The wheeze and clatter of the idling car, which didn't faze the coyotes, worried me. Whispering Burger was an isolated property; no one should have been near enough to have his curiosity pricked by the grumbling engine. If other intruders were already on the grounds, however, the noise would mask the sound of their movements.

I couldn't deal with two things at once. Getting the corpse out of sight took precedence over dealing with the coyotes.

By the time I returned, maybe the predators would have gone, led away by the scent of rabbits or other easy game.

I dragged the wrapped cadaver across the threshold, into the Quonset hut, and then closed the door securely behind me.

A hallway along one side of the building served a bath and four rooms. Each room had been the workplace of a prostitute.

My flashlight revealed dust, spider webs, two empty beer bottles, a litter of dead bees....

After all these years, the air was still thinly laced with the faded bouquet of scented candles, incense, perfume, fragrant oils. Underlying this faint but sweet melange was a fainter, acrid smell that might have been the stale urine of animals that had come and gone.

The furniture had been trucked away long ago. In two rooms, mirrors on the ceiling suggested where the beds had been positioned. The walls were painted hot-pink.

Each room featured two portholes. Most of the glass had been shot out by kids with air guns.

In the fourth room, both small windows were intact. Here, none of the larger carrion eaters could get at the corpse.

One of the securing shoelaces had snapped. An end of the shroud sagged loose, and Robertson's left foot became exposed.

I considered taking both laces and the sheet. They were possible connections to me, though they were such common brands, sold in

so many stores, that they alone would not convict me.

As I bent to the task, into my mind came an image of the wound in Robertson's chest. And in memory I heard my mother's voice: *You want to pull the trigger for me? You want to pull the trigger?*

I'd had much practice turning my mind away from certain memories of my childhood. I could quickly dial her remembered voice from a whisper to a silence.

Casting from my mind the image of Robertson's wound was not as easy. That wet hole pulsed in memory as though his dead heart were beating under it.

In my bathroom, when I'd opened his shirt to check for lividity and had seen the entrance wound in his empurpled flesh, something had compelled me to look more closely. Disgusted by my own morbid impulse and, indeed, frightened by it, afraid that my fascination proved I'd been twisted by my mother in ways I hadn't realized, I had resisted looking closer and had at once turned away, rebuttoned his shirt.

Now, on one knee beside Robertson, fumbling with the knots in the remaining shoelace that secured the shroud, I tried to close the memory of that shirt over the memory of the oozing wound, but still it throbbed in my mind's eye.

In the bloating cadaver, gas swizzled up a series of chuckles culminating in what sounded like a sigh from the lips of the dead man, there behind his cotton veil.

Unable to spend another second with the corpse, I shot to my feet, fled the hot-pink room with my flashlight, and was halfway along the hall before I realized that I had left the door open. I went back and closed it, further protecting the body from the desert's larger scavengers.

I used the tail of my T-shirt to wipe the door handles to all the rooms that I had investigated. Then, scuffing my feet through the prints I'd left earlier, I smeared the thick dust on the floor with the hope that I could avoid leaving clear shoe-tread impressions.

When I opened the outer door, my flashlight beam struck flares of eyeshine from three coyotes that waited between me and the idling Chevy.

CHAPTER 37

WITH THEIR SINEWY LEGS, LEAN FLANKS, AND narrow muzzles, coyotes appear to be designed for speed and savage assault, and yet even as they face you down with a predatory gleam in their eyes, they have some of the appeal of dogs. Prairie wolves, some people call them, and although they lack most of the charm of wolves, they do have a puppylike quality because their feet are too big for their bodies and their ears are too big for their heads.

These three beasts appeared more quizzical than threatening—if you failed to read the right message in their tense posture and in the flare of their nostrils. Their large ears were pricked, and one of them cocked its head as if it found me to be deeply puzzling, an opinion of me that is not limited to coyotes.

Two stood in front of the Chevy, perhaps fourteen feet away. The third waited between me and the passenger's side of the car, where I had left the rear door open.

I let out a shout at the greatest volume I could muster, for common wisdom holds that sudden loud noises will frighten coyotes into flight. Two twitched, but none of them retreated so much as an inch.

Stewed in my own sweat, I must have smelled like a salty but delicious dinner.

When I stepped back from the threshold, they didn't spring at me, which meant their boldness had not yet matured into the absolute

conviction that they could take me down. I let the door fall shut between us.

Another door at the farther end of the hall also opened to the outside, but if I slipped out by that exit, I would be at too great a distance from the Chevy. I couldn't hope to circle around behind the car and get in through the door that I'd left open. Long before I got there, the three brethren of Wile E. would have caught my scent and would be waiting, and none would need to rely on a Byzantine killing machine purchased by mail from Acme, Inc.

If I waited inside until dawn, I might escape them, for these were night hunters, and possibly too hungry to outwait me. The fuel gauge in Rosalia's car had shown a half-full tank, which might last long enough, but the engine would almost surely overheat before the fuel gave out, leaving the car unusable.

Besides, the batteries in my flashlight most likely wouldn't last an hour. For all my brave talk earlier about being unafraid of the unknown, I could not tolerate being trapped in the pitch-black Quonset hut in the company of a dead man.

With nothing to entertain my eyes, I'd obsess on the recollected image of his bullet wound. I'd be convinced that every breath of the night breeze, whispering at a broken window, was in fact the sound of Bob Robertson peeling out of his cocoon.

I went in search of something to throw at the coyotes. Unless I was prepared to strip the shoes off the corpse, I had nothing but the two empty beer bottles.

After returning to the door with the bottles, I switched off the flashlight, jammed it under the waistband of my jeans, and waited a few minutes, giving peace a chance, but also letting my eyes adapt to darkness.

When I opened the door, hoping the chow line had broken up and slouched away, I was disappointed. The three remained almost where they had been when I'd left them: two in front of the car, the third near the forward tire on the passenger's side.

In sunshine, their coats would be tan with reddish highlights and a peppering of black hairs. Here they were the patinated gray of old silver. Subtly their eyes glowed with a moony madness.

Solely because it appeared to be the boldest of the trio, I pegged the nearest coyote as the pack leader. It was the biggest specimen, as well, with a grizzled chin that suggested much experience in the hunt.

Experts advise that, when confronted by an angry dog, you should avoid eye contact. This constitutes a challenge to which the animal will respond aggressively.

If the canine in question is a coyote pondering your nutritional value, the experts will get you killed. Failure to make eye contact will be read as weakness, which indicates that you are suitable prey; you might as well offer yourself on a platter with double spuds twice in Hell and an order of midnight whistleberries.

Making eye contact with the pack leader, I tapped one of the bottles against the metal door frame, then tapped harder, breaking it. I was left holding the neck, jagged shards protruding from my fist.

This would be a less than ideal weapon with which to confront an adversary that had the stiletto-packed jaws of a dedicated carnivore, but it was marginally better than my bare hands.

I hoped to challenge them with such confidence that they would have a momentary doubt about my vulnerability. All I might need to reach the open back door of the Chevy was a three-or four-second hesitation on their part.

Letting the door fall shut behind me, I moved toward the pack leader.

At once it bared a wicked clench of teeth. A low vibrous growl warned me to back off.

Ignoring the warning, I took another step, and with a sharp snap of my wrist, I threw the intact beer bottle. It struck the leader hard on the snout, bounced off, and shattered on the pavement at its feet.

Startled, the coyote stopped growling. It moved to the front of the car, not retreating from me, not drawing any closer, either, but merely repositioning itself to present a united front with its two companions.

This had the desirable effect of presenting me with a direct, unguarded route to the open back door of the Chevy. Unfortunately,

a full-out run for cover would require that I take my attention off the pack.

The moment that I sprinted for the car, they would spring at me. The distance between them and me was not much greater than the distance between me and the open door—and they were far quicker than I was.

Holding the broken bottle in front of me, thrusting it at them in sharp, threatening jabs, I edged sideways toward the idling Chevy, counting every inch a triumph.

Two watched with obvious curiosity: their heads raised, mouths open, tongues lolling. Curious but also alert for any opportunity that I might give them, they stood with their weight shifted toward their hind legs, ready to launch forward with their powerful haunch muscles.

The leader's posture troubled me more than that of the other pack members. Head lowered, ears laid back against its skull, teeth bared but not its tongue, this individual stared at me intently from under its lowered brow.

Its forepaws were pressed so hard against the ground that even in the wan moonlight, its toes spread in clear definition. With the forward knuckles sharply bent, the beast seemed to be standing on the points of its claws.

Although I continued to face them, they weren't directly in front of me any longer, but to my right. The open car door was to my left.

Fierce snarling could not have frayed my nerves as effectively as their bated breath, their expectant silence.

Halfway to the Chevy, I figured that I could risk a rush to the backseat, throw myself into the car, and pull the door shut just in time to ward off their snapping jaws.

Then I heard a muted growl to my left.

The pack now numbered four, and the fourth had stolen up on me from the back of the Chevy. It stood between me and the open door.

Sensing movement to my right, I snapped my attention to the threesome again. During my brief distraction, they had slunk closer to me.

Moonlight silvered a ribbon of drool that slipped from the lips of the pack leader.

To my left, the fourth coyote's low growl grew louder, rivaling the grumble of the car. It was a living engine of death, idling right now but ready to shift into high gear, and at the periphery of my vision, I saw it creep toward me.

CHAPTER 38

THE DOOR OF THE QUONSET HUT LAY A DAUNTING distance behind me. Before I reached it, the pack leader would be on my back, its teeth in my neck, and the others would be tearing at my legs, dragging me down.

In my hand, the broken beer bottle felt fragile, a woefully inadequate weapon, good for nothing more than slashing my own throat.

Judging by a sudden overwhelming pressure in my bladder, these predators would be getting marinated meat by the time they took a bite of me—

—but then the nasty customer to my left chewed up his growl and let out a submissive mewl.

The fearsome trio to the right of me, as one, traded menace for perplexity. They rose from their stalking posture, stood quite erect, ears pricked and cupped forward.

The change in the coyotes' demeanor, so abrupt and inexplicable, imparted to the moment a quality of enchantment, as though a guardian angel had cast a rapture of mercy over these creatures, granting me a reprieve from evisceration.

I stood stiff and stupefied, afraid that by moving I would break the spell. Then I realized that the coyotes' attention had shifted to something behind me.

Warily turning my head, I discovered that my guardian was a pretty but too thin young woman with tousled blond hair and

delicate features. She stood behind and to the left of me, barefoot, naked but for a pair of skimpy, lace-trimmed panties, slender arms crossed over her breasts.

Her smooth pale skin seemed luminous in the moonlight. Beryl-blue eyes, lustrous pools, were windows to a melancholy so profound that I knew at once she belonged to the community of the restless dead.

The lone coyote on my left settled to the ground, all hungers forgotten, the fight gone out of it. The beast regarded her in the manner of a dog waiting for a word of affection from its adored master.

To my right, the first three coyotes were not as humbled as the fourth, but they, too, were transfixed by this vision. Although they hadn't exerted themselves, they panted, and they licked their lips incessantly—two signs of nervous stress in any canine. As the woman stepped past me and toward the Chevy, they shied from her, not in a fearful way but as if in deference.

When she reached the car, she turned to me. Her smile was an inverted crescent of sadness.

I stooped to put the broken bottle quietly on the ground, then rose with new respect for the perceptions and priorities of coyotes, which seemed to give greater importance to the experience of wonder than to the demands of appetite.

At the car, I closed the back door on the passenger's side, opened the front door.

The woman regarded me solemnly now, as though she was as deeply moved by being seen, years after her death, as I was moved by seeing her in this purgatory of her own creation.

As lovely as a rose half bloomed and still containing promise, she appeared to have been not much more than eighteen when she died, too young to have sentenced herself for so long to the chains of this world, to such an extended lonely suffering.

She must have been one of the three prostitutes who were shot by an unbalanced man five years earlier, in the event that had closed Whispering Burger forever. Her chosen work should have hardened her; but she seemed to be a tender and timid spirit.

Touched by her vulnerability and by the harsh self-judgment that kept her here, I held out a hand to her.

Instead of taking my hand, she bowed her head demurely. After a hesitation, she uncrossed her arms and lowered them to her sides, revealing her breasts—and the two dark bullet holes that marred her cleavage.

Because I doubted that she had any unfinished business in this desolate place, and because her life had evidently been so hard that she would have little reason to love this world too much to leave it, I assumed that her reluctance to move on arose from a fear of what came next, perhaps from a dread of punishment.

“Don’t be afraid,” I told her. “You weren’t a monster in this life, were you? Just lonely, lost, confused, broken—like all of us who pass this way.”

Slowly she raised her head.

“Maybe you were weak and foolish, but many are. So am I.”

She met my eyes again. Her melancholy seemed deeper to me now, as acute as grief but as enduring as sorrow.

“So am I,” I repeated. “But when I die, I will move on, and so should you, without fear.”

She wore her wounds not as she would have worn divine stigmata, but as if they were the devil’s brand, which they were not.

“I’ve no idea what it’s like, but I know a better life awaits you, beyond the miseries you’ve known here, a place where you’ll belong and where you’ll be truly loved.”

From her expression, I knew that the idea of being loved had been for her only a cherished hope that had never been realized in her short unhappy life. Terrible experience, perhaps from the cradle to the sound of the shot that killed her, had left her in a poverty of imagination, unable to envision a world beyond this one, where love was a promise fulfilled.

She raised her arms once more and crossed them over her chest, concealing both her breasts and her wounds.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said again.

Resumed, her smile seemed to be as melancholy as before, but also now enigmatic. I couldn’t tell if what I’d said had been of

comfort to her.

Wishing that I were more persuasive in my faith, and wondering why I wasn't, I got into the front passenger's seat of the car. I closed the door and slid behind the steering wheel.

I didn't want to leave her there among the dead palm trees and the corroded Quonset huts, with as little hope as she had physical substance.

Yet the night ticked on, the moon and all the constellations moving across the heavens as relentlessly as hands across the face of a clock. In too few hours, terror would descend on Pico Mundo, unless I could somehow stop it.

As I slowly drove away, I glanced repeatedly at the rearview mirror. There she stood in the moonlight, the charmed coyotes resting on the ground at her feet, as if she were the goddess Diana between one hunt and another, mistress of the moon and all its creatures, receding, dwindling, but not ready to go home to Olympus.

I drove from the Church of the Whispering Comet back into Pico Mundo, from the company of a gunshot stranger to the bad news about a gunshot friend.

CHAPTER 39

IF I HAD KNOWN THE NAME OR EVEN THE FACE of the one I should be seeking, I might have tried a session of psychic magnetism, cruising Pico Mundo until my sixth sense brought me in contact with him. The man who had killed Bob Robertson, and who craved to kill others in the coming day, remained nameless and faceless to me, however, and as long as I sought only a phantom, I would be wasting gasoline and time.

The town slept, but not its demons. Bodachs were in the streets, more numerous and more fearsome than packs of coyotes, racing through the night in what seemed to be an ecstasy of anticipation.

I passed houses where these living shadows gathered and swarmed with particular inquisitiveness. At first I tried to remember each of the haunted residences, for I still believed that the people who interested the bodachs were also those who would be murdered between the next dawn and the next sunset.

Although small by comparison to a city, our town is much larger than it once was, with all its new neighborhoods of upscale tract houses, encompassing more than forty thousand souls in a county of half a million. I have met only a tiny fraction of them.

Most of the bodach-infested houses belonged to people I didn't know. I had no time to meet them all, and no hope of gaining their confidence to the extent that they would take my advice and change their Wednesday plans, as Viola Peabody had done.

I considered stopping at the houses of those who were known to me, to ask them to list every place they expected to be the following afternoon. With luck, I might discover the single destination that would prove common to them all.

None were in my small inner circle of friends. They didn't know of my supernatural gift, but many regarded me as a sweet eccentric, to one degree or another, and therefore wouldn't be surprised by either my unscheduled visit or my questions.

By seeking this information in the presence of bodachs, however, I would earn their suspicion. Once alert to me, they would eventually discern my unique nature.

I remembered the six-year-old English boy who had spoken aloud of the bodachs—and had been crushed between a concrete-block wall and a runaway truck. The impact had been so powerful that numerous blocks had shattered into gravel and dust, exposing the ribs of steel rebar around which they had been mortared.

Although the driver, a young man of twenty-eight, had been in perfect health, his autopsy revealed that he suffered a massive, instantly fatal stroke while behind the wheel.

The stroke must have killed him at the precise moment when he crossed the crest of a hill—at the bottom of which stood the English boy. Accident-scene analysis by the police determined that the lateral angle of the slope, in relationship to the cross street below, should have carried the unpiloted truck away from the boy, impacting the wall thirty feet from where it actually came to a deadly stop. Evidently, during part of the descent, the dead body of the driver had been hung up on the steering wheel, countering the angle of the street that should have saved the child.

I know more about the mysteries of the universe than do those of you who cannot see the lingering dead, but I do not understand more than a tiny fraction of the truth of our existence. I have nevertheless reached at least one certain conclusion based on what I know: There are no coincidences.

On the macro scale, I perceive what physicists tell us is true on the micro: Even in chaos, there is order, purpose, and strange

meaning that invites—but often thwarts—our investigation and our understanding.

Consequently, I didn't stop at any of those houses where the bodachs capered, didn't wake the sleeping to ask my urgent questions. Somewhere a healthy driver and a massive truck needed only a timely cerebral aneurysm and an expedient failure of brakes to bring it across my path in a sudden rush.

Instead, I drove to Chief Porter's house, trying to decide if I should wake him at the ungodly hour of three o'clock.

Over the years, I had only twice before interrupted his sleep. The first time, I had been wet and muddy, still wearing one of the shackles—and dragging a length of chain—that had bound me to the two corpses with which I had been dumped into Malo Suerte Lake by bad men of sour disposition. The second time that I'd awakened him, there had been a crisis needing his attention.

The current crisis hadn't quite reached us yet, but it loomed. I thought he needed to know that Bob Robertson was not a loner but a conspirator.

The trick would be to deliver this news convincingly but without revealing that I'd found Robertson dead in my bathroom and, breaking numerous laws without compunction, had bundled the cadaver to a less incriminating resting place.

When I turned the corner half a block from the Porter address, I was surprised to see lights on in several houses at that late hour. The chief's place blazed brighter than any other.

Four police cruisers stood in front of the house. All had been parked hastily, at angles to the curb. The roof-rack beacons of one car still flashed, revolved.

On the front lawn, across which rhythmic splashes of red light chased waves of blue, five officers gathered in conversation. Their posture suggested that they were consoling one another.

I had intended to park across the street from the chief's house. I would have called his private number only after concocting a story that avoided any mention of my recent exertions as a dead-man's taxi service.

Instead, with a helpless sinking of the heart, I abandoned the Chevy in the street, beside one of the patrol cars. I switched the headlights off but left the engine running, with the hope that none of the cops would get close enough to see that no keys were in the ignition.

The officers on the lawn were all known to me. They turned to face me as I ran to them.

Sonny Wexler, the tallest and toughest and softest-spoken of the group, extended one brawny arm as if to stop me from rushing past him to the house. "Hold on, stay back here, kid. We've got CSI working the place."

Until now I had not seen Izzy Maldonado on the front porch. He rose from some task that he'd been attending to on his knees, and stretched to get a kink out of his back.

Izzy works for the Maravilla County Sheriff's Department crime lab, which contracts its services to the Pico Mundo police. When the body of Bob Robertson was eventually found in that Quonset hut, Izzy would most likely be the technician meticulously sifting the scene for evidence.

Although I desperately wanted to know what had happened here, I couldn't speak. I couldn't swallow. Some gluey mass seemed to be obstructing my throat.

Trying unsuccessfully to choke down that phantom wad, which I knew to be only a choking emotion, I thought of Gunther Ulstein, a much-loved music teacher and director of the Pico Mundo High School band, who had experienced occasional difficulty swallowing. Over several weeks, the condition rapidly grew worse. Before he had it diagnosed, cancer of the esophagus spread all the way into his larynx.

Because he couldn't swallow, his weight plummeted. Doctors treated him first with radiation, intending subsequently to remove his entire esophagus and to fashion a new one from a length of his colon. Radiation therapy failed him. He died before surgery.

Thin and withered-looking, as he had been in his final days, Gunny Ulstein can usually be found in a rocking chair on the front

porch of the house that he built himself. His wife of thirty years, Mary, still lives there.

During his last few weeks of life, he had lost his ability to speak. He'd had so much that he wanted to say to Mary—how she had always brought out the best in him, how he loved her—but he couldn't write down his feelings with the subtlety and the range of emotion that he could have expressed in speech. He lingers now, regretting what he failed to say, futilely hoping that as a ghost he will find a way to speak to her.

A muting cancer seemed almost to be a blessing if it would have kept me from asking Sonny Wexler, "What happened?"

"I thought you must've heard," he said. "I thought that's why you came. The chief's been shot."

Jesus Bustamante, another officer, said angrily, "Almost an hour ago now, some pusbag sonofabitch plugged the chief three times in the chest on his own front porch."

My stomach turned over, over, over, almost in time with the revolving beacons on the nearby cruiser, and the phantom obstruction in my esophagus became real when a bitter gorge rose into the back of my throat.

I must have paled, must have wobbled on suddenly loose knees, for Jesus put an arm against my back to support me, and Sonny Wexler said quickly, "Easy, kid, easy, the chief's alive. He's bad off, but he's alive, he's a fighter."

"The doctors are working on him right now," said Billy Munday, whose port-wine birthmark, over a third of his face, seemed to glow strangely in the night, lending him the aura of a painted shaman with warnings and portents and evils imminent to report. "He's going to be all right. He's got to be. I mean, what would happen without him?"

"He's a fighter," Sonny repeated.

"Which hospital?" I asked.

"County General."

I ran to the car that I'd left in the street.

CHAPTER 40

THESE DAYS, MOST NEW HOSPITALS IN SOUTHERN California resemble medium-rent retail outlets selling discount carpet or business supplies in bulk. The bland architecture doesn't inspire confidence that healing can occur within those walls.

County General, the oldest hospital in the region, features an impressive porte-cochere with limestone columns and a dentil-molding cornice all the way around the building. At first sight of it, you know that nurses and doctors work inside, instead of sales clerks.

The main lobby has a travertine floor, not industrial carpet, and the travertine face of the information desk boasts an inlaid bronze caduceus.

Before I reached the desk, I was intercepted by Alice Norrie, a ten-year veteran of the PMPD, who was running interference to keep reporters and unauthorized visitors from advancing past the lobby.

"He's in surgery, Odd. He's going to be there awhile."

"Where's Mrs. Porter?"

"Karla's in the ICU waiting room. They'll be taking him there pretty much straight from the OR."

The intensive-care unit was on the fourth floor. In a tone meant to imply that she would have to arrest me to stop me, I said, "Ma'am, I'm going up there."

"You don't have to bust my badge to get there, Odd. You're on the short list Karla gave me."

I took the elevator to the second floor, where County General has its operating rooms.

Finding the right OR proved easy. Rafus Carter, in uniform and big enough to give pause to a rampaging bull, stood guard outside the door.

As I approached through the fluorescent glare, he rested his right hand on the butt of his holstered gun.

He saw me react to his suspicion, and he said, “No offense, Odd, but only Karla could come along this corridor and not get my back up.”

“You think he was shot by somebody he knew?”

“Almost had to be, which means it’s probably someone I know, too.”

“How bad is he?”

“Bad.”

“He’s a fighter,” I said, echoing Sonny Wexler’s mantra.

Rafus Carter said, “He better be.”

I returned to the elevator. Between the third and fourth floors, I pressed the STOP button.

Uncontrollable trembling shook the strength out of me. With my legs too weak to stand on, I slid down the wall of the cab and sat on the floor.

Life, Stormy says, is not about how fast you run or even with what degree of grace. It’s about perseverance, about staying on your feet and slogging forward no matter what.

After all, in her cosmology, this life is boot camp. If you don’t persevere through all its obstacles and all the wounds that it inflicts, you cannot move on to your next life of high adventure, which she calls “service,” or eventually to your third life, which she assumes will be filled with pleasures and glories far greater even than a bowl of coconut cherry chocolate chunk.

Regardless of how hard the winds of chance might blow or how heavy the weight of experience might become, Stormy always stays on her feet, metaphorically speaking; unlike her, I find that sometimes I must pause if ultimately I am to persevere.

I wanted to be calm, collected, strong, and full of positive energy when I went to Karla. She needed support, not tears of either sympathy or grief.

After two or three minutes, I was calm and *half* collected, which I decided would have to be good enough. I rose to my feet, took the elevator off STOP, and continued to the fourth floor.

The dreary waiting room, just down the hall from the intensive-care unit, had pale-gray walls, a gray-and-black speckled vinyl-tile floor, gray and mud-brown chairs. The ambience said, *death*. Someone needed to slap the hospital's decorator upside the head.

The chief's sister, Eileen Newfield, sat in a corner, red-eyed from crying, compulsively twisting an embroidered handkerchief in her hands.

Beside her sat Jake Hulquist, murmuring reassurances. He was the chief's best friend. They had joined the force the same year.

Jake was out of uniform, wearing khakis and an un-tucked T-shirt. The laces in his athletic shoes were untied. His hair bristled in weird twists and spikes, as if he hadn't taken the time to comb it after he'd gotten the call.

Karla looked like she always does: fresh, beautiful, and self-possessed.

Her eyes were clear; she hadn't been crying. She was a cop's wife first, a woman second; she wouldn't give in to tears as long as Wyatt was fighting for his life because she was fighting with him in spirit.

The moment I stepped through the open doorway, Karla came to me, hugged me, and said, "This blows, doesn't it, Oddie? Isn't that what young people your age would say about a situation like this?"

"It blows," I agreed. "Totally."

Sensitive to Eileen's fragile emotional condition, Karla led me into the hallway, where we could talk. "He got a call on his private night line, just before two o'clock in the morning."

"From who?"

"I don't know. The ringing only half woke me. He told me to go back to sleep, everything was fine."

"How many people have the night line?"

“Not many. He didn’t go to the closet to dress. He left the bedroom in his pajamas, so I figured he wasn’t going out, it was some problem he could handle from home, and I went back to sleep...until the gunshots woke me.”

“When was that?”

“Not ten minutes after the call. Apparently he opened the front door for someone he was expecting—”

“Someone he knew.”

“—and he was shot four times.”

“Four? I heard three to the chest.”

“Three to the chest,” she confirmed, “and one to the head.”

At the news of a head shot, I almost needed to slide down the wall and sit on the floor again.

Seeing how hard this information hit me, Karla quickly said, “No brain damage. The head shot was the least destructive of the four.” She found a tremulous but genuine smile. “He’ll make a joke out of that, don’t you think?”

“He probably already has.”

“I can hear him saying if you want to blow out Wyatt Porter’s brains, you’ve got to shoot him in the ass.”

“That’s him, all right,” I agreed.

“They think it was meant to be the coup de grace, after he was already down, but maybe the shooter lost his nerve or got distracted. The bullet only grazed Wyatt’s scalp.”

I was in denial: “Nobody would want to kill him.”

Karla said, “By the time I dialed nine-one-one and managed to get downstairs with my pistol, the shooter was gone.”

I pictured her coming fearlessly down the stairs with the gun in both hands, to the front door, ready to trade bullets with the man who had shot her husband. A lioness. Like Stormy.

“Wyatt was down, already unconscious when I found him.”

Along the corridor, from the direction of the elevators, came a surgical nurse dressed in green scrubs. She had a please-don’t-shoot-the-messenger expression.

CHAPTER 41

THE SURGICAL NURSE, JENNA SPINELLI, HAD BEEN one year ahead of me in high school. Her calm gray eyes were flecked with blue, and her hands were made to play piano concertos.

The news that she brought was not as grim as I feared, not as good as I would have liked. The chief's vital signs were stable but not robust. He'd lost his spleen, but he could live without that. One lung had been punctured, but not beyond repair, and none of his vital organs had been irreparably damaged.

Complex vascular repairs were required, and the physician in charge of the surgical team estimated that the chief would be in the OR another hour and a half to two hours.

"We're pretty sure he'll come through surgery good enough," Jenna said. "Then the challenge will be to prevent postoperative complications."

Karla went into the ICU waiting room to share this report with the chief's sister and Jake Hulquist.

Alone in the hallway with Jenna, I said, "Have you swung both hammers, or are you holding one back?"

"It's just the way I said, Oddie. We don't soften bad news for the spouse. We tell it straight and all at once."

"This blows."

"Like a hurricane," she agreed. "You're close to him, I know."

"Yeah."

“I think he’s eventually going to make it,” Jenna said. “Not just out of surgery but all the way home on his own two feet.”

“But no guarantees.”

“When is there ever? He’s a mess inside. But he’s not half as bad as we thought he’d be when we first put him on the table, before we opened him up. It’s a thousand to one odds that anyone can survive three chest wounds. He’s incredibly lucky.”

“If that’s luck, he better never go to Vegas.”

With a fingertip, she pulled down one of my lower eyelids and examined the bloodshot scenery: “You look wrecked, Oddie.”

“It’s been a long day. You know—breakfast starts early at the Grille.”

“I was in with two friends the other day. You cooked our lunch.”

“Really? Sometimes things are so frantic at the griddle, I don’t get a chance to look around, see who’s there.”

“You’ve got a talent.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That’s sweet.”

“I hear your dad’s selling the moon.”

“Yeah, but it’s not a great place for a vacation home. No air.”

“You’re nothing at all like your dad.”

“Who would want to be?”

“Most guys.”

“I think you’re wrong about that.”

“You know what? You ought to give cooking classes.”

“Mostly what I do is fry.”

“I’d still sign up.”

“It’s not exactly healthy cuisine,” I said.

“We’ve all got to die of something. You still with Bronwen?”

“Stormy. Yeah. It’s like destiny.”

“How do you know?”

“We have matching birthmarks.”

“You mean the one she got tattooed to match yours?”

“Tattooed? No. It’s real enough. We’re getting married.”

“Oh. I didn’t hear about that.”

“It’s breaking news.”

“Wait’ll the girls find out,” Jenna said.

“What girls?”

“All of them.”

This conversation wasn't always making perfect sense to me, so I said, “Listen, I'm walking grime, I need a bath, but I don't want to leave the hospital till Chief Porter comes out of surgery safe like you say. Is there anywhere here I can get a shower?”

“Let me talk to the head nurse on this floor. We should be able to find you a place.”

“I've got a change of clothes in the car,” I said.

“Go get them. Then ask at the nurses' station. I'll have arranged everything.”

As she started to turn away, I said, “Jenna, did you take piano lessons?”

“Did I ever. Years of them. But why would you ask?”

“Your hands are so beautiful. I bet you play like a dream.”

She gave me a long look that I couldn't interpret: mysteries in those blue-flecked gray eyes.

Then she said, “This wedding thing is true?”

“Saturday,” I assured her, full of pride that Stormy would have me. “If I could leave town, we'd have gone to Vegas and been married by dawn.”

“Some people are way lucky,” Jenna Spinelli said. “Even luckier than Chief Porter still sucking wind after three chest wounds.”

Assuming that she meant I was fortunate to have won Stormy, I said, “After the mother-father mess I was handed, fate owed me big.”

Jenna had that inscrutable look down perfect. “Call me if you decide to give cooking lessons, after all. I'll bet you really know how to whisk.”

Puzzled, I said, “Whisk? Well, sure, but that's mainly just for scrambled eggs. With pancakes and waffles, you've got to *fold* the batter, and otherwise almost everything is fry, fry, fry.”

She smiled, shook her head, and walked away, leaving me with that perplexity I'd sometimes felt when, as the player with the best stats on our high-school baseball team, I had been served up what

appeared to be a perfect strike-zone slow pitch and yet had swung above it, not even kissing the ball.

I hurried out to Rosalia's car in the parking lot. I took the gun from the shopping bag and tucked it under the driver's seat.

When I returned to the fourth-floor nurses' station with my bag, they were expecting me. Although tending to the sick and dying would seem to be grim work, all four nurses on the graveyard shift were smiling and clearly amused about something.

In addition to the usual range of private and semiprivate rooms, the fourth floor offered a few fancier co-payment accommodations that could pass for hotel rooms. Carpeted and decorated in warm colors, they featured comfortable furniture, nicely framed bad art, and full bathrooms with under-the-counter refrigerators.

Ambulatory patients able to afford to augment their insurance benefits can book such swank, escaping the dreary hospital ambience. This is said to speed recuperation, which I'm sure that it does, in spite of the paint-by-the-number sailing ships and the kittens in fields of daisies.

Provided with a set of towels, I was given the use of a bathroom in an unoccupied luxury unit. The paintings followed a circus theme: clowns with balloons, sad-eyed lions, a pretty high-wire walker with a pink parasol. I chewed two tablets of antacid.

After shaving, showering, shampooing, and changing into fresh clothes, I still felt as if I'd crawled out from under a steamroller, fully flattened.

I sat in an armchair and went through the contents of the wallet that I'd taken off Robertson's body. Credit cards, driver's license, a library card...

The only unusual item was a plain black plastic card featuring nothing but a line of blind-embossed dots that I could feel with my fingertips and see clearly in angled light. They looked like this:



The dots were raised on one side of the card, depressed on the other. Although it might have been coded data that could be read by some kind of machine, I assumed that it was a line of tangible type, otherwise known as Braille.

Considering that he had not been blind, I couldn't imagine why Robertson would have carried a card bearing a statement in Braille.

Neither could I imagine why any blind person would have kept such an item in his wallet.

I sat in the armchair, slowly sliding a thumb across the dots, then the tip of a forefinger. They were only bumps in the plastic, unreadable to me, but the more that I traced their patterns, the more disquieted I became.

Tracing, tracing, I closed my eyes, playing at being blind and hoping that my sixth sense might suggest the purpose of the card if not the meaning of the words spelled by the dots.

The hour was late, the moon sinking beyond the windows, the darkness intensifying and marshaling itself for a futile resistance against the bloody dawn.

I must not sleep. I dared not sleep. I slept.

In my dreams, guns cracked, slow-motion bullets bored visible tunnels in the air, coyotes bared fierce black plastic teeth marked by cryptic patterns of dots that I could *almost* read with my nervous fingers. In Robertson's livid chest, the oozing wound opened before me as if it were a black hole and I were an astronaut in deep space, drawing me with irresistible gravity into its depths, to oblivion.

CHAPTER 42

I SLEPT ONLY AN HOUR UNTIL A NURSE WOKE me. Chief Porter was being moved from surgery to the intensive-care unit.

The window presented a view of black hills rising to a black sky full of Braille dots leafed with silver. The sun still lay an hour below the eastern horizon.

Carrying my shopping bag of dirty clothes, I returned to the hallway outside the ICU.

Jake Hulquist and the chief's sister were waiting there. Neither had seen anything like the black plastic card.

Within a minute, a nurse and an orderly entered the long hallway from the elevator alcove, one at the head and one at the foot of a gurney bearing the chief. Karla Porter walked at her husband's side, one hand on his arm.

When the gurney passed us, I saw that the chief was unconscious, with the prongs of an inhalator in his nose.

His tan had turned to tin; his lips were more gray than pink.

The nurse pulled and the orderly pushed the gurney through the double doors of the ICU, and Karla followed them after telling us that her husband wasn't expected to regain consciousness for hours.

Whoever murdered Robertson had wounded the chief. I couldn't prove it; however, when you don't believe in coincidences, then two shootings with the intent to kill, hours apart, in a sleepy town as small as Pico Mundo, must be as indisputably connected as Siamese twins.

I wondered if the caller on the chief's private night line had attempted to imitate my voice, if he had identified himself as me, seeking counsel, asking to be met downstairs at the front door of the house. He might have hoped that the chief would not only be fooled by the deception but would mention my name to his wife before he left the bedroom.

If an effort had been made to frame me for one killing, why not for two?

Though I prayed that the chief would recover quickly, I worried about what he might say when he regained consciousness.

My alibi for the time of his shooting amounted to this: I had been hiding a corpse in a Quonset hut at the Church of the Whispering Comet. This explanation, complete with verifying cadaver, would not give heart to any defense attorney.

At the fourth-floor nurses' station, none of the women on duty recognized the item that I'd found in Robertson's wallet.

I had better luck on the third floor, where a pale and freckled nurse with a fey quality stood at the station counter, checking the contents of pill cups against a list of patients' names. She accepted the mysterious plastic rectangle, examined both sides of it, and said, "It's a meditation card."

"What's that?"

"Usually they come without the bumps. Instead they have little symbols printed on them. Like a series of crosses or images of the Holy Virgin."

"Not this one."

"You're supposed to say a repetitive prayer, like an Our Father or a Hail Mary, as you move your finger from symbol to symbol."

"So it's like a convenient form of a rosary you can carry in your wallet?"

"Yeah. Worry beads." Sliding her fingertips back and forth over the raised dots, she said, "But they're not only used by Christians. In fact, they began as a New Age thing."

"What're those like?"

"I've seen them with rows of bells, Buddhas, peace signs, dogs or cats if you want to direct your meditative energy toward the

achievement of rights for animals, or rows of planet Earths so you can meditate for a better environment.”

“Is this one for blind people?” I wondered.

“No. Not at all.”

She held the card against her forehead for a moment, like a mentalist reading the contents of a note through a sealed envelope.

I don’t know why she did this, and I decided not to ask.

Tracing the dots again, she said, “About a quarter of the cards are Braille like this. What you’re supposed to do is press a finger to the dots and meditate on each letter.”

“But what does it say?”

As she continued to finger the card, a frown took possession of her face as gradually as an image rising out of the murk on Polaroid film. “I don’t read Braille. But they say different things, this and that, a few inspirational words. A mantra to focus your energy. It’s printed on the package the card comes in.”

“I don’t have the package.”

“Or you can also order a custom imprint, your personal mantra, anything you want. This is the first black one I’ve ever seen.”

“What color are they usually?” I asked.

“White, gold, silver, the blue of the sky, lots of times green for the environmentalist mantras.”

Her frown had fully developed.

She returned the card to me.

With evident distaste, she stared at the fingers with which she had traced the dots.

“Where’d you say you found this?” she asked.

“Downstairs in the lobby, on the floor,” I lied.

From behind the counter, she picked up a bottle of Purell. She squirted a gob of the clear gel onto her left palm, put the bottle down, and vigorously rubbed her hands together, sanitizing them.

“If I were you, I’d get rid of that,” she said as she rubbed. “And the sooner the better.”

She had used so much Purell that I could smell the ethyl alcohol evaporating.

“Get rid of it—why?” I asked.

“It’s got negative energy. Bad mojo. It’ll bring wickedness down on you.”

I wondered which school of nursing she had attended.

“I’ll throw it in the trash,” I promised.

The freckles on her face seemed to have grown brighter, burning like sprinkles of cayenne pepper. “Don’t throw it away here.”

“All right,” I said, “I won’t.”

“Not anywhere in the hospital,” she said. “Take a drive out in the desert, where there’s nobody around, drive fast, throw it out the window, let the wind take it.”

“That sounds like a good plan.”

Her hands were dry and sanitized. Her frown had evaporated along with the alcohol gel. She smiled. “I hope I’ve been of some help.”

“You’ve been great.”

I took the meditation card out of the hospital, into the waning night, but not for a drive in the desert.

CHAPTER 43

THE STUDIOS OF KPMC RADIO, VOICE OF THE Maravilla Valley, are on Main Street, in the heart of Pico Mundo, in a three-story brick Georgian townhouse, between two Victorian edifices housing the law offices of Knacker Hisscus and the Good Day Bakery.

In this last hour of darkness, lights were on in the kitchen of the bakery. When I got out of the car, the street smelled of bread fresh from the oven, cinnamon buns, and lemon strudel.

No bodachs were in sight.

The lower floors of KPMC house the business offices. Broadcast studios are on the third level.

Stan “Spanky” Lufmunder was the engineer on duty. Harry Beamis, who managed to survive in the radio business without a nickname, was the producer of “All Night with Shamus Cocobolo.”

I made faces at them through the triple-insulated view window between the third-floor hall and their electronic aerie.

After conveying by hand gestures that I should copulate with myself, they gave me the okay sign, and I continued along the hall to the door to the broadcast booth.

From the speaker in the hallway, at low volume, issued “String of Pearls,” by the immortal Glenn Miller, the platter that Shamus was currently spinning on the air.

The music actually originated from a CD, but on his show, Shamus uses the slang of the 1930s and ’40s.

Harry Beamis alerted him, so when I entered the booth, Shamus took off his headphones, tuned up the on-air feed just enough to stay on track with it, and said, “Hey, Wizard, welcome to *my* Pico Mundo.”

To Shamus, I am the Wizard of Odd, or Wizard for short.

He said, “Why don’t you smell like peach shampoo?”

“The only soap I had was unscented Neutrogena.”

He frowned. “It’s not over between you and the goddess, is it?”

“It’s only just begun,” I assured him.

“Glad to hear it.”

The foam-cone walls mellowed our voices, smoothed rough edges.

The lenses of his dark glasses were the blue of old Milk of Magnesia bottles. His skin was so black that it, too, seemed to have a blue tint.

I reached in front of him and put down the meditation card, snapping it sharply against the countertop to intrigue him.

He played cool, didn’t pick it up right away. “I plan to come by the Grille after the show, chow down on a heart-stopping pile of fried shaved ham, shoestring onions, and biscuits in gravy.”

As I circled the microphone island, sat on a stool opposite him, and pushed the other mike aside on its flexible arm, I said, “I won’t be cooking this morning. Got the day off.”

“What do you do on a day off—go out there and moon around at the tire store?”

“I thought I might go bowling.”

“You’re one wild party animal, Wizard. I don’t know how your lady keeps up with you.”

The Miller tune wrapped. Shamus leaned into the mike and let ad-libbed patter dance off his tongue, cuing back-to-back cuts of Benny Goodman’s “One O’clock Jump” and Duke Ellington’s “Take the A Train.”

I like to listen to Shamus on the air and off. He has a voice that makes Barry White and James Earl Jones sound like carnival barkers with strep throat. To radio people, he’s the Velvet Tongue.

From 1:00 A.M. to 6:00, every day but Sunday, Shamus spins what he calls “the music that won the big war,” and recounts tales

of the night life of that long-ago age.

The other nineteen hours of the day, KPMC eschews music in favor of talk radio. Management would prefer to shut down during those five least-listened hours, but their broadcast license requires them to serve the community 24/7.

This situation gives Shamus the freedom to do anything he wants, and what he wants is to immerse himself and his insomniac listeners in the glories of the Big Band era. In those days, he says, the music was *real*, and life was more grounded in truth, reason, and good will.

The first time I heard this rap, I expressed surprise that he would feel such affinity for an age of active segregation. His answer was, “I’m black, blind, seriously smart, and sensitive. *No* age would be easy for me. At least the culture had *culture* then, it had *style*.”

Now he told his audience, “Close your eyes, picture the Duke in his trademark white tux, and join me, Shamus Cocobolo, as I ride that A Train to Harlem.”

His mother named him Shamus because she wanted her son to be a police detective. When he went blind at three, a law-enforcement career ceased to be an option. The “Cocobolo” came with his father, straight out of Jamaica.

Picking up the black plastic card, holding it by the top and bottom edges between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, he said, “Some stupefyingly stupid bank give you a credit card?”

“I was hoping you could tell me what it says.”

He slid one finger across the card, not really reading it, just determining its nature. “Oh, Wizard, surely you don’t think I need meditation when I’ve got Count Basie and Satchmo and Artie Shaw.”

“So you know what it is.”

“The last couple years, people have given me maybe a dozen of these things, all different inspirational thoughts, as though blind people can’t dance, so they meditate. No offense, Wizard, but you’re entirely too cool to give me a plastic fantastic spiritual whizbang like this, and I’m a little embarrassed for you.”

“You’re welcome. But I’m not giving it to you. I’m just curious what it says in Braille.”

“I’m relieved to hear that. But why curious?”

“I was born that way.”

“I get the point. None of my business.” He read the card with his fingertips and said, “Father of lies.”

“Father of flies?”

“*Lies. Untruths.*”

The phrase was familiar to me, but for some reason I couldn’t make sense of it, perhaps because I didn’t want to.

“The devil,” Shamus said. “The Father of Lies, Father of Evil, His Satanic Majesty. What’s the story, Wizard? Is St. Bart’s old-time religion just too boring these days, you need a whiff of sulfur to give your soul a thrill?”

“It’s not my card.”

“So whose card is it?”

“A nurse at County General told me to drive pedal-to-the-metal, into the desert, toss it out a window, let the wind take it.”

“For a nice boy who makes an honest living with a fast spatula, you sure hang around with some seriously whacked people.”

He slid the card toward me, across the microphone island.

I got up from my stool.

“Don’t you leave that brimstone Braille here,” he said.

“It’s just a plastic fantastic spiritual whizbang, remember?”

My twin reflections watched me from the dark-blue lenses of his glasses.

Shamus said, “I knew a practicing Satanist once. The guy claimed he hated his mother, but he must’ve loved her. Cops found her severed head in his freezer, in a sealed plastic bag with rose petals to keep it fresh.”

I picked up the meditation card. It felt cold.

“Thanks for your help, Shamus.”

“You be careful, Wizard. Interestingly eccentric friends aren’t easy to find. You were suddenly dead, I’d miss you.”

CHAPTER 44

THE RED DAWN CAME, THE SUN LIKE AN EXECUTIONER'S blade slicing up from the dark horizon.

Elsewhere in Pico Mundo, a would-be mass murderer might have been looking at this sunrise while inserting cartridges in spare magazines for his assault rifle.

I parked in the driveway and turned off the engine. I could wait no longer to learn if the shooter who popped Bob Robertson had also murdered Rosalia Sanchez. Yet two or three minutes passed before I found sufficient courage to get out of the car.

The night birds had fallen silent. Usually active at first light, the morning crows had not yet appeared.

Climbing the back-porch steps, I saw that the screen door was closed but that the door stood open. The kitchen lights were off.

I peered through the screen. Rosalia sat at the table, her hands folded around a coffee mug. She appeared to be alive.

Appearances can be deceiving. Her dead body might be awaiting discovery in another room, and this might be her earthbound spirit with its hands around the mug that she had left when she'd gone to answer the killer's knock on her door the previous evening.

I could not smell freshly brewed coffee.

Always before, when she waited for me to arrive to tell her that she was visible, the lights had been on. I had never seen her sitting in the dark like this.

Rosalia looked up and smiled as I entered the kitchen.

I stared at her, afraid to speak, for fear that she was a lingering spirit and could not answer.

“Good morning, Odd Thomas.”

Dread blew out of me with my pent-up breath. “You’re alive.”

“Of course I’m alive. I know I’m a long way down the road from the young girl I used to be, but I don’t look dead, I hope.”

“I meant—visible. You’re visible.”

“Yes, I know. The two policemen told me, so I didn’t have to wait for you this morning.”

“Policemen?”

“It was good knowing early. I turned out the lights and just enjoyed sitting here, watching the dawn develop.” She raised her mug. “Would you like some apple juice, Odd Thomas?”

“No thank you, ma’am. Did you say two policemen?”

“They were nice boys.”

“When was this?”

“Not forty minutes ago. They were worried about you.”

“Worried—why?”

“They said someone reported hearing a gunshot come from your apartment. Isn’t that ridiculous, Odd Thomas? I told them I hadn’t heard anything.”

I was sure that the call reporting the shot had been made anonymously, because the caller had likely been Robertson’s killer.

Mrs. Sanchez said, “I asked them what on earth you’d be shooting at in your apartment. I told them you don’t have mice.” She raised her mug to take a sip of apple juice, but then said, “You don’t have mice, do you?”

“No, ma’am.”

“They wanted to look anyway. They were concerned about you. Nice boys. Careful to wipe their feet. They didn’t touch a thing.”

“You mean you showed them my apartment?”

After swallowing some apple juice, she said, “Well, they were policemen, and they were so worried about you, and they felt much better when they didn’t find that you’d shot your foot or something.”

I was glad I'd moved Robertson's body immediately upon finding it in my bathroom.

"Odd Thomas, you never came around last night to get the cookies I baked for you. Chocolate chip with walnuts. Your favorite."

A plate, heaped with cookies, covered with plastic wrap, stood on the table.

"Thank you, ma'am. Your cookies are the best." I picked up the plate. "I was wondering...do you think I could borrow your car for a little while?"

"But didn't you just drive up in it?"

My blush was redder than the spreading dawn beyond the windows. "Yes, ma'am."

"Well, then, you've already borrowed it," she said without the slightest trace of irony. "No need to ask twice."

I retrieved the keys from a pegboard by the refrigerator. "Thank you, Mrs. Sanchez. You're too good to me."

"You're a sweet boy, Odd Thomas. You remind me so much of my nephew Marco. Come September, he'll have been invisible three years."

Marco, with the rest of his family, had been aboard one of the planes that flew into the World Trade Center.

She said, "I keep thinking he'll turn visible again any day, but it's been so long now.... Don't you ever go invisible, Odd Thomas."

She breaks my heart sometimes. "I won't," I assured her.

When I bent down and kissed her brow, she put a hand to my head, holding my face to hers. "Promise me you won't."

"I promise, ma'am. I swear to God."

CHAPTER 45

WHEN I PARKED IN FRONT OF STORMY'S APARTMENT house, the undercover PD van was no longer across the street.

Obviously, when the police detail had been in place, it hadn't been providing security for her. As I'd suspected, they had been keeping a watch with the hope that Robertson would come looking for me. When I'd shown up at Chief Porter's house, after the shooting, they realized that I was no longer with Stormy, and evidently they pulled up stakes.

Robertson was embarked upon an endless sleep, watched over by the ghost of a young prostitute, but his murderer and former kill buddy remained at large. This second psychopath would have no reason to make a special target of Stormy; besides, she had her 9-mm pistol and the hard-nosed will to use it.

Yet into my mind came the image of Robertson's chest wound, and I could not turn away from it or close my eyes to it as I had done in my bathroom. Worse, my imagination transferred the mortal hole from the dead man's livid flesh to Stormy, and I thought also of the young woman who saved me from the coyotes, arms crossed modestly over her breasts and wounds.

On the front walkway, I broke into a run. Slammed up the stairs. Crashed across the porch. Threw open the door with the leaded glass.

I fumbled the key, dropped it, bent and snatched it from the air as it bounced off the hardwood floor, and let myself into her

apartment.

From the living room, I saw Stormy in the kitchen, and I went to her side.

She stood at the cutting board, beside the sink, using a small grapefruit knife to section the prime Florida fruit. A small pile of extracted seeds glistened on the wood.

“What’re you wired about?” she asked as she finished her task and set aside the knife.

“I thought you were dead.”

“Since I’m not, do you want some breakfast?”

I almost told her that someone had shot the chief.

Instead, I said, “If I did drugs, I’d love an amphetamine omelet with three pots of black coffee. I didn’t get much sleep. I need to stay awake, clarify my thinking.”

“I’ve got chocolate-covered doughnuts.”

“That’s a start.”

We sat at the kitchen table: she with her grapefruit, me with the box of doughnuts and with a Pepsi, full sugar, full caffeine.

“Why did you think I was dead?” she asked.

She was already worried about me. I didn’t want to wind her anxiety spring to the breaking point.

If I told her about the chief, I’d wind up also telling her about Bob Robertson in my bathtub, about how he’d been a dead man already when I’d seen him in the churchyard, about the events at the Church of the Whispering Comet and the satanic meditation card.

She’d want to stay at my side for the duration. Ride shotgun, give me cover. I couldn’t allow her to endanger herself like that.

I sighed and shook my head. “I don’t know. I’m seeing bodachs everywhere. Hordes of them. Whatever’s coming, it’s going to be big. I’m scared.”

Warningly, she pointed her spoon at me. “Don’t tell me to stay home today.”

“I’d like you to stay home today.”

“What’d I just say?”

“What’d *I* just say.”

Chewing, silenced by grapefruit and by chocolate doughnut, we stared at each other.

“I’ll stay home today,” she said, “if you’ll stay here all day with me.”

“We’ve been through this. I can’t let people die if there’s a way to spare them.”

“And I’m not going to live even one day in a cage just because there’s a loose tiger out there somewhere.”

I chugged Pepsi. I wished that I had some caffeine tablets. I wished that I had smelling salts to clear my head each time a fog of sleep began to creep upon me. I wished that I could be like other people, with no supernatural gift, with no weight to carry except whatever chocolate doughnuts might eventually put on me.

“He’s worse than a tiger,” I told her.

“I don’t care if he’s worse than a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. I’ve got a life to live—and no time to waste if I’m going to have my own ice-cream shop within four years.”

“Get real. One day off work isn’t going to destroy your chances of fulfilling the dream.”

“Every day I work toward it is the dream. The process, not the final achievement, is what it’s all about.”

“Why do I even try to reason with you? I always lose.”

“You’re a fabulous man of action, sweetie. You don’t need to be a good debater, too.”

“I’m a fabulous man of action *and* a terrific short-order cook.”

“The ideal husband.”

“I’m going to have a second doughnut.”

With full knowledge that she was offering a concession that I could not accept, she smiled and said, “Tell you what—I’ll take a day off work and go with you, right at your side, everywhere you go.”

Where I hoped to go, by the grace of psychic magnetism, was to the unknown man who’d killed Robertson and who might now be preparing himself to carry out the atrocity that they had planned together. Stormy wouldn’t be safe at my side.

“No,” I said. “You get on with your dream. Pack those cones, mix those milkshakes, and be the best damn purveyor of ice cream that you can be. Even little dreams can’t come true unless you persevere.”

“Did you think that up, odd one, or are you quoting?”

“Don’t you recognize it? I’m quoting you.”

She smiled affectionately. “You’re smarter than you look.”

“I’d have to be. Where are you going on your lunch break?”

“You know me—I pack my lunch. It’s cheaper, and I can stay at work, on top of things.”

“Don’t change your mind. Don’t go near a bowling alley, near a movie theater, near anything.”

“Can I go near a golf course?”

“No.”

“A miniature-golf course?”

“I’m serious about this.”

“Can I go near a game arcade?”

“Remember that old movie, *Public Enemy*?” I asked.

“Can I go near an amusement park?”

“James Cagney’s this gangster having breakfast with his moll—”

“I’m nobody’s moll.”

“—and when she irritates him, he shoves half a grapefruit in her face.”

“And what does she do—castrate him? That’s what I’d do, with my grapefruit knife.”

“*Public Enemy* was made in 1931. You couldn’t show castration on the screen back then.”

“What an immature art form it was in those days. So enlightened now. You want half my grapefruit and I’ll get my knife?”

“I’m just saying I love you and I’m worried about you.”

“I love you, too, sweetie. So I’ll promise not to eat lunch on a miniature-golf course. I’ll have it right at Burke Bailey’s. If I spill salt, I’ll immediately throw a pinch over my shoulder. Hell, I’ll throw the entire shaker.”

“Thanks. But I’m still considering the grapefruit-face smash.”

CHAPTER 46

AT THE TAKUDA HOUSE ON HAMPTON WAY, NO bodachs were in sight. The previous night, they had been swarming over the residence.

As I parked in front of the place, the garage door rolled up. Ken Takuda backed out in his Lincoln Navigator.

When I walked to the driveway, he stopped the SUV and put down his window. “Good morning, Mr. Thomas.”

He’s the only person I know who addresses me so formally.

“Good morning, sir. It’s a beautiful morning, isn’t it?”

“A *glorious* morning,” he declared. “A momentous day, like every day, full of possibilities.”

Dr. Takuda is on the faculty of California State University at Pico Mundo. He teaches twentieth-century American literature.

Considering that the modern and contemporary literature taught in most universities is largely bleak, cynical, morbid, pessimistic, misanthropic dogmatism, often written by suicidal types who sooner or later kill themselves with alcohol or drugs, or shotguns, Professor Takuda was a remarkably cheerful man.

“I need some advice about my future,” I lied. “I’m thinking of going to college, after all, eventually getting a doctorate, building an academic career, like you.”

When his lustrous Asian complexion paled, he acquired a taupe tint. “Well, Mr. Thomas, while I’m in favor of education, I couldn’t in good conscience recommend a university career in anything but

the hard sciences. As a working environment, the rest of academia is a sewer of irrationality, hatemongering, envy, and self-interest. I'm getting out the moment I earn my twenty-five-year pension package, and then I'm going to write novels like Ozzie Boone."

"But, sir, you always seem so happy."

"In the belly of Leviathan, Mr. Thomas, one can either despair and perish, or be cheerful and persevere." He smiled brightly.

This wasn't the response I expected, but I pressed forward with my half-baked scheme to learn his schedule for the day and thereby perhaps pinpoint the place where Robertson's kill buddy would strike. "I'd still like to talk to you about it."

"The world has too few modest fry cooks and far too many self-important professors, but we'll chat about it if you like. Just call the university and ask for my office. My graduate assistant will set up an appointment."

"I was hoping we could talk this morning, sir."

"Now? What has caused this sudden urgent thirst for academic pursuits?"

"I need to think more seriously about the future. I'm getting married on Saturday."

"Would that be to Ms. Bronwen Llewellyn?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Thomas, you have a rare opportunity for perfect bliss, and you would be ill advised to poison your life with either academia or drug dealing. I have a class this morning, followed by two student conferences. Then I'm having lunch and seeing a movie with my family, so I'm afraid tomorrow is the absolute earliest we can discuss this self-destructive impulse of yours."

"Where are you having lunch, sir? At the Grille?"

"We're allowing the children to choose. It's their day."

"What movie are you seeing?"

"That thing about the dog and the alien."

"Don't," I said, though I hadn't seen the film. "It stinks."

"It's a big hit."

"It sucks."

"The critics like it," he said.

“Randall Jarrell said that art is long and critics are but the insects of a day.”

“Give my office a call, Mr. Thomas. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

He put up his window, backed out of the driveway, and drove off toward the university and, later in the day, an appointment with Death.

CHAPTER 47

NICOLINA PEABODY, AGE FIVE, WORE PINK sneakers, pink shorts, and a pink T-shirt. Her wristwatch featured a pink plastic band and a pink pig's face on the dial.

"When I'm old enough to buy my own clothes," she told me, "I'll wear nothing but pink, pink, pink, every day, all year, forever."

Levanna Peabody, who would soon be seven, rolled her eyes and said, "Everybody'll think you're a whore."

Entering the living room with a birthday cake on a plate under a clear-glass lid, Viola said, "Levanna! That's an awful thing to say. That's just half a step from trash talk and two weeks with no allowance."

"What's a whore?" Nicolina asked.

"Someone who wears pink and kisses men for money," Levanna said in a tone of worldly sophistication.

When I took the cake from Viola, she said, "I'll just grab their box of activity books, and we'll be ready to go."

I had taken a quick tour of the house. No bodachs lurked in any corner.

Nicolina said, "If I kiss men for free, then I can wear pink and not be a whore."

"If you kiss lots of men for free, you're a slut," Levanna said.

"Levanna, enough!" Viola reprimanded.

"But, Mom," Levanna said, "she's got to learn how the world works sooner or later."

Noticing my amusement and interpreting it with uncanny skill, Nicolina confronted her older sister: “You don’t even know what a whore is, you only think you do.”

“I know, all right,” Levanna insisted smugly.

The girls preceded me down the front walk to Mrs. Sanchez’s car, which was parked at the curb.

After locking the house, Viola followed us. She put the box of activity books in the backseat with the girls, and then she sat up front. I handed the cake to her and closed her door.

The morning was pure Mojave, blazing and breathless. The sky, an inverted blue ceramic cauldron, poured out a hot dry brew.

With the sun still in the east, all shadows slanted westward, as if yearning for that horizon over which the night had preceded them. And along the windless street, only my shadow moved.

If supernatural entities were present, they were not evident.

As I got in the car and started the engine, Nicolina said, “I’m never going to kiss any men, anyway. Just Mommy, Levanna, and Aunt Sharlene.”

“You’ll want to kiss men when you’re older,” Levanna predicted.

“I won’t.”

“You will.”

“I won’t,” Nicolina firmly declared. “Just you, Mommy, Aunt Sharlene. Oh, and Cheevers.”

“Cheevers is a boy,” Levanna said as I pulled away from the curb and set out for Sharlene’s house.

Nicolina giggled. “Cheevers is a *bear*.”

“He’s a boy bear.”

“He’s *stuffed*.”

“But he’s still a boy,” Levanna contended. “See, it’s started already—you want to kiss men.”

“I’m not a slut,” Nicolina insisted. “I’m going to be a dog doctor.”

“They’re called veterinarians, and they don’t wear pink, pink, pink, every day, all year, forever.”

“I’ll be the first.”

“Well,” Levanna said, “if I had a sick dog and you were a pink veterinarian, I guess I’d still bring him to you ’cause I know you’d

make him well.”

Following a circuitous route, checking the rearview mirror, I drove six blocks to wind up two blocks away on Maricopa Lane.

Using my cell phone en route, Viola called her sister to say that she was bringing the girls for a visit.

The tidy white clapboard house on Maricopa has periwinkle-blue shutters and blue porch posts. On the porch, a social center for the neighborhood, are four rocking chairs and a bench swing.

Sharlene rocked up from one of the chairs when we parked in her driveway. She is a large woman with a rapturous smile and a musical voice perfect for a gospel singer, which she is.

A golden retriever, Posey, rose from the porch floor to stand at her side, lashing a gorgeous plumed tail, excited by the sight of the girls, held in place not by a leash but by her master’s softly spoken command.

I carried the cake into the kitchen, where I politely declined Sharlene’s offer of ice-cold lemonade, an apple dumpling, three varieties of cookies, and homemade peanut brittle.

Lying on the floor with four legs in the air, forepaws bent in submission, Posey solicited a belly rub, which the girls were quick to provide.

I dropped to one knee and interrupted long enough to say happy birthday to Levanna. I gave each of the girls a hug.

They seemed terribly small and fragile. So little force would be required to shatter them, to rip them out of this world. Their vulnerability frightened me.

Viola accompanied me through the house to the front porch, where she said, “You were gonna bring me a picture of the man I’m supposed to be on the lookout for.”

“You don’t need it now. He’s...out of the picture.”

Her huge eyes were full of trust that I didn’t deserve. “Odd, tell me honest-to-Jesus, do you still see death in me?”

I didn’t know what might be coming, but though the desert day made a bright impression on my eyes, it seemed storm-dark to my sixth sense, with great thunder pending. Changing their plans, canceling the movie and dinner at the Grille—that would surely be

enough to change their fate. Surely. “You’re okay now. And the girls, too.”

Her eyes searched mine, and I dared not look away. “What about you, Odd? Whatever’s coming...is there a path for you to walk through it to someplace safe?”

I forced a smile. “I know about all that’s Otherly and Beyond—remember?”

She locked eyes with me a moment longer, then put her arms around me. We held each other tight.

I didn’t ask Viola if *she* saw death in *me*. She had never claimed to have a foretelling gift...but I was afraid nevertheless that she would say yes.

CHAPTER 48

LONG AFTER “ALL NIGHT WITH SHAMUS Cocobolo” had gone off the air and the strains of Glenn Miller had traveled out of the stratosphere toward distant stars, with no Elvis CDs to comfort me, I cruised the streets of Pico Mundo in the silence of the sun, wondering where all the bodachs had gone.

At a service station, I stopped to fuel the Chevy and to use the men’s room. In the streaked mirror above the sink, my face suggested that I was a hunted man, haggard and hollow-eyed.

From the adjacent minimart, I bought a screw-top sixteen-ounce Pepsi and a small bottle of caffeine tablets.

With the chemical assistance of No-Doz, cola, and the sugar in the plate of cookies that Mrs. Sanchez had given me, I could remain awake. Whether I could think clearly enough on such a regimen would not be entirely evident until the bullets started flying.

Lacking a name or face to put to Robertson’s collaborator, my psychic magnetism would not lead me to my quarry. Cruising randomly, I would arrive nowhere of consequence.

With clear intention, I drove to Camp’s End.

The chief had ordered surveillance on Robertson’s house the previous evening, but that stakeout had apparently been withdrawn. With the chief shot and the entire police department in shock, someone had decided to shift resources elsewhere.

Suddenly I realized that the chief might not have been targeted solely to frame me for a second murder. Robertson’s kill buddy

might have wanted to eliminate Wyatt Porter in order to ensure that the Pico Mundo PD would be shaken, disoriented, and slow to respond to whatever crisis was coming.

Instead of parking across the street and down the block from the pale yellow casita with the faded blue door, I left the Chevy at the curb in front of the place. I walked boldly to the carport.

My driver's license still served its fundamental purpose. The door latch popped, and I entered the kitchen.

For a minute, I stood inside the threshold, listening. The hum of the refrigerator motor. Faint ticks and creaks marked the steady expansion of the old house's joints in the ascending heat of the new morning.

Instinct told me that I was alone.

I went directly to the neatly kept study. Currently, it didn't serve as a train station for incoming bodachs.

From the wall above the file cabinets, McVeigh, Manson, and Atta watched me as if with conscious awareness.

At the desk, I sifted through the contents of the drawers once more, seeking names. On my previous visit, I had considered the small address book to be of little value, but this time I paged through it with interest.

The book contained fewer than forty names and addresses. None resonated with me.

I didn't peruse the bank statements again, but I stared at them, thinking about the \$58,000 in cash that he'd withdrawn over the past two months. More than four thousand had been in his pants pockets when I found his body.

If you were a rich sociopath interested in funding well-planned acts of mass murder, how big a circus of blood could you purchase for approximately \$54,000?

Even sleep-deprived, with a caffeine headache and a sugar buzz, I could answer that one without much consideration: big. You could buy a three-ring circus of death—bullets, explosives, poison gas, just about anything short of a nuclear bomb.

Elsewhere in the house, a door closed. Not with a bang. Quietly, with a soft thump and click.

Moving stealthily but quickly, I went to the open door of the study. I stepped into the hall.

No intruder in sight. Except me.

The bathroom and bedroom doors stood open, as they had been.

In the bedroom, the closet door was a slider. That couldn't have made the sound I heard.

Aware that death is frequently the reward for the reckless and the timid alike, I moved with cautious haste into the living room. Deserted.

The swinging door to the kitchen could not have been what I heard. The entry door to the house remained closed, as it had been.

In the front left corner of the living room, a closet. In the closet: two jackets, a few sealed cartons, an umbrella.

Into the kitchen. No one.

Maybe I had heard an intruder *leaving*. Which meant someone had been in the house when I arrived and had crept out when certain that I was distracted.

Perspiration prickled my brow. A single bead quivered down the nape of my neck and traced my spine to the coccyx.

The morning heat was not the sole cause of my sweat.

I returned to the study and switched on the computer. I sampled Robertson's programs, surfed his directories, and found a library of sleaze that he had downloaded from the Internet. Files of sadistic porn. Child porn. Still others were about serial killers, ritualistic mutilation, and satanic ceremonies.

None of it seemed certain to lead me to his collaborator, at least not quickly enough to resolve the current crisis favorably. I switched the computer off.

If I'd had some Purell, the sanitizing gel that the nurse used at the hospital, I might have poured half a bottle on my hands.

During my first visit to this casita, I had conducted a quick search, which concluded when I'd made enough disturbing discoveries to take my case against Robertson to the chief. Although a countdown clock ticked in my head, this time I went through the house more thoroughly, grateful that it was small.

In the bedroom, in one drawer of a highboy, I found several knives of different sizes and curious design. Latin phrases were engraved in the blades of the first few weapons that I examined.

Although I don't read Latin, I sensed that the character of the words would prove, on translation, to be as wicked as the sharpness of each razor-edged blade.

Another knife featured hieroglyphics from the hilt to the point. These pictographs meant no more to me than did the Latin, although I recognized a few of the highly stylized images: flames, falcons, wolves, snakes, scorpions....

Searching a second drawer, I discovered a heavy silver chalice. Engraved with obscenities. Polished. Cool in my hands.

This unholy chalice was a hateful mockery of the communion cup that held consecrated wine in a Catholic Mass. The ornate handles were inverted crucifixes: Christ turned on His head. Latin encircled the rim, and around the bowl of the cup were engraved images of naked men and women engaged in various acts of sodomy.

In the same drawer, I found a black-lacquered pyx likewise decorated with pornographic images. On the sides and the lid of this small box, colorful hand-painted scenes of lurid degradation depicted men and women copulating not with one another but with jackals, hyenas, goats, and serpents.

In an ordinary church, the pyx contains the Eucharist, communion wafers of unleavened bread. This box brimmed with coal-black crackers flecked with red.

Unleavened bread exudes a subtle, appealing aroma. The contents of this pyx had an equally faint but repellent odor. First whiff—herbal. Second whiff—burnt matches. Third whiff—vomit.

The highboy contained other satanic paraphernalia; but I'd seen enough.

I couldn't fathom how adults could take seriously the Hollywood trappings and hokey rituals of glamorized satanism. Certain fourteen-year-old boys, yes, because some of them were washed half loose from reason by shifting tides of hormones. But not adults. Even sociopaths like Bob Robertson and his unknown pal, as enthralled by violence and as crackbrained as they were, must have

some clarity of perception, surely enough to see the absurdity of such Halloween games.

After replacing the items in the highboy, I closed the drawers.

A knocking startled me. The soft rap of knuckles.

I looked at the bedroom window, expecting to see a face at the glass, perhaps a neighbor tapping the pane. Only the hard desert light, tree shadows, and the brown backyard.

The knocking came again, as quiet as before. Not just three or four brisk raps. A stutter of small blows lasting fifteen or twenty seconds.

In the living room, I went to the window beside the front door and carefully parted the greasy drapes. No one waited on the stoop outside.

Mrs. Sanchez's Chevy was the only vehicle at the curb. The weary dog that had slouched along the street the day before now traveled it again, head held low, tail lower than its head.

Recalling the racket of the quarrelsome crows on the roof during my previous visit, I turned from the window and studied the ceiling, listening.

After a minute, when the knocking didn't come again, I stepped into the kitchen. In places, the ancient linoleum crackled underfoot.

Needing a name to put to Robertson's collaborator, I could think of no place in a kitchen likely to contain such information. I looked through all the drawers and cupboards, anyway. Most were empty: only a few dishes, half a dozen glasses, a small clatter of flatware.

I went to the refrigerator because eventually Stormy would ask if *this* time I had checked for severed heads. When I opened the door, I found beer, soft drinks, part of a canned ham on a platter, half a strawberry pie, as well as the usual staples and condiments.

Next to the strawberry pie, a clear plastic package held four black candles, eight-inch tapers. Maybe he kept them in the fridge because they would soften and distort if left in this summer heat, in a house without air conditioning.

Beside the candles stood a jar without a label, filled with what appeared to be loose teeth. A closer look confirmed the contents:

dozens of molars, bicuspids, incisors, canines. Human teeth. Enough to fill at least five or six mouths.

I stared at the jar for a long moment, trying to imagine how he had obtained this strange collection. When I decided that I'd rather not think about it, I closed the door.

Had I found nothing unusual in the refrigerator, I would not have opened the freezer compartment. Now I felt obligated to explore further.

The freezer was a deep roll-out compartment under the fridge. The hot kitchen sucked a quick plume of cold fog from the drawer when I pulled it open.

Two bright pink-and-yellow containers were familiar: the Burke Bailey's ice cream that Robertson had purchased the previous afternoon. Maple walnut and mandarin-orange chocolate.

In addition, the compartment held about ten opaque Rubbermaid containers with red lids, the shape and the size in which to store leftover deep-dish lasagna. I would not have opened these if the topmost containers hadn't featured freezer-proof hand-printed labels: HEATHER JOHNSON, JAMES DEERFIELD.

After all, I was looking specifically for names.

When I lifted aside the top containers, I saw more names on the lids under them: LISA BELMONT, ALYSSA RODRIQUEZ, BENJAMIN NADER....

I started with Heather Johnson. When I pried off the red lid, I found a woman's breasts.

CHAPTER 49

SOUVENIRS. TROPHIES. OBJECTS TO SPUR THE imagination and thrill the heart on lonely nights.

As though it had burned my hands, I dropped the container back in the freezer. I shot to my feet and kicked the drawer shut.

I must have turned away from the refrigerator, must have crossed the kitchen, but I was not aware of going to the sink until I found myself there. Leaning against the counter, bent forward, I struggled to repress the urge to surrender Mrs. Sanchez's cookies.

Throughout my life, I have seen terrible things. Some have been worse than the contents of the Rubbermaid container. Experience has not immunized me to horror, however, and human cruelty still has the power to devastate me, to loosen the locking pins in my knees.

Although I wanted to wash my hands and then splash cold water in my face, I preferred not to touch Robertson's faucets. I shrank from the thought of using his soap.

Nine more containers waited in the freezer. Someone else would have to open them. I had no curiosity about the rest of the grotesque collection.

In the file folder that bore his name, Robertson had included nothing but the calendar page for August 15, suggesting that his own career as a murderer would begin on this date. Yet evidence in the freezer suggested that his file should already be thick.

Sweat sheathed me, hot on my face, cold along my spine. I might as well not have showered at the hospital.

I consulted my wristwatch—10:02.

The bowling alley didn't open for business until one o'clock. The first showing of the hot-ticket dog movie was also scheduled for one o'clock.

If my prophetic dream was about to be fulfilled, evidence suggested that I might have no more than three hours to find Robertson's collaborator and stop him.

I unclipped the cell phone from my belt. Flipped it open. Pulled out the antenna. Pressed the power button. Watched the maker's logo appear and listened to the electronic signature music.

Chief Porter might not yet have regained consciousness. Even if he surfaced, his thoughts would be muddled by the lingering effects of anesthetic, by morphine or its equivalent, and by pain. He would have neither the strength nor presence of mind to give instructions to his subordinates.

To one extent or another, I knew all the officers on the PMPD. None had been made aware of my paranormal gift, however, and none had ever been as good a friend to me as was Chief Porter.

If I brought the police to this house, revealed to them the contents of the freezer, and urged them to apply all their resources to learning the name of Robertson's kill buddy, they would need hours to wrap their minds around the situation. Because they did not share my sixth sense and would not easily be persuaded that it was real, they wouldn't share my urgency.

They would detain me here while they investigated the situation. In their eyes, I would be as suspect as Robertson, for I had entered his house illegally. Who was to say that I hadn't harvested these body parts myself and hadn't planted the ten Rubbermaid containers in his freezer to incriminate him?

If ever they found Bob Robertson's body, and if the chief—God forbid—succumbed to postoperative complications, I would surely be arrested and charged with murder.

I switched off the phone.

Without a name to focus my psychic magnetism, without anyone to turn to for assistance, I had hit a wall, and the impact rattled my teeth.

Something crashed to the floor in another room: not just the thump of a closing door this time, not merely a soft rapping, but a hard thud and the sound of breakage.

Driven by frustration so intense that it allowed no caution, I headed for the swinging door, trying to clip the phone to my belt. I dropped it, left it for later, and shoved through the swinging door, into the living room.

A lamp had been knocked to the floor. The ceramic base had shattered.

When I tore open the front door and saw no one on the stoop or on the lawn, I slammed it shut. Hard. The boom shook the house, and making noise greatly pleased me after so much pussyfooting. My anger felt good.

I rushed through the archway, into the narrow hall, seeking the perpetrator. Bedroom, closet, study, closet, bathroom. No one.

Crows on the roof hadn't knocked over the lamp. Nor a draft. Nor an earthquake.

When I returned to the kitchen to pick up my phone and get out of the house, Robertson was waiting there for me.

CHAPTER 50

FOR A DEAD MAN WHO NO LONGER HAD A STAKE in the schemes and games of this world, Robertson lingered with singular ferocity, as infuriated as he had been when I had watched him from the bell tower at St. Bart's. His mushroom-colony body now seemed powerful, even in its lumpiness. His soft face and blurry features hardened and sharpened with rage.

No bullet hole, scorch mark, or stain marred his shirt. Unlike Tom Jedd, who carried his severed arm and pretended to use it as a back scratcher out there at Tire World, Robertson was in denial of his death, and he chose not to sport his mortal wound, just as Penny Kallisto had initially manifested without evidence of strangulation, acquiring the ligature marks only in the company of Harlo Landerson, her killer.

In high agitation, Robertson circled the kitchen. He glared at me, his eyes wilder and more fevered than those of the coyotes at the Church of the Whispering Comet.

When I had begun to out him, I had unintentionally made him a liability to his collaborator, setting him up for murder, but I had not pulled the trigger. Evidently, his hatred for me nonetheless exceeded what he harbored for the man who had killed him; otherwise, he would have done his haunting elsewhere.

Ovens to refrigerator, to sink, to ovens, he circled while I stooped and picked up the cell phone that I'd dropped earlier. Dead, he

didn't worry me a fraction as much as he had when I had thought he'd been alive in the churchyard.

As I clipped the phone to my belt, Robertson came to me. Loomed before me. His eyes were the gray of dirty ice, yet they conveyed the heat of his fury.

I met his stare and didn't retreat from him. I've learned that it's not wise to show fear in these cases.

His heavy face indeed had the quality of a fungus, but a meaty variety. Very portobello. His bloodless lips drew back from teeth that had seen too little of a brush.

He reached past my face and cupped his right hand against the back of my neck.

Penny Kallisto's hand had been dry and warm. Robertson's felt damp, cold. This was not his real hand, of course, only part of an apparition, a spirit image, that only I could have felt; but the nature of such a touch reveals the character of the soul.

Although I refused to shy from this unearthly contact, I cringed inwardly at the thought of the creep playing with the ten souvenirs in his freezer. The visual stimulation of those frozen trophies might not always satisfy. Perhaps he thawed them now and then to increase his tactile pleasure and to conjure a more vivid memory of each kill—tweaking, pinching, petting, caressing, planting tender kisses upon those mementos.

No spirit, however evil, can harm a living person merely by touch. This is our world, not theirs. Their blows pass through us, and their bites draw no blood.

When he realized that he could not make me cower, Robertson lowered his hand from my neck. His fury doubled, trebled, wrenching his face into a gargoyle mask.

One way exists for certain spirits to harm the living. If their character is sufficiently pernicious, if they give their hearts to evil until malevolence ripens into incurable spiritual malignancy, they are able to summon the energy of their demonic rage and vent it upon the inanimate.

We call them poltergeists. I once lost a brand-new music system to such an entity, as well as the handsome award plaque for creative

writing that I had won in that high-school competition judged by Little Ozzie.

As he had done in the sacristy at St. Bart's, Robertson's wrathful spirit stormed through the kitchen, and from his hands streamed pulses of energy that were visible to me. The air quivered with them, a sight similar to the concentric ripples that spread across water from the impact point of a stone.

Cabinet doors flew open, slammed shut, open, shut, banging even louder and with less meaning than the jaws of ranting politicians. Dishes erupted from shelves, each cutting through the air with the *whoosh* of a discus thrown by an Olympian.

I ducked a drinking glass, which exploded into an oven door, spraying sparkling shrapnel. Other glasses spun wide of me, shattered against walls, cabinets, countertops.

Poltergeists are all blind fury and thrashing torment, without aim or control. They can harm you only by indirection, a lucky blow. Even by indirection and chance, however, decapitation can ruin your day.

Accompanied by the hardwood applause of clapping cabinet doors, Robertson flung bolts of power from his hands. Two chairs danced in place at the dinette table, tapping on the linoleum, clattering against the table legs.

At the cooktop, untouched, four knobs turned. Four rings of gas flames shimmered eerie blue light into the otherwise gloomy kitchen.

Alert for deadly projectiles, I edged away from Robertson and toward the door by which I'd entered the house.

A drawer shot open, and a cacophony of flatware exploded out of it, glittering and clinking in a levitated frenzy, as if starving ghosts were carving-forking-spooning a dinner as invisible as they were themselves.

I saw those utensils coming—they passed *through* Robertson with no effect on his ectoplasmic form—and I turned aside, brought up my arms to shield my face. The flatware found me as iron will find a magnet, pummeled me. One fork speared past my defenses, stabbed my forehead, and raked back through my hair.

When this brittle rain of stainless steel rang to the floor behind me, I dared to lower my arms.

Like some great troll capering to a dark music that only he could hear, Robertson punched-clawed-twisted the air, appearing to howl and shout, but thrashing in the utter silence of the mute departed.

The upper compartment of the ancient Frigidaire sprang open, disgorging beer, soft drinks, the plate of ham, strawberry pie, a vomitous deluge that splashed and clattered across the floor. Ring tabs popped; beer and soda gouted from spinning cans.

The refrigerator itself began to vibrate, violently knocking side to side against the flanking cabinetry. Vegetable drawers chattered; wire shelves jangled.

Kicking aside rolling cans of beer and scattered flatware, I continued toward the door to the carport.

A juggernaut rumble alerted me to the fast approach of sliding death.

I dodged to my left, skidded on a foamy sludge of beer and a bent spoon.

With its grisly freight of frozen body parts still nestled in the freezer drawer, the Frigidaire slid past me and crashed into the wall hard enough to make the studs crack behind the plaster.

I plunged outside, into the shadows under the carport, and slammed the door behind me.

Inside, the tumult continued, the thump and crash, the rattle and bang.

I didn't expect Robertson's tortured spirit to follow me, at least not for a while. Once committed to a frenzy of destruction, a poltergeist will usually thrash out of control until it exhausts itself and wanders off in confusion to drift again in a purgatory zone between this world and the next.

CHAPTER 51

AT THE CONVENIENCE STORE WHERE I PURCHASED the No-Doz and the Pepsi, I bought another cola, Bactine, and a package of large-patch Band-Aids.

The cashier, a man with a face made for astonishment, put aside the sports section of the *Los Angeles Times* and said, “Hey, you’re bleeding.”

Being polite is not only the right way to respond to people but also the easiest. Life is so filled with unavoidable conflict that I see no reason to promote more confrontations.

At that moment, however, I happened to be in a rare bad mood. Time was flushing away at a frightening rate, the hour of the gun rapidly drawing near, and I still had no name to hang on Robertson’s collaborator.

“Do you know you’re bleeding?” he asked.

“I had a suspicion.”

“That looks nasty.”

“My apologies.”

“What happened to your forehead?”

“A fork.”

“A fork?”

“Yes, sir. I wish I’d been eating with a spoon.”

“You stabbed yourself with a fork?”

“It flipped.”

“Flipped?”

“The fork.”

“A flipped fork?”

“It flicked my forehead.”

Pausing in the counting of my change, he gave me a narrow look.

“That’s right,” I said. “A flipped fork flicked my forehead.”

He decided not to have any further involvement with me. He gave me my change, bagged the items, and returned to the sports pages.

In the men’s room at the service station next door, I washed my bloody face, cleaned the wound, treated it with Bactine, and applied a compress of paper towels. The punctures and scratches were shallow, and the bleeding soon stopped.

This wasn’t the first time—nor the last—that I wished my supernatural gift included the power to heal.

Band-Aid applied, I returned to the Chevy. Sitting behind the wheel, engine running, air-conditioning vents aimed at my face, I chugged cold Pepsi.

Only bad news on my wristwatch—10:48.

My muscles ached. My eyes were sore. I felt tired, weak. Maybe my wits hadn’t shifted into low gear, as they seemed to have, but I didn’t like my chances if I had to go one-on-one with Robertson’s kill buddy, who must have enjoyed a better night’s sleep than I had.

I’d taken two caffeine tablets no more than an hour ago, so I couldn’t justify swilling down two more. Besides, already the acid in my stomach had soured into a corrosive strength sufficient to etch steel, and I had grown simultaneously exhausted and jumpy, which is not a condition conducive to survival.

Although I had no person—no name, no description—as a focus for my psychic magnetism, I drove at random through Pico Mundo, hoping to be brought to a place of enlightenment.

The brilliant Mojave day burned at white-hot ferocity. The air itself seemed to be on fire, as if the sun—by speed of light, less than eight and a half minutes from Earth—had gone nova eight minutes ago, giving us nothing more than this dazzling glare as a short warning of our impending bright death.

Each flare and flicker of light flashing off the windshield seemed to score my eyes. I hadn’t brought my sunglasses. The searing glare

soon spawned a headache that made a fork in the brow seem like a tickle by comparison.

Turning aimlessly from street to street, trusting intuition to guide me, I found myself in Shady Ranch, one of the newer residential developments on the Pico Mundo hills that a decade ago were home to nothing more dangerous than rattlesnakes. Now people lived here, and perhaps one of them was a sociopathic monster plotting mass murder in upper-middle-class suburban comfort.

Shady Ranch had never been a ranch of any kind; it wasn't one now, unless you counted houses as a crop. As for shade, these hills enjoyed less of it than most neighborhoods in the heart of town because the trees were far from maturity.

I parked in my father's driveway but didn't at once switch off the engine. I needed time to gather my nerve for this encounter.

Like those who lived in it, this Mediterranean-style house had little character. Below the red-tile roof, ornament-free planes of beige stucco and glass met at unsurprising angles arrived at less by architectural genius than by the dictates of lot size and shape.

Leaning closer to a dashboard vent, I closed my eyes against the rush of chilled air. Ghost lights drifted across the backs of my eyelids, retinal memories of the desert glare, strangely soothing for a moment—until the wound in Robertson's chest rose from deeper memory.

I switched off the engine, got out of the car, went to the house, and rang my father's doorbell.

At this hour in the morning, he was likely to be home. He had never worked a day in his life and seldom rose before nine or ten o'clock.

My father answered, surprised to see me. "Odd, you didn't call to say you were coming."

"No," I agreed. "Didn't call."

My father is forty-five, a handsome man with thick hair still more black than silver. He has a lean athletic body of which he is proud to the point of vanity.

Barefoot, he wore only khaki shorts slung low across his hips. His tan had been assiduously cultivated with oils, enhanced with toners,

preserved with lotions.

“Why have you come?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t look well.”

He retreated one step from the door. He fears illness.

“I’m not sick,” I assured him. “Just bone tired. No sleep. May I come in?”

“We weren’t doing much, just finishing breakfast, getting ready to catch some rays.”

Whether that was an invitation or not, I interpreted it as one, and I crossed the threshold, pulling the door shut behind me.

“Britney’s in the kitchen,” he said, and led me to the back of the house.

The blinds were drawn, the rooms layered with sumptuous shadows.

I’ve seen the place in better light. It’s beautifully furnished. My father has style and loves comfort.

He inherited a substantial trust fund. A generous monthly check supports a lifestyle that many would envy.

Although he has much, he yearns for more. He desires to live far better than he does, and he chafes at terms of the trust that require him to live on its earnings and forbid him access to the principal.

His parents had been wise to settle their estate on him under those terms. If he had been able to get his hands on the principal, he would long ago have been destitute and homeless.

He is full of get-rich-quick schemes, the latest being the sale of land on the moon. Were he able to manage his own fortune, he would be impatient with a ten-or fifteen-percent return on investment and would plunge great sums on unlikely ventures in hopes of doubling and tripling his money overnight.

The kitchen is big, with restaurant-quality equipment and every imaginable culinary tool and gadget, though he eats out six or seven nights a week. Maple floor, ship’s-style maple cabinets with rounded corners, granite counters, and stainless-steel appliances contribute to a sleek and yet inviting ambience.

Britney is sleek, as well, and inviting in a way that makes your skin crawl. When we entered the kitchen, she was standing hipshot at a window, sipping a morning champagne and staring out at sun serpents sinuously flexing across the surface of the swimming pool.

Her thong bikini was small enough to excite the jaded editors of *Hustler*, but she wore it well enough to make the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue.

She was eighteen but looked younger. This is my father's basic criterion in women. They are never older than twenty, and they always look younger than they are.

Some years ago, he got in trouble for cohabiting with a sixteen-year-old. He claimed to be unaware of her true age. An expensive attorney plus payoffs to the girl and her parents spared him the indignity of a prison pallor and jail haircuts.

Instead of a greeting, Britney gave me a sullen, dismissive look. She returned her attention to the sun-dappled swimming pool.

She resents me because she thinks my father might give me money that would otherwise be spent on her. This concern has no validity. He would never offer me a buck, and I would never take it.

She would be better advised to worry about two facts: first, that she has been with my father for five months; second, that the average duration of one of his affairs is six to nine months. With a nineteenth birthday looming, she would soon seem old to him.

Fresh coffee had been brewed. I asked for a cup, poured it myself, and sat on a bar stool at the kitchen island.

Always restless in my company, my father moved around the room, rinsing out Britney's champagne glass when she finished with it, wiping a counter that didn't need to be wiped, straightening the chairs at the breakfast table.

"I'm getting married on Saturday," I said.

This surprised him. He'd been married to my mother only briefly and regretted it within hours of exchanging vows. Marriage doesn't suit him.

"To that Llewellyn girl?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is that a good idea?"

“It’s the best idea I’ve ever had.”

Britney turned away from the window to study me with beady-eyed speculation. To her, a wedding meant a gift, a parental boon, and she was prepared to defend her interests.

She didn’t stir in me the slightest anger. She saddened me, for I could see her deeply unhappy future without need of any sixth sense.

Admittedly, she scared me a little, too, because she was moody and quick to anger. Worse, the purity and the intensity of her self-esteem ensured that she would never doubt herself, that she could not conceive of suffering unpleasant consequences for any act that she might commit.

My father likes moody women in whom a perpetually simmering anger lies just beneath the surface. The more clearly that their moodiness indicates genuine psychological disorder, the more they excite him. Sex without danger does not appeal to him.

All of his lovers have fit this profile. He doesn’t appear to spend much effort seeking them; as if sensing his need, drawn by vibes or pheromones, they find him with dependable regularity.

He once told me that the moodier a woman is, the hotter she will prove to be in bed. This was fatherly advice that I could have lived without.

Now, as I poured coffee into a gutful of Pepsi, he said, “Is this Llewellyn girl knocked up?”

“No.”

“You’re too young for marriage,” he said. “My age—that’s when it’s time to settle down.”

He said this for Britney’s benefit. He would never marry her. Later, she would remember this as a promise. When he ditched her, the fight would be more epic than *Godzilla vs. Mothra*.

Sooner or later, one of his hotties, during a bad mood swing, will maim or kill him. I believe that on some deep level, even if subconsciously, he knows this.

“What’s that on your forehead?” Britney asked.

“Band-Aid.”

“You fall down drunk or something?”

“Something.”

“You in a fight?”

“No. It’s an employment-related fork wound.”

“A what?”

“A flipped fork flicked my forehead.”

Alliteration seems to offend people. Her expression soured. “What kind of shit are you on?”

“I’m fully amped on caffeine,” I admitted.

“Caffeine, my ass.”

“Pepsi and coffee and No-Doz. And chocolate. Chocolate contains caffeine. I had some chocolate-chip cookies. Chocolate doughnuts.”

My father said, “Saturday’s not good. We can’t make Saturday. We’ve got other plans we can’t cancel.”

“That’s all right,” I said. “I understand.”

“I wish you’d have told us earlier.”

“No problem. I didn’t expect you’d be able to make it.”

“What kind of dork,” Britney wondered, “announces his wedding just three days before the ceremony?”

“Go easy,” my father advised her.

Her psychological engine didn’t have a go-easy gear. “Well, damn it, he’s such a freak.”

“That’s really not helpful,” my father admonished her, but in a honeyed tone.

“Well, it’s true,” she insisted. “Like we haven’t talked about it maybe three dozen times. He doesn’t have a car, he lives in a garage —”

“Above a garage,” I corrected.

“—he wears the same thing every day, he’s friends with every loser geek in town, he’s a wannabe cop like a water boy hanging around a football team, and he’s just a major freak—”

“You won’t get an argument from me,” I said.

“—such a major freak, the way he comes in here on some shit or other, talking about weddings and ‘employment-related fork wounds.’ Give me a break.”

“I’m a freak,” I said sincerely. “I acknowledge it, accept it. There’s no reason to argue. Peace.”

My father couldn't quite fake a convincing note of sincerity when he said, "Don't say that. You're not a freak."

He doesn't know about my supernatural gift. At the age of seven, when my previously weak and inconstant sixth sense grew in power and reliability, I didn't go to him for counsel.

I hid my difference from him in part because I expected him to harass me into picking winning lottery numbers, which I can't do. I figured he'd parade me before the media, parlay my gift into a TV show, or even sell shares in me to speculators willing to finance an infomercial and a psychic-by-the-minute 900 number.

Getting off the stool, I said, "I think now maybe I know why I came here."

As I started toward the kitchen door, my father followed me. "I really wish you'd picked another Saturday."

Turning to face him, I said, "I think I came here because I was afraid to go to my mother."

Britney stepped behind my father, pressing her nearly naked body against him. She put her arms around him, hands flat on his chest. He made no attempt to pull away from her.

"There's something I'm blocking on," I said, more to myself than to either of them. "Something I desperately need to know...or need to do. And somehow, some way, it's related to Mother. Somehow she has the answer."

"Answers?" he said incredulously. "You know perfectly well that your mother's about the last place to find answers."

Smiling wickedly at me over my father's left shoulder, Britney slid her hands slowly up and down his muscled chest and drum-flat belly.

"Sit down," my father said. "I'll pour you another coffee. If you have a problem you need to talk about, then let's talk."

Britney's right hand moved low on his belly, fingertips teasing under the waistband of his hip-slung shorts.

He wanted me to see the desire that he inspired in this lush young woman. He had a weak man's pride in his status as a stud, and this pride was so fierce that it filled his mind, leaving him quite incapable of recognizing his son's humiliation.

“Yesterday was the anniversary of Gladys Presley’s death,” I said. “Her son wept uncontrollably for days after losing her, and he grieved openly for a year.”

A faint frown made the shallowest of furrows in my father’s Botoxed forehead, but Britney was too engrossed in her game to be listening to me with full attention. Her eyes glittered with what might have been mockery or triumph as her right hand slowly slipped deeper in his khaki shorts.

“He loved his dad, too. Tomorrow is the anniversary of Elvis’s own death. I think I’ll try to look him up and tell him how lucky he was from the very day he was born.”

I walked out of the kitchen, out of the house.

He didn’t come after me. I hadn’t expected that he would.

CHAPTER 52

MY MOTHER LIVES IN A LOVELY VICTORIAN house in the historical district of Pico Mundo. My father had inherited it from his parents.

In the divorce, she received this gracious residence, its contents, and substantial alimony with a cost-of-living adjustment. Because she has never remarried and most likely never will, her alimony will be a lifetime benefit.

Generosity is not my father's first or second—or last—impulse. He settled a comfortable lifestyle on her solely because he feared her. Although he resented having to share his monthly income from the trust, he didn't have the courage even to negotiate with her through attorneys. She received pretty much everything that she demanded.

He paid for his safety and for a new chance at happiness (as he defines it). And he left me behind when I was one year old.

Before I rang the doorbell, I brushed my hand across the porch swing to confirm that it was clean. She could sit on the swing, and I would sit on the porch railing while we talked.

We meet always in the open air. I had promised myself that I would never enter that house again, even if I should outlive her.

After I'd rung the bell twice without a response, I went around the house to the backyard.

The property is deep. A pair of immense California live oaks stand immediately behind the house, together casting shade that is all but

complete. Farther toward the back of the lot, sun falls unfiltered, allowing a rose garden.

My mother was at work among the roses. Like a lady of another era, she wore a yellow sundress and a matching sunbonnet.

Although the wide brim of the hat shaded her face, I could see that her exceptional beauty had not been tarnished during the four months since I last visited her.

She had married my father when she was nineteen and he was twenty-four. She is forty now, but she might pass for thirty.

Photographs taken on her wedding day reveal a nineteen-year-old who looked sixteen, breathtakingly lovely, shockingly tender to be a bride. None of my father's subsequent conquests have matched her beauty.

Even now, when she is forty, if she were in a room with Britney, she in her sundress and Britney in that thong bikini, most men would be drawn to her first. And if she were in a mood to rule the moment, she would enchant them such that they would think she was the only woman among them.

I drew near to her before she realized that she was no longer alone. She raised her attention from the flowers, stood taller, and for a moment blinked at me as though I were a heat mirage.

Then: "Odd, you sweet boy, you must have been a cat in another life, to sneak across all that yard."

I could summon only the ghost of a smile. "Hello, Mom. You look wonderful."

She requires compliments; but in fact she never looks less than wonderful.

If she had been a stranger, I might have found her to be even lovelier. For me, our shared history diminishes her radiance.

"Come here, sweetie, look at these fabulous blooms."

I entered the gallery of roses, where a carpet of decomposed granite held down the dust and crunched underfoot.

Some flowers offered sun-pricked petals of blood in bursting sprays. Others were bowls of orange fire, bright cups of yellow onyx brimming with summer sunshine. Pink, purple, peach—the garden was perpetually decorated for a party.

My mother kissed me on the cheek. Her lips were not cold, as I always expect them to be.

Naming the variety, she said, “This is the John F. Kennedy rose. Isn’t it exquisite?”

With one hand, she gently lifted a mature bloom so heavy that its head was bowed on its bent stem.

As Mojave-white as sun-bleached bone, with a faint undertone of green, these large petals weren’t delicate but remarkably thick and smooth.

“They look as if they’re molded from wax,” I said.

“Exactly. They’re perfection, aren’t they, dear? I love all my roses, but these more than any other.”

Not merely because this rose was her favorite, I liked it *less* than the others. Its perfection struck me as artificial. The sensuous folds of its labial petals promised mystery and satisfaction in its hidden center, but this seemed to be a false promise, for its wintry whiteness and waxy rigidity—and lack of fragrance—suggested neither purity nor passion, but death.

“This one’s for you,” she said, withdrawing a small pair of rose snips from a pocket of her sundress.

“No, don’t cut it. Let it grow. It’ll be wasted on me.”

“Nonsense. You must give it to that girl of yours. If properly presented, a single rose can express a suitor’s feelings more clearly than a bouquet.”

She snipped off eight inches of stem with the bloom.

I held the flower not far below its receptacle, pinching the stem with thumb and forefinger, between the highest pair of thorns.

Glancing at my wristwatch, I saw that the lulling sun and the perfumed flowers only made time *seem* to pass lazily, when in fact it raced away. Robertson’s kill buddy might even now be driving to his rendezvous with infamy.

Moving along the rosarium with a queenly grace and a smile of royal beneficence, admiring the nodding heads of her colorful subjects, my mother said, “I’m so glad you came to visit, dear. What is the occasion?”

At her side yet half a step behind her, I said, “I don’t know exactly. I’ve got this problem—”

“We allow no problems here,” she said in a tone of gentle remonstrance. “From the front walk to the back fence, this house and its grounds are a worry-free zone.”

Aware of the risks, I had nonetheless led us into dangerous territory. The decomposed granite under my feet might as well have been sucking quicksand.

I didn’t know how else to proceed. I didn’t have time to play our game by her rules.

“There’s something I need to remember or something I should do,” I told her, “but I’m blocked on it. Intuition brought me here because...I think somehow you can help me figure out what I’ve overlooked.”

To her, my words could have been barely more comprehensible than gibberish. Like my father, she knows nothing of my supernatural gift.

As a young child, I had realized that if I complicated her life with the truth of my condition, the strain of this knowledge would be the death of her. Or the death of me.

Always, she has sought a life utterly without stress, without contention. She acknowledges no duty to another, no responsibility for anyone but herself.

She would never call this selfishness. To her it’s self-defense, for she finds the world enormously more demanding than she is able to tolerate.

If she fully embraced life with all its conflicts, she would suffer a breakdown. Consequently, she manages the world with all the cold calculation of a ruthless autocrat, and preserves her precarious sanity by spinning around herself a cocoon of indifference.

“Maybe if we could just talk for a while,” I said. “Maybe then I could figure out why I came here, why I thought you could help me.”

Her mood can shift in an instant. The lady of the roses was too frail to handle this challenge, and that sunny persona retreated to make way for an angry goddess.

My mother regarded me with pinched eyes, her lips compressed and bloodless, as if with only a fierce look she could send me away.

In ordinary circumstances, that look alone would indeed have dispatched me.

A sun of nuclear ferocity rose toward its apex, however, rapidly bringing us nearer to the hour of the gun. I dared not return to the hot streets of Pico Mundo without a name or a purpose that would focus my psychic magnetism.

When she realized that I would not immediately leave her to the comfort of her roses, she spoke in a voice as cold and brittle as ice: “He was shot in the head, you know.”

This statement mystified me, yet it seemed to have an uncanny connection to the approaching atrocity that I hoped to prevent.

“Who?” I asked.

“John F. Kennedy.” She indicated the namesake rose. “They shot him in the head and blew his brains out.”

“Mother,” I said, though I seldom use that word in conversation with her, “this is different. You’ve got to help me this time. People will die if you don’t.”

Perhaps that was the worst thing that I could have said. She didn’t possess the emotional capacity to assume responsibility for the lives of others.

She seized the rose that she had cut for me, gripped it by the bloom and tore it out of my hand.

Because I failed to release the rose quickly enough, the stem ripped between my fingers, and a thorn pierced the pad of my thumb, broke off in the flesh.

She crushed the bloom and threw it on the ground. She turned away from me and strode toward the house.

I would not relent. I caught up with her, moved at her side, pleading for a few minutes of conversation that might clarify my thoughts and help me understand why I had come here, of all places, at this mortal hour.

She hurried, and I hurried with her. By the time she reached the steps to the back porch, she had broken into a run, the skirt of her

sundress rustling like wings, one hand on her bonnet to hold it on her head.

The screen door slammed behind her as she disappeared into the house. I stopped on the porch, reluctant to go farther.

Although I regretted the need to harass her, I felt harassed myself, and desperate.

Calling to her through the screen, I said, "I'm not going away. I can't this time. I have nowhere to go."

She didn't answer me. Beyond the screen door, a curtained kitchen lay in shadows, too still to be harboring my tormented mother. She'd gone deeper into the house.

"I'll be here on the porch," I shouted. "I'll be waiting right here. All day if I have to."

Heart hammering, I sat on the porch floor, my feet on the top step, facing away from the kitchen door.

Later, I would realize that I must have come to her house with the subconscious intention of triggering precisely this response and driving her quickly to her ultimate defense against responsibility. The gun.

At that moment, however, confusion was my companion, and clarity seemed far beyond my reach.

CHAPTER 53

THE SHANK OF THE THORN PROTRUDED FROM my thumb. I plucked it free, but still the bleeding puncture burned as if contaminated by an acid.

To a shameful degree, sitting there on my mother's porch steps, I felt sorry for myself, as though it had been not a single thorn but a crown's worth.

As a child, when I had a toothache, I could expect no maternal pampering. My mother always called my father or a neighbor to take me to the dentist, while she retreated to her bedroom and locked her door. She sought refuge there for a day or two, until she felt certain I would have no lingering complaint that she might need to address.

The slightest fever or sore throat that troubled me was a crisis with which she could not deal. At seven, afflicted by appendicitis, I collapsed at school and was rushed from there to the hospital; had my condition deteriorated at home, she might have left me to die in my room, while she occupied herself with the soothing books and the music and the other genteel interests with which she determinedly fashioned her private *perfecto mundo*, her "perfect world."

My emotional needs, my fears and joys, my doubts and hopes, my miseries and anxieties were mine to explore or resolve without her counsel or sympathy. We spoke only of those things that did not disturb her or make her feel obliged to offer guidance.

For sixteen years we shared a house as though we lived not in the same world but in parallel dimensions that rarely intersected. The chief characteristics of my childhood were an aching loneliness and the daily struggle to avoid a bleakness of spirit that unrelieved loneliness can foment.

On those grim occasions when events had forced our parallel worlds to intersect in crises that my mother could not tolerate and from which she could not easily withdraw, she reliably resorted to the same instrument of control. The gun. The terror of those dark encounters and the subsequent guilt that racked me made loneliness preferable to any contact that distressed her.

Now, pressing thumb and forefinger tight together to stop the bleeding, I heard the twang of the spring on the screen door.

I couldn't bear to turn and look at her. The old ritual would play out soon enough.

Behind me, she said, "Just go."

Gazing into the complexity of shadows cast by the oaks, to the bright rose garden beyond, I said, "I can't. Not this time."

I checked my watch—11:32. My tension could not have wound any tighter, minute by minute, if this had been a bomb clock on my wrist.

Her voice had grown flat and strained under the weight of the burden that I'd placed upon her, the burden of simple human kindness and caring, which she could not carry. "I won't put up with this."

"I know. But there's something...I'm not sure what...something you can do to help me."

She sat beside me at the head of the porch steps. She held the pistol in both hands, aimed for the moment at the oak-shaded yard.

She engaged in no fakery. The pistol was loaded.

"I won't live this way," she said. "I won't. I can't. People always wanting things, sucking away my blood. All of you—wanting, wanting, greedy, insatiable. Your need...it's like a suit of iron to me, the weight, like being buried alive."

Not in years—perhaps never—had I pressed her as hard as I did on that fateful Wednesday: "The crazy thing is, Mother, after more

than twenty years of this crap, down at the bottom of my heart, where it ought to be the darkest, I think there's still this spark of love for you. It may be pity, I'm not sure, but it hurts enough to be love."

She doesn't want love from me or anyone. She doesn't have it to give in return. She doesn't believe in love. She is *afraid* to believe in it and the demands that come with it. She wants only undemanding congeniality, only relationships that require less than lip service to be sustained. Her perfect world has a population of one, and if she does not love herself, she has at least the tenderest affection for herself and craves her own company when she must be with others.

My uncertain declaration of love inspired her to turn the gun upon herself. She pressed the muzzle against her throat, angling it slightly toward her chin, the better to blow out her brains.

With hard words and cold indifference, she can turn away anyone she chooses, but sometimes those weapons have not been sufficiently effective in our turbulent relationship. Even though she doesn't feel it, she recognizes the existence of a special bond between mother and child, and she knows that sometimes it won't be broken by any but the cruelest measures.

"You want to pull the trigger for me?" she asked.

As I always do, I looked away. As if I had inhaled the shade of the oaks along with the air, as if my lungs passed it into my blood, I felt a cold shadow arise in the chambers of my heart.

As she always does when I avert my eyes, she said, "Look at me, *look at me*, or I'll gut-shoot myself and die slow and screaming right here in front of you."

Sickened, trembling, I gave her the attention that she wanted.

"You might as well pull the trigger yourself, you little shit. It's no different than making me pull it."

I couldn't count—and didn't care to remember—how often I had heard this challenge before.

My mother is insane. Psychologists might use an array of more specific and less judgmental terms, but in the *Dictionary of Odd*, her behavior is the definition of insanity.

I have been told that she wasn't always like this. As a child, she had been sweet, playful, affectionate.

The terrible change occurred when she was sixteen. She began to experience sudden mood swings. The sweetness was supplanted by an unrelenting, simmering anger that she could best control when she was alone.

Therapy and a series of medications failed to restore her former good nature. When, at eighteen, she rejected further treatment, no one insisted that she continue with psychotherapy or drugs, because at that time she hadn't been as dysfunctional, as solipsistic, and as threatening as she became by her early twenties.

When my father met her, she was just moody enough and dangerous enough to infatuate him. As she grew worse, he bailed.

She has never been institutionalized because her self-control is excellent when she's not being challenged to interact with others beyond her capacity. She limits all threats of violence to suicide and occasionally to me, presenting a charming or at least rational face to the world.

Because she has a comfortable income without the need to work and because she prefers life as a recluse, her true condition is not widely recognized in Pico Mundo.

Her exceptional beauty also helps her to keep her secrets. Most people tend to think the best of those who are blessed with beauty; we have difficulty imagining that physical perfection can conceal twisted emotions or a damaged mind.

Her voice grew raw and more confrontational: "I curse the night I let your idiot father squirt you into me."

This didn't shock me. I'd heard it before, and worse.

She said, "I should've had you scraped out of me and thrown in the garbage. But what would I have gotten from the divorce then? You were the ticket."

When I look at my mother in this condition, I don't see hatred in her, but anguish and desperation and even terror. I can't imagine the pain and the horror of being her.

I take solace only in the knowledge that when she is alone, when she is not challenged to give anything of herself, she is content if not

happy. I want her to be at least content.

She said, “Either stop sucking my blood or pull the trigger, you little shit.”

One of my most vivid early memories is of a rainy night in January when I was five years old and suffering with influenza. When not coughing, I cried for attention and relief, and my mother was unable to find a corner of the house in which she could entirely escape the sound of my misery.

She came to my room and stretched out beside me on the bed, as any mother might lie down to comfort a stricken child, but she came with the gun. Her threats to kill herself always earned my silence, my obedience, my grant of absolution from her parental obligations.

That night, I swallowed my misery as best I could and stifled my tears, but I couldn't wish away my sore and inflamed throat. To her, my coughing was a demand for mothering, and its persistence brought her to an emotional precipice.

When the threat of suicide didn't silence my cough, she put the muzzle of the gun to my right eye. She encouraged me to try to see the shiny point of the bullet deep in that narrow dark passage.

We were a long time there together, with the rain beating on my bedroom windows. I have known much terror since, but none as pure as what I knew that night.

From the perspective of a twenty-year-old, I don't believe that she would have killed me then or that she ever will. Were she to harm me—or anyone—she would doom herself to exactly the interaction with other people that she most dreads. She knows that they would want answers and explanations from her. They would want truth and remorse and justice. They would want far too much, and they would never stop wanting.

I didn't know if here on the porch steps she would turn the gun on me again, and I didn't know exactly how I would react if she did. I had come seeking a confrontation that would enlighten me, though I didn't understand what it needed to be or what I could learn from it that would help me to find Robertson's collaborator.

Then she lowered the gun from her throat to her left breast, as she always does, for the symbolism of a bullet through the brain will not

as powerfully affect any mother's son as will the symbolism of a shot through the heart.

“If you won't leave me alone, if you won't stop forever sucking and *sucking* on me, draining me like a leech, then for God's sake pull the trigger, give me some peace.”

Into my mind's eye came the wound in Robertson's chest, as it had plagued me for nearly twelve hours.

I tried to drown that insistent image in the swamp of memory from which it had risen. It is a deep swamp, filled with much that stubbornly will not remain submerged.

Suddenly I realized that *this* was why I had come here: to force my mother to enact the hateful ritual of threatened suicide that was at the core of our relationship, to be confronted with the sight of a pistol pressed to her breast, to turn away as I always do, to hear her *command* my attention...and then, sickened and trembling, to find the nerve to look.

The previous night, in my bathroom, I hadn't been strong enough to examine Robertson's chest wound.

At the time, I'd sensed that something was strange about it, that something might be learned from it. Yet, nauseated, I had averted my eyes and rebuttoned his shirt.

Thrusting the pistol toward me, grip-first, my mother angrily insisted, “Come on, you ungrateful shit, take it, take it, shoot me and get it over with *or leave me alone!*”

Eleven-thirty-five, according to my wristwatch.

Her voice had grown as vicious and demented as ever it gets: “I dreamed and dreamed that you would be born dead.”

Shakily, I rose to my feet and carefully descended the porch steps.

Behind me, she wielded the knife of alienation as only she can cut with it: “The whole time I carried you, I thought you were dead inside me, dead and rotting.”

The sun, nurturing mother of the earth, poured a scalding milk upon the day, boiling some of the blue from the sky and leaving the heavens faded. Even the oak shadows now throbbed with heat, and as I walked away from my mother, I was so hot with shame that I

would not have been surprised if the grass had burst into fire under my feet.

“Dead inside me,” she repeated. “Month after unending month, I felt your rotting fetus festering in my belly, spreading poison through my body.”

At the corner of the house I stopped, turned, and looked at her for what I suspected might be the last time.

She had descended the steps but had not followed me. Her right arm hung slackly at her side, the gun aimed at the ground.

I had not asked to be born. Only to be loved.

“I have nothing to give,” she said. “Do you hear me? Nothing, nothing. You poisoned me, you filled me with pus and dead-baby rot, and I’m ruined now.”

Turning my back on her for what felt like forever, I hurried along the side of the house toward the street.

Given my heritage and the ordeal of my childhood, I sometimes wonder why I myself am not insane. Maybe I am.

CHAPTER 54

DRIVING FASTER THAN THE LAW ALLOWED TO the outskirts of Pico Mundo, I tried but failed to banish from my mind all thoughts of my mother's mother, Granny Sugars.

My mother and my grandmother exist in widely separated kingdoms of my mind, in sovereign nations of memory that have no trade with each other. Because I loved Pearl Sugars, I had always been loath to think of her in context with her demented daughter.

Considering them together raised terrible questions to which I had long resisted seeking answers.

Pearl Sugars knew that her daughter was mentally unstable, if not unbalanced, and that she had gone off medication at eighteen. She must have known, as well, that pregnancy and the responsibility of child-rearing would stress my fragile mother to the breaking point.

Yet she did not interfere on my behalf.

For one thing, she feared her daughter. I had seen evidence of this on numerous occasions. My mother's abrupt mood swings and hot temper cowed my grandmother even though she was not intimidated by anyone else and would not hesitate to take a swing at a threatening man twice her size.

Besides, Pearl Sugars liked her rootless life too much to settle down and raise a grandchild. Wanderlust, the lure of rich card games in fabled cities—Las Vegas, Reno, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Dallas, San Antonio, New Orleans, Memphis—a need for adventure

and excitement kept her away from Pico Mundo more than half the year.

In her defense, Granny Sugars could not have imagined either the intensity or the relentless nature of my mother's cruelty to me. She didn't know about the gun and the threats that shaped my childhood.

As I write this, no one knows except me and my mother. Although Stormy has been told all my other secrets, I withheld this one from even her. Only when Little Ozzie reads this manuscript, which I have written at his insistence, will I have shared entirely what my mother is to me and what I am to her.

Guilt and shame have, until now, kept me silent on this issue. I am old enough, even if just twenty, to know that I have no logical reason to feel either guilt or shame, that I was the victim, not the victimizer. Yet I've been so long marinated in both emotions that they will forever flavor me.

When I give this script to Ozzie, I will burn with humiliation. After he has read it, I will cover my face, abashed, when he speaks of these portions of the narrative.

Infected minds to their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.

Shakespeare. *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 1.

That literary allusion is included here not merely to please you, Ozzie. There's bitter truth in it that resonates with me. My mother had infected my mind with such a potent virus that I had not been able to confess my shameful victimization even to my pillow, but carried it into sleep each night, unpurged.

As for Granny Sugars: I must now wonder whether her peripatetic lifestyle and her frequent absences, combined with her gambling and restless nature, contributed materially to my mother's psychological problems.

Worse, I cannot avoid considering that my mother's sickness might not be the result of inadequate nurturing, but might entirely be the consequence of genetics. Perhaps Pearl Sugars suffered from a milder form of the same psychosis, which expressed itself in more appealing ways than did my mother's.

Mother's hermetic impulse might have been an inversion of my grandmother's wanderlust. My mother's need for financial security, won at the expense of a pregnancy that repulsed her, might be my grandmother's gambling fever turned inside out.

This would suggest that much—though not all—of what I loved about Granny Sugars was but a different facet of the same mental condition that made my mother such a terror. This disturbs me for reasons I can understand but also for reasons that I suspect will not be clear to me until I've lived another twenty years, if I do.

When I was sixteen, Pearl Sugars asked me to come on the road with her. By then, I had become what I am: a seer of the dead with limitations, with responsibilities that I must fulfill. I had no choice but to decline her offer. If circumstances had allowed me to travel with her from game to game, adventure to adventure, the stresses of daily life and constant contact might have revealed a different and less appealing woman from the one I thought I knew.

I must believe that Granny Sugars had the capacity for genuine love that my mother lacks, and must believe that she did indeed love me. If these two things are not true, then my childhood will have been an unrelieved wasteland.

Having failed to banish these troubling thoughts on the drive out of Pico Mundo, I arrived at the Church of the Whispering Comet in a mood that matched the ambience of dead palm trees, sun-blasted landscape, and abandoned buildings on the slide to ruin.

I parked in front of the Quonset hut where the three coyotes had encircled me. They weren't in evidence.

They are generally night hunters. In the noonday heat, they shelter in cool dark dens.

The dead prostitute, charmer of coyotes, was not to be seen, either. I hoped that she had found her way out of this world, but I doubted that my fumbling counsel and platitudes had convinced her to move on.

From among the items in the bottom of the plastic shopping bag that served as my suitcase, I withdrew the flashlight, the scissors, and the package of foil-wrapped moist towelettes.

In my apartment, when I packed the bag, the towelettes had seemed to be a peculiar inclusion, the scissors even more peculiar. Yet subconsciously I must have known exactly why I would need them.

We are not strangers to ourselves; we only try to be.

When I got out of the car, the fierce heat of the Mojave was matched by its stillness, a nearly perfect silence found perhaps nowhere else but in a dioramic snow scene sealed in Lucite.

My watch revealed that time had not stood still—11:57.

Two desiccated brown phoenix palms cast frond shadows across the dusty ground in front of the Quonset hut, as if paving the way not for me but for an overdue messiah. I had not returned to raise the dead, only to examine him.

When I stepped inside, I felt as if I had cast my lot with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the furnace of Nebuchadnezzar, though this was a heat, laced with an unspeakable scent, from which even an angel could not spare me.

Alkaline-white desert light seared through the portal-style windows, but they were so small and set so wide apart that I still needed the flashlight.

I followed the littered hallway to the fourth door. I went into the pink room, once a den of profitable fornication, now a slow-cook crematorium.

CHAPTER 55

NO CURIOUS PEOPLE OR CARRION EATERS HAD been here in my absence. The corpse lay where I had left it, one end of the shroud open, one shod foot exposed, otherwise wrapped in the white bedsheet.

The hot night and the blistering morning had facilitated and accelerated decomposition. The stench was much worse here than in the rest of the hut.

The suffocating heat and the stink had the power of two quick punches to the gut. I backed quickly out of the room, into the hall, simultaneously gasping for a cleaner breath and struggling to repress the urge to vomit.

Although I hadn't brought the foil-sealed towelettes for this purpose, I ripped open one of them and tore two strips from it. The moistened paper had a lemony fragrance. I rolled the saturated strips into dripping wads and plugged my nostrils with them.

Breathing through my mouth, I couldn't smell the decomposing corpse. When I reentered the room, I gagged again, anyway.

I could have cut the shoelace that secured the top of the shroud—the one at the foot had broken the previous night—and rolled the body out of its wrapping. The thought of the dead man tumbling across the floor, as if animated again, convinced me to approach the problem with a different solution.

Reluctantly, I knelt at the head of the corpse. I propped the flashlight against it in such a way as to best illuminate my work.

I snipped the shoelace and tossed it aside. The scissors were sharp enough to trim through all three layers of rolled sheeting at once. I cut with patience and care, repulsed by the possibility of gouging the dead man.

As the fabric fell away to both sides of the body, the face came into view first. I realized too late that if I had started from the bottom, I would have had to open the shroud only as far as the neck, to see his wound, and could have avoided this hideous sight.

Time and the ungodly heat had done their nasty work. The face—upside down to me—was bloated, darker than it had been when last I had seen it, and marbled with green. The mouth had sagged open. Thin cataracts of milky fluid had formed over both eyes, although I could still discern the delineation between the whites and irises.

As I reached across the dead man's face to cut the shroud away from his chest, he licked my wrist.

I cried out in shock and disgust, reared back, and dropped the scissors.

From the cadaver's sagging mouth exploded a squirming black mass, a creature so strange in this context that I didn't realize what it must be until it fully extracted itself. On Robertson's dead face, the thing reared up on its four back legs and raked the air with its forelegs. Tarantula.

Moving too quickly to give it a chance to bite, I backhanded the spider. It tumbled across the floor, sprang to its feet, and scurried into a far corner.

When I picked up the fallen scissors, my hand shook so badly that I gave the air a vigorous trimming before I was able to steady myself.

Concerned that more critters might have crawled into the bottom of the shroud to explore the fragrant contents, I resumed my work on the sheet with nervous care. I exposed the body to the waist without encountering another eight-legged forager.

In my startled reaction to the tarantula, I had blown the plug out of my right nostril. When the residue of lemony fluid evaporated, I could smell the body again, though not at full strength because I continued to breathe through my mouth.

Glancing toward the corner into which the spider had retreated, I discovered that it wasn't there anymore.

I searched anxiously for a moment. Then, in spite of the poor light, I saw the hairy beast just to the left of the corner, three feet off the floor, slowly ascending the pink wall.

Too shaky and too pressed for time to unbutton the dead man's shirt as I'd done in my apartment, I tore it open, popping buttons. One of them snapped off my face, and the others bounced across the floor.

When I pressed from my mind the inhibiting image of my mother with a pistol to her breast, I was able to focus the flashlight on the wound. Steeling myself to examine it closely, I saw why it had seemed strange to me.

I propped the flashlight against the body again and tore open three foil-wrapped towelettes. I sandwiched them into one thick pad and gently swabbed away the obscuring custardy ooze that had seeped from the wound.

The bullet had pierced a tattoo on Robertson's chest, directly over his heart. This black rectangle was the same size and shape as the meditation card that I had found in his wallet. In the center of the rectangle were three red hieroglyphs.

Bleary-eyed, nervous, strung out on caffeine, I couldn't quickly make sense of the design when it was upside down.

As I shifted from behind Robertson's head to his side, those dead eyes seemed to move, tracking me under the semiopaque, milky cataracts.

When I checked on the tarantula, it had vanished from the farther wall. With the flashlight, I located it on the ceiling, working its way toward me. It froze in the direct light.

I turned the beam on the tattoo and discovered that the three red hieroglyphs were actually three letters of the alphabet in a script with flourishes. *F...O...*The third had been partially torn away by the bullet, but I was certain that it had been an *L*.

FOL. Not a word. An acronym. Thanks to Shamus Cocobolo, I knew what it meant: *Father of Lies*.

Robertson had worn the name of his dark lord over his heart.

Three letters: *FOL*. Three others, encountered elsewhere, and recently...

Suddenly I could see Officer Simon Varner vividly in memory: behind the wheel of the department cruiser in the parking lot at the bowling alley, leaning toward the open window, his face sweet enough to qualify him as the host of a children's TV program, his heavy-lidded eyes like those of a sleepy bear, his burly forearm resting on the driver's door, the "gang tattoo" that he claimed embarrassed him. Nothing as elaborate as Robertson's tattoo, no similarity of style whatsoever. No black rectangle inlaid with fancy red script. Just another acronym in black block letters: *D...* something. Maybe *DOP*.

Did Officer Simon Varner, of the Pico Mundo Police Department, wear the name of this same master on his left arm?

If Robertson's tattoo marked him with one of the devil's many names, then Simon Varner's put him in the same club.

Names for the devil raced through my mind: Satan, Lucifer, Old Scratch, Beelzebub, Father of Evil, His Satanic Majesty, Apollyon, Belial....

I couldn't think of the words that would explain the acronym on Varner's arm, but I had no doubt that I had identified Robertson's kill buddy.

At the bowling alley, there had been no bodachs around Varner as there had been, at times, around Robertson. If I'd seen him with bodachs in attendance, I might have realized what a monster he was.

Because they might take fingerprints, I hurriedly gathered the scraps of foil that had wrapped the towelettes and shoved them in a pocket of my jeans. I grabbed the scissors, stood, swept the ceiling with the flashlight, and found the tarantula directly overhead.

Tarantulas are timid. They do not stalk human beings.

I sprinted from the room, heard the spider drop to the floor with a soft but solid fleshy sound, slammed the door between us, and wiped prints off the knob with the tail of my T-shirt, then off the front door, too, as I left.

Because tarantulas are timid and because I believe there are no coincidences, I raced to the Chevy, threw the scissors and flashlight in the shopping bag, started the engine, and stomped the accelerator. I exited the grounds of the Church of the Whispering Comet with a shriek of tortured rubber, kicking up a spray of sand and crumbled blacktop, eager to reach the state highway before being surrounded by legions of tarantulas, an army of coyotes, and a slithering swarm of rattlesnakes all functioning in concert.

CHAPTER 56

NOT DOP. POD. PRINCE OF DARKNESS. THE source of Simon Varner's tattooed acronym, POD, occurred to me as I crossed the town line, returning to Pico Mundo.

Costumed satanists performing weird rituals with an obscenely decorated chalice would be regarded by most people as being less well intentioned but also markedly sillier than the elaborately furrhatted members of a men's lodge called the Fraternal Order of Hedgehogs. Men who dress up to look *bad* are as suspect of being nerds as are those men with weed-whacker haircuts, tortoiseshell eyeglasses, pants worn five inches above the navel and three inches above the shoes, and bumper stickers that say JAR JAR BINKS RULES.

If I would have been inclined to dismiss them as nerds *playing* at evil, that inclination had not held past the moment when I found the Rubbermaid-boxed souvenirs in the freezer.

Now that I suspected the identity of Robertson's collaborator, I trusted my supernatural gift to lead me to him. Considering that in the grip of psychic magnetism—Stormy sometimes shortens it to PM syndrome or PMS—I occasionally make abrupt turns, I drove with as much speed as seemed prudent.

Under the influence of PMS, I zone out to some extent, and try to think only about the object of my interest—in this case, Varner—rather than about where I am at any moment or about where I might be going. I'll know where I'm going when I get there.

In this state, my conscious mind relaxes, and random thoughts pop into it almost as often as I make seemingly random turns in search of my quarry. This time, one of those thoughts involved my mother's older sister, Cymry, whom I have never met.

According to my mother, Cymry is married to a Czechoslovakian whose first name is Dobb. My father says Cymry has never married.

Neither of my parents has a history of reliability. In this case, however, I suspect that my father is telling the truth and that I have no uncle of either Czechoslovakian or any other heritage.

My father says that Cymry is a freak, but he will say no more. His assertion infuriates my mother, who denies Cymry's freakhood and calls her a gift from God.

This is an odd statement on my mother's part, considering that she lives her life as if with the firm conviction that God does not exist.

The first time that I asked Granny Sugars about her mysterious firstborn, she dissolved in tears. I had never seen her cry before. The next day, still red-eyed, she had hit the road again in pursuit of faraway poker games.

The second time I asked her about Cymry, she became angry with me for pursuing the issue. I had never before seen her angry. Then she became cold and distant. She had never previously been that way with me, and her behavior reminded me too much of my mother.

Thereafter, I never asked about Cymry.

I suspect that in an institution somewhere, managed with drugs and humane restraints, I have an aunt who is at least a little like me. I suspect that as a child she didn't conceal her special gift as I did.

This is probably why Granny Sugars, with all her poker winnings, left no estate of which I'm aware. I think she funded a trust to pay for Cymry's care.

Over the years, my father has let slip certain clues leading me to speculate that Cymry's sixth sense, whatever strange talents it may encompass, is accompanied by *physical* mutation. I think she scared people not just because of things that she said but also because of how she looked.

More often than not, a baby born with one mutation will, in fact, have two or more. Ozzie says—and apparently not in his role as a writer of fiction—that one in every eighty-eight thousand babies is born with a sixth finger on one hand, as he was. Hundreds if not thousands of them should be walking the streets of America, yet how many six-fingered hands have you seen on adults? You don't encounter them because most of those babies are born with other and more terrible deformities that cause them to die in early infancy.

Those six-fingered children fortunate enough to be robustly healthy will usually receive surgery if the superfluous digit can be removed without affecting the function of the hand. They walk among us, Little Ozzie says, passing for five-fingered “mundanes.”

I think all this is true, because Ozzie is proud of his sixth finger and enjoys collecting lore on what he calls “the natural-born pickpockets who are members of my superior breed.” He says that his second mutation is his ability to write well and swiftly, turning out enthusiastically received books at a prodigious pace.

I dream of Aunt Cymry from time to time. These are not prophetic dreams. They are full of yearning. And sadness.

Now, at 12:21, *daydreaming* about Cymry yet acutely and nervously aware of precious minutes passing, fully in the PMS zone, I expected to find Officer Simon Varner in the vicinity of either the bowling alley or the multiplex theater where the dog movie would unreel shortly after one o'clock. Instead, I was led unexpectedly to the Green Moon Mall.

What I saw was unusual for a Wednesday in summer: a packed parking lot. The giant banner reminded me that the mall merchants' annual summer sale had begun at ten o'clock this morning and would continue through the weekend.

What a crowd.

CHAPTER 57

A GALAXY OF SUNS BLAZED ON THE WINDSHIELDS of the serried cars and SUVs, a lightquake that shocked my bloodshot eyes and forced me to squint.

Three-story department stores anchored the north and south ends of the mall. Numerous specialty shops occupied the two levels between those leviathans.

PMS drew me to the department store at the north end. I drove around to the back and parked near a wide descending ramp that led to the subterranean loading docks where trucks delivered merchandise.

Three spaces away stood a black-and-white police cruiser. No cop in sight.

If this was Varner's car, he was already in the mall.

My hands shook. The buttons on my cell phone were small. To get it right, I had to key in the number of Burke Bailey's twice.

I intended to tell Stormy to leave work immediately, to get out of the mall by the nearest door, to go quickly to her car and drive away fast, drive anywhere, just *drive*.

As the number was ringing, I hung up. She might not at this moment be destined to cross Varner's path, but if I persuaded her to get the hell out of there, she might cross his sights at the instant that he pulled his gun and opened fire.

Her destiny is to be with me forever. We have the card from the fortune-telling machine as proof. It hangs above her bed. Gypsy

Mummy had given us, for a single quarter, what that other couple couldn't buy at any price.

Logic argued that if I did nothing, she would be safe. If she changed her plans at my urging, I might be thwarting her destiny and mine. Trust in fate.

My responsibility was not to warn off Stormy but to stop Simon Varner before he was ready to put his plan in action, before he killed *anyone*.

There you have your classic easier-said-than-done. He was a cop, and I wasn't. He carried at least one firearm, and I didn't. Taller than me, stronger than me, trained in every possible method to subdue an aggressive citizen, he enjoyed all the advantages—except a sixth sense.

The gun that had killed Robertson was stashed under the driver's seat. I had put it there the previous night, meaning to dispose of it later.

Leaning forward, I fumbled under my seat, found the weapon, and withdrew it. I felt as if I were holding hands with Death.

After more fumbling, I figured out how to eject the magazine. I counted nine rounds. Bright brass. Loaded nearly to capacity. The only round missing was the one that had put a hole in Robertson's heart.

I shoved the magazine back into the pistol. It clicked in place.

My mother's gun has a safety. A red dot is revealed when the safety is switched off.

This piece appeared to have no comparable feature. Perhaps the safety was built into the trigger, requiring a double pull.

No safety on my heart. It was booming.

I felt as though I were holding hands with death, all right—*my* death.

With the pistol in my lap, I picked up the phone and punched in Chief Porter's private cell number, not his police-department line. The keys seemed to be growing smaller, as if this were a phone Alice had gotten from a hookah-smoking caterpillar, but I entered the seven digits correctly on the first try, and pressed SEND.

Karla Porter answered on the third ring. She said that she was still in the ICU waiting room. She'd been allowed to see the chief on three occasions, for five-minute visits.

"He was awake the last time, but very weak. He knew who I was. He smiled for me. But he's not able to talk much, and not coherently. They're keeping him semi-sedated to facilitate healing. I don't think he'll be really talking much before tomorrow."

"But he's going to be all right?" I asked.

"That's what they say. And I'm beginning to believe it."

"I love him," I said, and heard my voice break.

"He knows that, Oddie. He loves you, too. You're a son to him."

"Tell him."

"I will."

"I'll call," I promised.

I pressed END and dropped the phone on the passenger's seat.

The chief could not help me. No one could help me. No sad, dead prostitute to quell the killing frenzy of this coyote. Just me.

Intuition told me not to take the pistol. I slid it under the seat again.

When I switched off the engine and got out of the car, the fiery sun was both a hammer and an anvil, forging the world between itself and its reflection.

Psychic magnetism works whether I'm rolling on wheels or afoot. I was drawn to the delivery ramp. I went down into the coolness of the subterranean loading docks.

CHAPTER 58

WITH A LOW CEILING AND ENDLESS GRAY CONCRETE, the mall-employee underground parking garage and loading dock had the bleak and ominous atmosphere of an ancient tomb deep under Egyptian sands, the tomb of a hated pharaoh whose subjects had buried him on the cheap, without glittering gold vessels or ornamentation of any kind.

The elevated dock ran the length of the immense structure, and big trucks were backed up to it at various points. At the department store, two semis at a time could bypass the dock and pull directly into an enormous receiving room.

This place clattered and hummed with activity as the truck crews off-loaded late-arriving sales merchandise and the harried stockroom employees prepped it for delivery to the sales floors after the close of business.

I passed among racks, carts, carousels, bins, boxes, and drums of merchandise, everything from women's party dresses to culinary gadgets to sporting goods. Perfume, swimwear, gourmet chocolates.

Nobody challenged my right to be there, and when I plucked a hardwood baseball bat out of a drum full of them, no one ordered me to put it back.

Another drum contained hollow aluminum bats. They weren't what I wanted. I preferred a bat with heft. I required a certain balance to the instrument. You can better break an arm with a wooden club, more easily shatter a knee.

Maybe I would need the baseball bat, maybe I wouldn't. The fact that it was *there*—and that PMS brought me to it—seemed to suggest that if I didn't avail myself of it, then I would later regret my decision.

The only extracurricular activity I went out for in high school was baseball. As I wrote earlier, I had the best stats on the team, even though I could only play home games.

I'm not out of practice, either. The Pico Mundo Grille has a team. We play other businesses and civic organizations; we whup ass, year after year.

Repeatedly, loaded forklifts and electric carts announced their approach with soft beeps and musical toots. I stepped out of their way but kept moving, though I had no idea where I was going.

In my mind's eye: Simon Varner. Sweet face. Sleepy eyes. POD on his left forearm. Find the bastard.

A pair of extra-wide double doors swung into a corridor with a bare concrete floor and painted concrete walls. I hesitated, looked right, turned left.

My stomach churned. I needed antacids.

I needed a bigger bat, a bulletproof vest, and backup, too, but I didn't have them, either. I just kept moving.

Doors led to rooms off the right side of the corridor. Most were labeled. BATHROOMS. SHIPPING OFFICE. MAINTENANCE OFFICE.

Seeking Simon Varner. Sweet face. Prince of Darkness. Feel the pull of him, drawing me forward.

I passed two men, a woman, another man. We smiled and nodded. None of them seemed to wonder where the game was, what the score might be, whose team I was on.

Soon I came to a door marked SECURITY. I stopped. This didn't feel right...and yet it did.

When PMS works, I usually *know* that I've arrived. This time I *felt* that I'd arrived. I can't explain the difference, but it was real.

I put my hand on the knob but hesitated.

In my mind, I heard Lysette Rains as she'd spoken to me at the chief's recent barbecue: *I was just a nail technician, and now I'm a certified nail artist.*

For the life of me—and it really might *be* for the life of me, considering that I was about to plunge into a fire of one kind or another—I didn't know why I should recall Lysette at this juncture.

Her voice haunted me again: *It takes a while to realize what a lonely world it is, and when you do...then the future looks kinda scary.*

I took my hand off the knob.

I stepped to one side of the door.

Iron-shod hooves on hard-baked ground could have made no louder thunder than the internal booming of my galloping heart.

My instinct is a winning coach, and when it said *Batter up*, I didn't argue that I wasn't ready for the game. I gripped the bat in both hands, assumed the stance, and said a prayer to Mickey Mantle.

The door opened, and a guy stepped boldly into the corridor. He was dressed in black boots, a lightweight black jumpsuit with hood, a black ski mask, and black gloves.

He carried an assault rifle so big and wicked that it looked as unreal as the weaponry in an early Schwarzenegger movie. From a utility belt hung eight or ten spare magazines.

He looked to his left when he came out of the security room. I stood to his right, but he sensed me at once and in midstep turned his head toward me.

Never one who liked to bunt, I swung hard, high above the strike zone, and hit him in the face.

I would have been surprised if he hadn't gone down cold. I was not surprised.

The corridor was deserted. No one had seen. For the moment.

I needed to handle this as anonymously as possible, to avoid questions later if the chief remained unable to run interference for me.

After rolling the baseball bat into the security room and sliding the assault rifle after it, I grabbed the gunman by the jumpsuit and dragged him in there, too, out of the hallway, and shut the door.

Among overturned office chairs and spilled mugs of coffee, three unarmed security guards lay dead in this bunker. Apparently they had been killed with a silencer-fitted pistol, because the shots had not attracted attention. They looked surprised.

The sight of them tortured me. They were dead because I had been too slow on the uptake.

I know that I'm not responsible for every death I can't prevent. I understand that I can't carry the world on my back, like Atlas. But I *feel* that I should.

Twelve oversize TV monitors, each currently in quartered-screen format, featured forty-eight views provided by cameras positioned throughout the department store. Everywhere I looked, the aisles were busy; the sale had pulled in shoppers from all over Maravilla County.

I knelt beside the gunman and stripped off his ski mask. His nose was broken, bleeding; breath bubbled in the blood. His right eye would probably swell entirely shut. A welt had already begun to form on his forehead.

He wasn't Simon Varner. Before me lay Bern Eckles, the deputy who had been at the barbecue, who had been invited because the chief and Karla Porter had been trying to match him up with Lysette Rains.

CHAPTER 59

BOB ROBERTSON HAD NOT ONE COLLABORATOR but two. Maybe more. They probably called themselves a coven, unless that was only for witches. One more, and they could have a satanic combo, provide their own music for Black Mass, buy group health insurance, get a block discount at Disneyland.

At the chief's barbecue, I'd seen no bodachs around Bern Eckles. Their presence had tipped me to Roberston's nature but not to either of his co-conspirators—which now began to seem intentional. As if they had become aware of my gift. As if they had...manipulated me.

After turning Eckles on his side to ensure that he wouldn't choke on his own blood and saliva, I searched for something to tie his hands and feet.

I didn't expect him to regain consciousness within the next ten minutes. When he finally did come around, he would be crawling and puking and begging for painkillers, in no condition to snatch up the assault rifle and return to his mission.

Nevertheless, I disabled two security-room phones and quickly used their cords to bind his hands behind his back and to shackle his ankles. I yanked the knots tight and didn't worry unduly about inhibiting his circulation.

Eckles and Varner were the newest officers on the Pico Mundo Police Department. They had applied and signed up only a month or two apart.

Smart money would take the proposition that they had known each other before they arrived in Pico Mundo. Varner had been hired first and had paved the way for Eckles.

Robertson had moved to Pico Mundo from San Diego and purchased the house in Camp's End ahead of his two collaborators. If my memory could be trusted, Varner had previously been a police officer in the San Diego area if not in the city itself.

I didn't know in what jurisdiction Bern Eckles served before he had signed up with the PMPD. Greater San Diego would be a better bet than Juneau, Alaska.

The three of them had targeted Pico Mundo for reasons impossible to guess. They had planned long and carefully.

When I had gone to the barbecue, suggesting that a background profile on Bob Robertson might be a good idea, the chief had enlisted Eckles's assistance. At that instant, Robertson had been marked for death.

Indeed, he must have been murdered within half an hour. No doubt Eckles had telephoned Varner from the chief's house, and Varner had pulled the trigger on their mutual friend. Perhaps Simon Varner and Robertson had been together when Varner got Eckles's call.

With Eckles securely tied, I unzipped the front of his jumpsuit far enough to confirm that under it he wore his police uniform.

He had come into the security room in his blues and badge. The guards would have greeted him without suspicion.

Evidently he'd carried the assault rifle and the jumpsuit in a suitcase. A two-suiter lay open and empty on the floor. Samsonite.

The plan had most likely been to go on a shooting spree in the department store and then, as the police arrived, to find a private place to strip out of the jumpsuit and the ski mask. Abandoning the assault rifle, Eckles could mingle with his fellow officers as though responding to the same call that they had received.

The *why* of it wasn't as easy to understand as the *how*.

Some people said that God talked to them. Others heard the devil whispering in their heads. Maybe one of these guys thought Satan had told him to shoot up Green Moon Mall.

Or maybe they were just doing it for fun. A lark. Their religion is tolerant of extreme forms of recreation. Boys will be boys, after all, and sociopathic boys will be sociopathic.

Simon Varner remained on the loose. Maybe he and Eckles had not come to the mall alone. I had no idea how many might be in a coven.

Using one of the working phones, I called 911, reported three murders, and without answering any questions, put the phone down, leaving it off the hook. The police would come, and a SWAT team. Three minutes, four. Maybe five.

That wouldn't be fast enough. Varner would be blasting away at shoppers before they arrived.

The baseball bat hadn't cracked. Good wood.

As effective as the bat had been with Eckles, I couldn't expect to be lucky enough to surprise Varner in the same way. Regardless of my fear of guns, I needed a better weapon than a Louisville Slugger.

On a counter in front of the security monitors lay the pistol that Eckles had used to kill the guards. On inspection, I found that four rounds remained in the ten-shot magazine.

As much as I wanted to avoid looking at them, the dead men on the floor commanded my attention. I hate violence. I hate injustice more. I just want to be a fry cook, but the world demands more from me than eggs and pancakes.

I unscrewed the silencer, tossed it aside. Pulled my T-shirt out of my jeans. Tucked the pistol under my waistband.

Without success, I tried not to think of my mother with the gun under her chin, against her breast. I tried not to remember what the muzzle of that pistol had felt like when she pressed it against my eye and told me to look for the brass of the bullet at the bottom of that narrow bore of darkness.

The T-shirt hid the weapon but not perfectly. Shoppers would be too preoccupied finding bargains and salesclerks would be too busy serving shoppers to notice the bulge.

Cautiously, I opened the door barely wide enough to slip out of the security room, and closed it behind me. A man was walking

away from me, in the direction I needed to go, and I followed him, wishing that he would *hurry*.

He turned right, through the swinging doors to the receiving room, and I ran past elevators reserved for company employees to a door labeled STAIRS. I took them two at a time.

Somewhere ahead, Simon Varner. Sweet face. Sleepy eyes. POD on his left forearm.

At the first floor of the department store, I left the stairs and pushed through a door into a stockroom.

A pretty redhead was busy pulling small boxes off the packed shelves. She said, "Hey," in a friendly way.

"Hey," I said back at her, and I went out of the stockroom onto the sales floor.

The sporting-goods department. Bustling. Men, a few women, a lot of teenagers. The kids were checking out Rollerblades, skateboards.

Beyond the sporting goods were aisles of athletic shoes. Beyond the shoes, men's sportswear.

People, people everywhere. Too many people too tightly bunched. An almost festive atmosphere. So vulnerable.

If I hadn't waylaid him as he came out of the security room, Bern Eckles would have killed ten or twenty by now. Thirty.

Simon Varner. Big guy. Beefy arms. Prince of Darkness. Simon Varner.

Reliably guided by my supernatural gift as any bat is guided by echolocation, I crossed the first floor of the department store, heading toward the exit to the mall promenade.

I didn't expect to see another gunman here. Eckles and Varner would have chosen widely separated killing fields, the better to sow terror and chaos. Besides, they would want to avoid accidentally straying into each other's fire patterns.

Ten steps short of the promenade exit, I saw Viola Peabody, who was supposed to be at her sister's house on Maricopa Lane.

CHAPTER 60

THE BIRTHDAY GIRL, LEVANNA, AND HER PINK-INFATUATED little sister, Nicolina, were not at their mother's side. I scanned the crowd of shoppers, but didn't see the girls.

When I hurried to Viola and seized her by the shoulder from behind, she reacted with a start and dropped her shopping bag.

"What're you doing here?" I demanded.

"Odd! You scared the salt off my crackers."

"Where are the girls?"

"With Sharlene."

"Why aren't *you* with them?"

Picking up the shopping bag, she said, "Hadn't done birthday shopping yet. Got to have a gift. Came here just quick for these Rollerblades."

"Your dream," I reminded her urgently. "This is your *dream*."

Her eyes widened. "But I'm just in and out quick, and I'm not at the movies."

"It's not going to be at the theater. It's happening *here*."

For an instant her breath caught in her throat as terror cocked the hammers of her heart.

"Get out of here," I said. "Get out of here *now*."

She exhaled explosively, looked wildly around as if any shopper might be a killer, or all of them, and she started toward the exit to the promenade.

“No!” I pulled her close to me. People were looking at us. What did it matter? “It’s not safe that way.”

“Where?” she asked.

I turned her around. “Go to the back of this floor, through the athletic shoes, through sporting goods. There’s a stockroom not far from where you bought Rollerblades. Go to the stockroom. Hide there.”

She started away, stopped, looked at me. “Aren’t you coming?”

“No.”

“Where are you going?”

“Into it.”

“Don’t,” she pleaded.

“*Go now!*”

As she moved toward the back of the department store, I hurried out into the mall promenade.

Here at the north end of the Green Moon Mall, the forty-foot waterfall tumbled over a cliff of man-made rocks, feeding the stream that ran the length of the public concourse. As I passed the base of the falls, the rumble and splash sounded uncannily like the roar of a crowd.

Patterns of darkness and light. Darkness and light as in Viola’s dream. The shadows were cast by palm trees that rose alongside the stream.

Looking up into the queen palms, up toward the second floor of the promenade, I saw hundreds upon hundreds of bodachs gathered along the balustrade above, peering down into the open atrium. Pressed one against the other, excited, eager, twitching and swaying, squirming like agitated spiders.

A throng of bargain-hunting shoppers filled the first floor of the promenade, browsing from store to store, unaware of the audience of malevolent spirits that was watching them with such anticipation.

My wonderful gift, my hateful gift, my terrifying gift led me along the promenade, farther south, faster, following the splash and tumble of the stream, in a frantic search for Simon Varner.

Not hundreds of bodachs. Thousands. I’d never seen such a horde as this, never imagined I ever would. They were like a celebratory

Roman mob in the Colosseum, watching with delight as the Christians made unanswered prayers, waiting for the lions, for blood on the sand.

I had wondered why they had vanished from the streets. Here was the answer. Their hour had come.

As I passed a bed-and-bath store, the hard chatter of automatic gunfire erupted from the promenade ahead of me.

The first burst proved brief. For two seconds, three, after it ended, an impossible hush fell across the mall.

Hundreds of shoppers appeared to freeze as one. Although surely the water in the stream continued to move, it seemed to spill along its course without sound. I would not have been surprised if my watch had confirmed a miraculous stoppage of time.

One scream tore the silence, and at once a multitude answered it. The gun replied to the screamers with a longer death rattle than the first.

Recklessly, I pushed southward along the promenade. Progress wasn't easy because the panicked shoppers were running north away from the gunfire. People ricocheted off me, but I stayed on my feet, pressing toward a third burst of gunfire.

CHAPTER 61

I WILL NOT TELL EVERYTHING I SAW. I WILL NOT. Cannot. The dead deserve their dignity. The wounded, their privacy. Their loved ones, a little peace.

More to the point, I know why soldiers, home from war, seldom tell their families about their exploits in more than general terms. We who survive must go on in the names of those who fall, but if we dwell too much on the vivid details of what we've witnessed of man's inhumanity to man, we simply *can't* go on. Perseverance is impossible if we don't permit ourselves to hope.

The panicked throng surged past me, and I found myself among a scattering of victims, all on the ground, dead and wounded, fewer than I expected, but too many. I saw the blond bartender from Green Moon Lanes in her work uniform...and three others. Maybe they had come to the mall for lunch before work.

Whatever I am, I am not superhuman. I bleed. I suffer. This was more than I could handle. This was Malo Suerte Lake times ten.

Cruelty has a human heart...terror the human form divine.

Not Shakespeare. William Blake. Himself a piece of work.

Scores of bodachs had descended from the upper level of the mall. They were crawling among the dead and wounded.

Whether I could handle this or not, I had no choice but to make the effort. If I walked away, I might as well kill myself right here.

The koi pond lay not far ahead. The man-made jungle surrounded it. I saw the bench on which Stormy and I had sat to eat cones of

coconut cherry chocolate chunk.

A man in a black jumpsuit, black ski mask. Big enough to be Simon Varner. Holding an assault rifle apparently modified for full—and illegal—automatic fire.

A few people were hiding among the palm trees, huddled in the koi pond; but most had fled the open promenade for the specialty shops, desperately taking cover there, perhaps hoping to escape by the back doors. Through the windows—jewelry store, gift shop, art gallery, culinary shop—I could see them crowding after one another, still too visible.

In this blood-jaded age that is as violent as video games, the cruel machine language increasingly in common use would refer to this as a target-rich environment.

His back to me, Varner sprayed the fronts of those businesses with bullets. The windows of Burke Bailey's dissolved, cascaded into the shop in a glittering deluge.

We are destined to be together forever. We have a card that says so. We have matching birthmarks.

Sixty feet from the crazy bastard, then fifty feet and closing, I discovered that I was gripping the pistol. I didn't recall drawing it from my waistband.

My gun hand was shaking, so I held it with both hands.

I'd never used a firearm. I hated guns.

You might as well pull the trigger yourself, you little shit.

I'm trying, Mother. I'm trying.

Varner exhausted the assault rifle's extended magazine. Maybe it was already the second magazine. Like Eckles, he carried spares on a utility belt.

From forty feet, I fired a round. Missed.

Alerted by the crack of the shot, he turned toward me and ejected the depleted magazine.

I fired again, missed again. In the movies they never miss from this distance. Unless it's the hero being shot at, in which case they miss from five feet. Simon Varner was no hero. I didn't know what I was doing.

He did. He plucked a fresh magazine from the utility belt. He was practiced, swift, and calm.

With the pistol I had taken from him, Eckles had used six rounds on the security guards. I had expended two. Only two left.

From about thirty feet, I squeezed off a third shot.

Varner took the hit in his left shoulder, but it didn't drop him. He rocked, he recovered, he jammed the fresh magazine into the rifle.

Jittering, thrashing with excitement, scores of bodachs swarmed around me, around Varner. They were solid to me, invisible to him; they obstructed my view of him but not his view of me.

Earlier in the day, I had wondered if maybe I might be crazy. Issue settled. I am totally bugshit.

Running straight at him, through bodachs as opaque as black satin but as insubstantial as shadows, pistol held out stiff-armed in front of me, determined not to waste my final round, I saw the muzzle of the assault rifle coming up, and I knew that he would cut me down, but I waited one more step, and then one more, before I squeezed the trigger point-blank.

Whatever grotesque transformation occurred in his face, the ski mask concealed it, but the mask couldn't entirely contain the spray. He went down as hard as the Prince of Darkness himself had been cast out of Heaven, into Hell. The weapon clattered out of his hand.

I kicked the assault rifle a few feet away from him, out of his reach. When I stooped to examine him, there was no question that he was carrion. POD was DOA.

Nevertheless, I returned to the rifle and kicked it even farther from him. Then I followed it and kicked it farther still, and again.

The pistol in my hand was useless. I threw it aside.

As if I were suddenly standing on high ground, as if they were black water, the bodachs flowed away from me, seeking the spectacle of dead and dying victims.

I felt as if I might throw up. I went to the edge of the koi pond and dropped to my knees.

Although the motion of the colorful fish ought to have turned me inside out, the nausea passed in a moment. I didn't purge, but as I got to my feet, I started to cry.

Inside the stores, beyond the shot-out windows, people dared to raise their heads.

We are destined to be together forever. We have a card that says so. Gypsy Mummy is never wrong.

Trembling, sweating, wiping tears from my eyes with the backs of my hands, half sick with an expectation of unbearable loss, I started toward Burke Bailey's.

People had risen to their feet from the ruination in the ice-cream shop. Some began to make their way cautiously across the broken glass, returning to the promenade.

I didn't see Stormy among them. She might have fled back to the storeroom, to her office, when the shooting started.

Suddenly I was overwhelmed by the need to move, move, move. I turned away from Burke Bailey's and took several steps toward the department store at the south end of the mall. I stopped, confused. For a moment, I thought I must be in denial, that I was trying to run from what I might find in the ice-cream shop.

No. I felt the subtle but unmistakable pull. Psychic magnetism. Drawing me. I'd assumed that I had finished the job. Evidently not.

CHAPTER 62

THIS DEPARTMENT STORE STYLED ITSELF MORE upscale than the one in which Viola had bought the Rollerblades. The crap they sold here was of a more refined quality than the crap they sold in the store at the north end of the mall.

I passed through a perfume and makeup department with beveled-glass cabinets and glamorous displays that not so subtly implied the merchandise was as valuable as diamonds.

The jewelry department dazzled with black granite, stainless steel, and Starfire glass, as if it offered not common diamonds but baubles from God's own collection.

Although the gunfire had fallen silent, shoppers and employees still sheltered behind counters, behind marble-clad columns. They dared to peek at me as I strode among them, but many flinched and ducked out of sight again.

Even though I didn't have a gun, I must have appeared to be dangerous. Or maybe I only seemed to be in a state of shock. They weren't taking any chances. I didn't blame them for hiding from me.

Still crying, blotting my eyes with my hands, I was also talking aloud to myself. I couldn't *stop* talking to myself, and I wasn't even saying anything coherent.

I didn't know where psychic magnetism might be taking me next, didn't know if Stormy was alive or dead in Burke Bailey's. I wanted to go back to find her, but I continued to be drawn urgently forward by my demanding gift. My body language was marked by tics,

twitches, hesitations, and sudden rushes of new purpose. I must have looked not just spastic but psychotic.

Sweet-faced, sleepy-eyed Simon Varner didn't have such a sweet face anymore, or sleepy eyes. Dead in front of Burke Bailey's.

So maybe I was tracking something *related* to Varner. I couldn't guess what that might be. This compulsion to keep moving without a clearly defined quarry was new to me.

Among racks of cocktail dresses, silk blouses, silk jackets, handbags, I hurried at last to a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. Beyond lay a storeroom. Directly across from the door by which I entered, another led to a concrete stairwell.

The layout was familiar from the department store at the north end of the mall. The stairs led down to a corridor where I passed employee-only elevators and came to oversized swinging doors marked RECEIVING.

This room reflected a thriving enterprise, though it didn't quite equal the size of the one at the north-end store. Merchandise on racks and carts awaited processing, prepping, and transfer to stockrooms and sales floors.

Numerous employees were present, but work appeared to have come to a halt. Most had gathered around a sobbing woman, and others were crossing the room toward her. Down here where no shots could have been heard, news of the horror in the mall had now arrived.

Only one truck stood in the receiving room: not a full semi, about an eighteen-footer, with no company name on the cab doors or the sides of the trailer. I moved toward it.

A burly guy with a shaved head and a handlebar mustache braced me as I reached the vehicle. "Are you with this truck?"

Without responding, I pulled open the driver's door and climbed into the cab. The keys weren't in the ignition.

"Where's your driver," he asked.

When I popped open the glove box, I found it empty. Not even the registration or proof of insurance required by California law.

"I'm the shift foreman here," the burly guy said. "Are you deaf or just difficult?"

Nothing on the seats. No trash container on the floor. No scrap of discarded candy wrapper. No air freshener or decorative geegaw hanging from the mirror.

This didn't have the feel of a truck that anyone drove for a living or in which anyone spent a significant amount of his day.

When I got out from behind the steering wheel, the foreman said, "Where's your driver? He didn't leave me a manifest, and the box is locked."

I went around to the back of the truck, which featured a roll-up door on the cargo trailer. A key lock in the base bar of the door secured it to a channel in the truck bed.

"I've got other shipments due," he said. "I can't let this just sit here."

"Do you have a power drill?" I asked.

"What're you going to do?"

"Drill out the lock."

"You're not the guy drove this in here. Are you his crew?"

"Police," I lied. "Off duty."

He was dubious.

Pointing to the sobbing woman around whom so many workers had now gathered, I said, "You hear what she's been saying?"

"I was on my way over there when I saw you."

"Two maniacs with machine guns shot up the mall."

His face drained of color so dramatically that even his blond mustache seemed to whiten.

"You hear they shot Chief Porter last night?" I asked. "That was prep for this."

With rapidly growing dread, I studied the ceiling of the immense receiving room. Three floors of the department store were stacked on top of it, supported by its massive columns.

Scared people were hiding from the gunmen up there. Hundreds and hundreds of people.

"Maybe," I said, "the bastards came here with something even worse than machine guns."

"Oh, shit. I'll get a drill." He sprinted for it.

After placing both hands flat against the roll-up door on the cargo box for a moment, I then leaned my forehead against it.

I don't know what I expected to feel. In fact, I felt nothing unusual. Psychic magnetism still pulled me, however. What I wanted wasn't the truck but what was *in* the truck.

The foreman returned with the drill and tossed me a pair of safety goggles. Electrical outlets were recessed in the concrete floor at convenient intervals across the receiving room. He plugged the drill into the nearest of these, and the cord provided more than sufficient play.

The tool had heft. I liked the industrial look of the bit. The motor shrieked with satisfying power.

When I bored into the key channel, shavings of metal clicked off my goggles, stung my face. The bit itself deteriorated, but punched through the lock in mere seconds.

As I dropped the drill and stripped off the goggles, someone shouted from a distance. "Hey! Leave that alone!"

Along the elevated loading dock—no one. Then I saw him. Outside the receiving room, twenty feet beyond the foot of the long truck ramp.

"That's the driver," the foreman told me.

He was a stranger. He must have been watching, perhaps through binoculars, from out in the employee garage, past the three lanes that served the loading docks.

Seizing the two grips, I shoved up the door. Well-oiled and efficiently counterweighted, the panel rose smoothly and quickly out of the way.

The truck was packed with what appeared to be hundreds of kilos of plastic explosive.

A gun cracked twice, one slug cried off the truck frame, people in the receiving room screamed, and the foreman ran.

I glanced back. The driver hadn't come any closer to the foot of the ramp. He had a pistol, maybe not the best weapon for such a long shot.

On the truck bed in front of the explosives were a mechanical kitchen timer, two copper-top batteries, curious bits and pieces that

I didn't recognize, and a nest of wires. Two of the wires ended in copper jacks that were plugged into that gray wall of death.

With a shrill kiss of metal on metal, a third shot ricocheted off the truck.

I heard the foreman fire up a nearby forklift.

The coven hadn't rigged the cargo to explode when the door was opened because they had set it on such a short countdown that they didn't think anyone could get at it fast enough to disable it. The timer had a thirty-minute dial, and the ticking indicator hand was three minutes from zero.

Click: two minutes.

The fourth shot hit me in the back. I didn't at once feel pain, only the jolting impact, which drove me against the truck, my face inches from the timer.

Maybe it was the fifth shot, maybe the sixth, that slapped into one of the bricks of plastic explosive with a flat, wet sound.

A bullet wouldn't trigger it. Only an electrical charge.

The two detonation wires were set six or eight inches apart. Was one positive and the other negative? Or was one just a backup in case the first wire failed to carry the detonating pulse? I didn't know if I had to yank out just one or both.

Maybe it was the sixth shot, maybe the seventh, that again tore into my back. This time pain hammered me, plenty of it, excruciating.

As I sagged from the brutal impact of the bullet, I seized both wires, and as I fell backward, I jerked them out of the explosives, pulling the timer and the batteries and the entire detonator package with me.

Turning as I fell, I hit the floor on my side, facing the truck ramp. The shooter had ascended farther to get a better shot.

Though he could have finished me with one additional round, he turned away and sprinted down the ramp.

The foreman roared past me and descended the ramp in a forklift, somewhat protected from gunfire by the raised cargo tines and their armature.

I didn't believe that the shooter had fled from the forklift. He wanted to get out of there because he couldn't quite see what I had done to the detonator. He intended to escape the underground docks and the garage, and get as far away as luck allowed.

Worried people hurried to me.

The kitchen timer still functioned. It lay on the floor, inches from my face. *Click*: one minute.

Already my pain was subsiding; however, I was cold. Surprisingly cold. The underground loading docks and the receiving room relied on passive cooling, no air conditioning, yet I was positively chilly.

People were kneeling beside me, talking to me. They seemed to be speaking a host of foreign languages because I couldn't understand what they were saying.

Funny—to be so cold in the Mojave.

I never heard the kitchen timer click to zero.

CHAPTER 63

STORMY LLEWELLYN AND I HAD MOVED ON FROM boot camp to our second of three lives. We were having great adventures together in the next world.

Most were lovely romantic journeys to exotic misty places, with amusing incidents full of eccentric characters, including Mr. Indiana Jones, who would not admit that he was really Harrison Ford, and Luke Skywalker, and even my Aunt Cymry, who greatly resembled Jabba the Hutt but was wonderfully nice, and Elvis, of course.

Other experiences were stranger, darker, full of thunder and the smell of blood and slinking packs of bodachs with whom my mother sometimes ran on all fours.

From time to time I would be aware of God and His angels looking down upon me from the sky of this new world. They had huge, looming faces that were a cool, pleasant shade of green—occasionally white—though they had no features other than their eyes. With no mouths or noses, they should have been frightening, but they projected love and caring, and I always tried to smile at them before they dissolved back into the clouds.

Eventually I regained enough clarity of mind to realize that I had come through surgery and was in a hospital bed in a cubicle in the intensive-care unit at County General.

I had not been promoted from boot camp, after all.

God and the angels had been doctors and nurses behind their masks. Cymry, wherever she might be, probably didn't resemble

Jabba the Hutt in the least.

When a nurse entered my cubicle in response to changes in the telemetry data from my heart monitor, she said, “Look who’s awake. Do you know your name?”

I nodded.

“Can you tell me what it is?”

I didn’t realize how weak I was until I tried to respond. My voice sounded thin and thready. “Odd Thomas.”

As she fussed over me and told me that I was some kind of hero and assured me that I would be fine, I said, “Stormy,” in a broken whisper.

I had been afraid to pronounce her name. Afraid of what terrible news I might be bringing down on myself. The name is so lovely to me, however, that immediately I liked the feel of it on my tongue once I had the nerve to speak it.

The nurse seemed to think that I’d complained of a sore throat, and as she suggested that I might be allowed to let a chip or two of ice melt in my mouth, I shook my head as adamantly as I could and said, “Stormy. I want to see Stormy Llewellyn.”

My heart raced. I could hear the soft and rapid *beep-beep-beep* from the heart monitor.

The nurse brought a doctor to examine me. He appeared to be awestruck in my presence, a reaction to which no fry cook in the world is accustomed and with which none could be comfortable.

He used that word *hero* too much, and in my wheezy way, I asked him not to use it again.

I felt crushingly tired. I didn’t want to fall asleep before I’d seen Stormy. I asked them to bring her to me.

Their lack of an immediate response to my request scared me again. When my heart thumped hard, my wounds throbbed in sympathy, in spite of any painkillers I was receiving.

They were worried that even a five-minute visit would put too much strain on me, but I pleaded, and they let her come into the ICU.

At the sight of her, I cried.

She cried, too. Those black Egyptian eyes.

I was too weak to reach out to her. She slipped a hand through the bed rail, pressed it atop mine. I found the strength to curl my fingers into hers, a love knot.

For hours, she had been sitting out in the ICU waiting room in the Burke Bailey's uniform that she dislikes so much. Pink shoes, white socks, pink skirt, pink-and-white blouse.

I told her that this must be the most cheerful outfit ever seen in the ICU waiting room, and she informed me that Little Ozzie was out there right now, sitting on two chairs, wearing yellow pants and a Hawaiian shirt. Viola was out there, too. And Terri Stambaugh.

When I asked her why she wasn't wearing her perky pink cap, she put a hand to her head in surprise, for the first time realizing that she didn't have it. Lost in the chaos at the mall.

I closed my eyes and wept not with joy but with bitterness. Her hand tightened on mine, and she gave me the strength to sleep and to risk my dreams of demons.

Later she returned for another five-minute visit, and when she said that we would need to postpone the wedding, I pushed to remain on schedule for Saturday. After what had happened, the city would surely cut all red tape, and if Stormy's uncle wouldn't bend church rules to marry us in a hospital room, there was always a judge.

I had hoped that our wedding day would be followed at once by our first night together. The marriage, however, had always been more important to me than the consummation of it—now more than ever. We have a long lifetime to get naked together.

Earlier she had kissed my hand. Now she leaned over the railing to kiss my lips. She is my strength. She is my destiny.

With no real sense of time, I slept on and off.

My next visitor, Karla Porter, arrived after a nurse had raised my bed and allowed me a few sips of water. Karla hugged me and kissed me on the cheek, on the brow, and we tried not to cry, but we did.

I had never seen Karla cry. She is tough. She needs to be. Now she seemed devastated.

I worried that the chief had taken a turn for the worse, but she said that wasn't it.

She brought the excellent news that the chief would be moved out of the ICU first thing in the morning. He was expected to make a full recovery.

After the horror at the Green Moon Mall, however, none of us will ever be as we had been. Pico Mundo, too, is forever changed.

Relieved to know the chief would be okay, I didn't think to ask anyone about my wounds. Stormy Llewellyn was alive; the promise of Gypsy Mummy would be fulfilled. Nothing else mattered.

CHAPTER 64

FRIDAY MORNING, JUST ONE DAY AFTER CHIEF Porter escaped the ICU, the doctor issued orders for me to be transferred to a private room.

They gave me one of their swanky accommodations decorated like a hotel suite. The same one in which they had let me take a shower when I'd been sitting vigil for the chief.

When I expressed concern about the cost and reminded them that I was a fry cook, the director of County General personally assured me that they would excuse all charges in excess of what the insurance company would be willing to pay.

This hero thing disturbed me, and I didn't want to use it to get any special treatment. Nevertheless, I graciously accepted their generosity because, while Stormy could only visit me in an ordinary hospital room, she could actually move right in here and be with me twenty-four hours a day.

The police department posted a guard in the corridor outside my room. No one posed any threat to me. The purpose was to keep the news media at bay.

Events at the Green Moon Mall had, I was told, made headlines worldwide. I didn't want to see a newspaper. I refused to turn on the TV.

Reliving it in nightmares was enough. Too much.

Under the circumstances, the Saturday wedding finally proved to be impractical. Reporters knew of our plans and would be all over

the courthouse. That and other problems proved insurmountable, and we postponed for a month.

Friday and Saturday, friends poured in with flowers and gifts.

How I loved seeing Terri Stambaugh. My mentor, my lifeline when I'd been sixteen and determined to live on my own. Without her, I would have had no job and nowhere to go.

Viola Peabody came without her daughters, insisting that they would have been motherless if not for me. The next day she returned with the girls. As it turned out, Nicolina's love of pink had to do with her enthusiasm for Burke Bailey's ice cream; Stormy's uniform had always enchanted her.

Little Ozzie visited without Terrible Chester. When I teased him about the yellow pants and the Hawaiian shirt that he'd worn to the ICU, he denied that he would ever "costume" himself in that fashion because such "flamboyant togs" would inevitably make him look even bigger than he was. He did, he said, have *some* vanity. As it turned out, Stormy had made up this colorful story to give me a smile in the ICU when I badly needed one.

My father brought Britney with him, full of plans to represent my story for books, movies, television, and product placements. I sent him away unsatisfied.

My mother did not visit.

Rosalia Sanchez, Bertie Orbic, Helen Arches, Poke Barnet, Shamus Cocobolo, Lysette Rains, the Takuda family, so many others...

From all these friends, I could not escape learning some of the statistics that I preferred not to know. Forty-one people at the mall had been wounded. Nineteen had died.

Everyone said it was a miracle that only nineteen perished.

What has gone wrong with our world when nineteen dead can seem like any kind of miracle?

Local, state, and federal law-enforcement agencies had studied the quantity of plastic explosives in the truck and estimated that it would have brought down the entire department store plus a not insignificant portion of the south side of the mall.

Estimates are that between five hundred and a thousand would have been killed if the bomb had detonated.

Bern Eckles had been stopped before he killed more than the three security guards, but he'd been carrying enough ammunition to cut down scores of shoppers.

At night in my hotel-style hospital room, Stormy stretched out on the bed and held my hand. When I woke from nightmares, she pulled me against her, cradled me in her arms while I wept. She whispered reassurances to me; she gave me hope.

Sunday afternoon, Karla brought the chief in a wheelchair. He understood perfectly well that I would never want to talk to the media, let alone entertain offers for books, movies, and television miniseries. He had thought of many ways to foil them. He is a great man, the chief, even if he did break that Barney the dinosaur chair.

Although Bern Eckles refused interrogation, the investigation into the conspiracy had proceeded rapidly, thanks to the fact that a man named Kevin Gosset, having been run down by a forklift, was talking his hateful head off.

Gosset, Eckles, and Varner had been bent a long time. At the age of fourteen, they developed an interest in satanism. Maybe it was a game for a while. Quickly it grew serious.

On a mutual dare, they killed for the first time when they were fifteen. They enjoyed it. And satanism justified it. Gosset called it "just another way of believing."

When they were sixteen, they pledged to their god that they would go into law enforcement because it would give them excellent cover and because one of the requirements of a devout satanist is to undermine the trusted institutions of society whenever possible.

Eckles and Varner eventually became cops, but Gosset became a schoolteacher. Corrupting the young was important work, too.

The three childhood pals had met Bob Robertson sixteen months previously through a satanic cult from which they cautiously sought out others with their interests. The cult had proved to be a gaggle of wannabes playing at goth games, but Robertson had interested them because of his mother's wealth.

Their first intention had been to kill him and his mother for whatever valuables might be in their house—but when they

discovered that Robertson was eager to bankroll what he called nasty news, they formed a partnership with him. They murdered his mother, made it appear that she'd died and been all but entirely consumed in an accidental fire—and gave Robertson her ears as a souvenir.

Indeed, the contents of the Rubbermaid containers in Robertson's freezer had come from the collections of Eckles, Varner, and Gosset. Robertson himself had never had the guts to waste anyone, but because of his generosity, they wanted to make him feel like a genuine part of their family.

With Robertson's money behind them, they were full of big plans. Gosset didn't recall who first proposed targeting a town and turning it into Hell on Earth with a series of well-planned horrors, with the cold intention of ultimately destroying it entirely. They checked out numerous communities and decided that Pico Mundo was ideal, neither too large to be beyond ruination nor too small to be uninteresting.

Green Moon Mall was their first target. They intended to murder the chief and parlay the mall disaster—and a list of other complex and Machiavellian moves—into firm control of the police department. Thereafter, the steady destruction of the town would be their sport and their form of worship.

Bob Robertson moved into Camp's End because the neighborhood offered him a low profile. Besides, he wanted to manage his money wisely, to ensure that he could buy as much fun as possible.

By the time Chief Porter got around to telling me and Stormy how he was going to protect me and help me to keep the secret of my sixth sense, his face had grown haggard, and I imagine I looked worse. Through Karla, I'd gotten word to him about Robertson's body out there at the Church of the Whispering Comet, so he'd been able to work that bizarre detail into his cover story. He'd always done well by me in the past, but *this* Porter-spun narrative left me in stunned admiration.

Stormy said it was a work of genius. Clearly, the chief had not been spending *all* his time recuperating.

CHAPTER 65

MY WOUNDS PROVED TO BE NOT AS BAD AS I HAD feared in the ICU, and the doctor discharged me from County General the following Wednesday, one week to the day after the events at the mall.

To foil the media, they had been told that I'd be in the hospital another day. Chief Porter conspired to have me and Stormy conveyed secretly in the department's beige undercover van, the same one from which Eckles had watched Stormy's apartment that night.

If Eckles had seen me leaving, he would have arranged to have me caught in my apartment with the body of Bob Robertson. When I had slipped out the back, he had figured that I must be staying the night with my girl, and eventually he had given up the stakeout.

Leaving the hospital, I had no desire to return to my apartment above Mrs. Sanchez's garage. I'd never be able to use the bathroom there without remembering Robertson's corpse.

The chief and Karla didn't think it was wise to go to Stormy's place, either, because the reporters knew about her, too. Neither Stormy nor I was of a mind to accept the Porters' hospitality. We wanted to be alone, just us, at last. Reluctantly, they delivered us to her place through the alley.

Although we were besieged by the media, the next few days were bliss. They rang the doorbell, they knocked, but we didn't respond. They gathered in the street, a regular circus, and a few times we

peeked at these vultures through the curtains, but we never revealed ourselves. We had each other, and that was enough to hold off not merely reporters but armies.

We ate food that wasn't healthy. We let dirty dishes stack up in the sink. We slept too much.

We talked about everything, everything but the slaughter at the mall. Our past, our future. We planned. We dreamed.

We talked about bodachs. Stormy is still of the opinion that they are demonic spirits and that the black room was the gate to Hell, opening in Robertson's study.

Because of my experiences of lost and gained time related to the black room, I have developed a more disturbing theory. Maybe in our future, time travel becomes possible. Maybe they can't journey to the past in the flesh but can return in *virtual* bodies in which their minds are embodied, virtual bodies that can be seen only by me. Me and one long-dead British child.

Perhaps the violence that sweeps our world daily into greater darkness has led to a future so brutal, so corrupt, that our twisted descendants return to watch us suffer, charmed by festivals of blood. The appearance of the bodachs might have nothing to do with what those travelers from the future really look like; they probably pretty much resemble you and me; instead, the bodachs may be the shape of their deformed and diseased souls.

Stormy insists they are demons on a three-day pass from Hell.

I find her explanation less frightening than mine. I wish that I could embrace it without doubt.

The dirty dishes stacked higher. We finished most of the truly unhealthy food and, not wanting to venture out, began to eat more-sensible fare.

The phone had been ringing constantly. We'd never taken it off the answering machine. The calls were all from reporters and other media types. We turned the speaker volume off, so we wouldn't have to hear their voices. At the end of each day, I erased the messages without listening to them.

At night, in bed, we held each other, we cuddled, we kissed, but we went no further. Delayed gratification had never felt so good. I

cherished every moment with her, and decided that we might have to delay the marriage only two weeks instead of a month.

On the morning of the fifth day, the reporters were roused by the Pico Mundo Police Department, on the grounds that they were a public nuisance. They seemed ready to go, anyway. Maybe they had decided that Stormy and I weren't in residence, after all.

That evening, as we readied for bed, Stormy did something so beautiful that my heart soared, and I could believe that in time I might put the events at the mall behind me.

She came to me without her blouse, naked from the waist up. She took my right hand, turned it palm up, and traced my birthmark with her forefinger.

My mark is a crescent, half an inch wide, an inch and a half from point to point, as white as milk against the pink flush of my hand.

Her mark is identical to mine except that it is brown and on the sweet slope of her right breast. If I cup her breast in the most natural manner, our birthmarks perfectly align.

As we stood smiling at each other, I told her that I have always known hers is a tattoo. This doesn't trouble me. The fact that she wanted so much to prove that we share a destiny only deepens my love for her.

On the bed, under the card from the fortune-telling machine, we held each other chastely, but for my hand upon her breast.

For me, time always seems suspended in Stormy's apartment.

In these rooms I am at peace. I forget my worries. The problems of pancakes and poltergeists are lifted from me.

Here I cannot be harmed.

Here I know my destiny and am content with it.

Here Stormy lives, and where she lives, I flourish.

We slept.

The following morning, as we were having breakfast, someone knocked on the door. When we didn't answer, Terri Stambaugh called loudly from the hall. "It's me, Oddie. Open up. It's time to open up now."

I couldn't say no to Terri, my mentor, my lifeline. When I opened the door, I found that she hadn't come alone. The chief and Karla

Porter were in the hall. And Little Ozzie. All the people who know my secret—that I see the dead—were here together.

“We’ve been calling you,” Terri said.

“I figured it was reporters,” I said. “They won’t leave me and Stormy alone.”

They came into the apartment, and Little Ozzie closed the door behind them.

“We were having breakfast,” I said. “Can we get you something?”

The chief put one hand on my shoulder. That hangdog face, those sad eyes. He said, “It’s got to stop now, son.”

Karla brought a gift of some kind. Bronze. An urn. She said, “Sweetheart, the coroner released her poor body. These are her ashes.”

CHAPTER 66

FOR A WHILE I HAD GONE MAD. MADNESS RUNS in my family. We have a long history of retreating from reality.

A part of me had known from the moment Stormy came to me in the ICU that she had become one of the lingering dead. The truth hurt too much to accept. In my condition that Wednesday afternoon, her death would have been one wound too many, and I would have let go of this life.

The dead don't talk. I don't know why. So I spoke for Stormy in the conversations that she and I had shared during the past week. I said for her what I knew she wanted to say. I can almost read her mind. We are immeasurably closer than best friends, closer than mere lovers. Stormy Llewellyn and I are each other's destiny.

In spite of his bandaged wounds, the chief held me tightly and let me pour out my grief in his fatherly arms.

Later, Little Ozzie led me to the living-room sofa. He sat with me, tipping the furniture in his direction.

The chief pulled a chair close to us. Karla sat on the arm of the sofa, at my side. Terri settled on the floor in front of me, one hand on my knee.

My beautiful Stormy stood apart, watching. I have never seen on any human face a look more loving than the one with which she favored me in that terrible moment.

Taking my hand, Little Ozzie said, "You know you've got to let her go, dear boy."

I nodded, for I could not speak.

Long after the day of which I now write, Ozzie had told me to keep the tone of this manuscript as light as possible by being an unreliable narrator, like the lead character in Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. I have played tricks with certain verbs. Throughout, I have often written of Stormy and our future together in the present tense, as if we are still together in this life. No more.

Ozzie said, "She's here now, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"She hasn't left your side for a moment, has she?"

I shook my head.

"You don't want your love for her and hers for you to trap her here when she needs to move on."

"No."

"That's not fair to her, Oddie. Not fair to either of you."

I said, "She deserves...her next adventure."

"It's time, Oddie," said Terri, whose memory of Kelsey, her lost husband, is etched on her soul.

Trembling in fear of life without Stormy, I rose from the sofa and hesitantly went to her. She still wore her Burke Bailey's uniform, of course, without the perky pink hat, yet she had never looked lovelier.

My friends had not known where she stood until I stepped before her and put one hand to her precious face. So warm to me.

The dead cannot speak, but Stormy spoke three words silently, allowing me to read her lips. *I love you.*

I kissed her, my dead love, so tenderly, so chastely. I held her in my arms, my face buried in her hair, her throat.

After a while, she put a hand under my chin. I raised my head.

Three more words. *Be happy. Persevere.*

"I'll see you in service," I promised, which is what she calls the life that comes after boot camp.

Her eyes. Her smile. Now mine only in memory.

I let her go. She turned away and took three steps, fading. She looked over her shoulder, and I reached out to her, and she was gone.

CHAPTER 67

THese days I live alone in Stormy's apartment with her eclectic mix of thrift-shop furniture. The old floor lamps with silk shades and beaded fringes. The Stickley-style chairs and the contrasting Victorian footstools. The Maxfield Parrish prints and the carnival-glass vases.

She never had much in this life, but with the simplest things, she made her corner of the world as beautiful as any king's palace. We may lack riches, but the greatest fortune is what lies in our hearts.

I still see dead people, and from time to time I am required to do something about it. As before, this proactive strategy often results in an unusual amount of laundry.

Sometimes, coming awake in the night, I think I hear her voice saying, *Loop me in, odd one*. I look for her, but she is never there. Yet she is always there. So I loop her in, telling her all that has happened to me recently.

Elvis hangs out with me more than he used to. He likes to watch me eat. I have purchased several of his CDs, and we sit together in the living room, in the low silken light, and listen to him when he was young and alive and knew where he belonged.

Stormy believed that we are in this boot camp to learn, that if we don't persevere through all this world's obstacles and all its wounds, we won't earn our next life of great adventure. To be with her again, I will have the perseverance of a bulldog, but it seems to me that the training is unnecessarily hard.

My name is Odd Thomas. I am a fry cook. I lead an unusual life, here in my pico mundo, my little world. I am at peace.

DEAN KOONTZ





B a n t a m B o o k s

FOREVER ODD
A Bantam Book

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Author's Note

This book is for Trixie, though she will never read it. On the most difficult days at the key board, when I despair, she can always make me laugh. The words *good dog* are inadequate in her case. She is a good heart and a kind soul, and an angel on four feet.

Unearned suffering is redemptive.

—*Martin Luther King Jr.*

Look at those hands, Oh God, those hands
toiled to raise me.

—*Elvis Presley at his mother's casket*

CHAPTER 1

WAKING, I HEARD A WARM WIND STRUMMING the loose screen at the open window, and I thought *Stormy*, but it was not.

The desert air smelled faintly of roses, which were not in bloom, and of dust, which in the Mojave flourishes twelve months of the year.

Precipitation falls on the town of Pico Mundo only during our brief winter. This mild February night was not, however, sweetened by the scent of rain.

I hoped to hear the fading rumble of thunder. If a peal had awakened me, it must have been thunder in a dream.

Holding my breath, I lay listening to the silence, and felt the silence listening to me.

The nightstand clock painted glowing numbers on the gloom—2:41 A.M.

For a moment I considered remaining in bed. But these days I do not sleep as well as I did when I was young. I am twenty-one and much older than when I was twenty.

Certain that I had company, expecting to find two Elvises watching over me, one with a cocky smile and one with sad concern, I sat up and switched on the lamp.

A single Elvis stood in a corner: a life-size cardboard figure that had been part of a theater-lobby display for *Blue Hawaii*. In a Hawaiian shirt and a lei, he looked self-confident and happy.

Back in 1961, he'd had much to be happy about. *Blue Hawaii* was a hit film, and the album went to number one. He had six gold records that year, including "Can't Help Falling in Love," and he was falling in love with Priscilla Beaulieu.

Less happily, at the insistence of his manager, Tom Parker, he had turned down the lead in *West Side Story* in favor of mediocre movie fare like *Follow That Dream*. Gladys Presley, his beloved mother, had been dead three years, and still he felt the loss of her, acutely. Only twenty-six, he'd begun to have weight problems.

Cardboard Elvis smiles eternally, forever young, incapable of error or regret, untouched by grief, a stranger to despair.

I envy him. There is no cardboard replica of me as I once was and as I can never be again.

The lamplight revealed another presence, as patient as he was desperate. Evidently he had been watching me sleep, waiting for me to wake.

I said, "Hello, Dr. Jessup."

Dr. Wilbur Jessup was incapable of a response. Anguish flooded his face. His eyes were desolate pools; all hope had drowned in those lonely depths.

"I'm sorry to see you here," I said.

He made fists of his hands, not with the intention of striking anything, but as an expression of frustration. He pressed his fists to his chest.

Dr. Jessup had never previously visited my apartment; and I knew in my heart that he no longer belonged in Pico Mundo. But I clung to denial, and I spoke to him again as I got out of bed.

"Did I leave the door unlocked?"

He shook his head. Tears blurred his eyes, but he did not wail or even whimper.

Fetching a pair of jeans from the closet, slipping into them, I said, "I've been forgetful lately."

He opened his fists and stared at his palms. His hands trembled. He buried his face in them.

"There's so much I'd like to forget," I continued as I pulled on socks and shoes, "but only the small stuff slips my mind—like where

I left the keys, whether I locked the door, that I'm out of milk....”

Dr. Jessup, a radiologist at County General Hospital, was a gentle man, and quiet, although he had never before been *this* quiet.

Because I had not worn a T-shirt to bed, I plucked a white one from a drawer.

I have a few black T-shirts, but mostly white. In addition to a selection of blue jeans, I have two pair of white chinos.

This apartment provides only a small closet. Half of it is empty. So are the bottom drawers of my dresser.

I do not own a suit. Or a tie. Or shoes that need to be shined.

For cool weather, I own two crew-neck sweaters.

Once I bought a sweater vest. Temporary insanity. Realizing that I had introduced an unthinkable level of complexity to my wardrobe, I returned it to the store the next day.

My four-hundred-pound friend and mentor, P. Oswald Boone, has warned me that my sartorial style represents a serious threat to the apparel industry.

I've noted more than once that the articles in Ozzie's wardrobe are of such enormous dimensions that he keeps in business those fabric mills I might otherwise put in jeopardy.

Barefoot, Dr. Jessup wore cotton pajamas. They were wrinkled from the rigors of restless sleep.

“Sir, I wish you'd say something,” I told him. “I really wish you would.”

Instead of obliging me, the radiologist lowered his hands from his face, turned, and walked out of the bedroom.

I glanced at the wall above the bed. Framed behind glass is a card from a carnival fortune-telling machine. It promises YOU ARE DESTINED TO BE TOGETHER FOREVER.

Each morning, I begin my day by reading those seven words. Each night, I read them again, sometimes more than once, before sleep, if sleep will come to me.

I am sustained by the certainty that life has meaning. As does death.

From a nightstand, I retrieved my cell phone. The first number on speed dial is the office of Wyatt Porter, chief of the Pico Mundo

Police Department. The second is his home number. The third is his cell phone.

More likely than not, I would be calling Chief Porter, one place or another, before dawn.

In the living room, I turned on a light and discovered that Dr. Jessup had been standing in the dark, among the thrift-shop treasures with which the place is furnished.

When I went to the front door and opened it, he did not follow. Although he had sought my assistance, he couldn't find the courage for what lay ahead.

In the rufescent light from an old bronze lamp with a beaded shade, the eclectic decor—Stickley-style armchairs, plump Victorian footstools, Maxfield Parrish prints, carnival-glass vases—evidently appealed to him.

“No offense,” I said, “but you don't belong here, sir.”

Dr. Jessup silently regarded me with what might have been supplication.

“This place is filled to the brim with the past. There's room for Elvis and me, and memories, but not for anyone new.”

I stepped into the public hall and pulled the door shut.

My apartment is one of two on the first floor of a converted Victorian house. Once a rambling single-family home, the place still offers considerable charm.

For years I lived in one rented room above a garage. My bed had been just a few steps from my refrigerator. Life was simpler then, and the future clear.

I traded that place for this not because I needed more space, but because my heart is here now, and forever.

The front door of the house featured an oval of leaded glass. The night beyond looked sharply beveled and organized into a pattern that anyone could understand.

When I stepped onto the porch, this night proved to be like all others: deep, mysterious, trembling with the potential for chaos.

From porch steps to flagstone path, to public sidewalk, I looked around for Dr. Jessup but didn't see him.

In the high desert, which rises far east beyond Pico Mundo, winter can be chilly, while our low-desert nights remain mild even in February. The curbside Indian laurels sighed and whispered in the balmy wind, and moths soared to street lamps.

The surrounding houses were as quiet as their windows were dark. No dogs barked. No owls hooted.

No pedestrians were out, no traffic on the streets. The town looked as if the Rapture had occurred, as if only I had been left behind to endure the reign of Hell on Earth.

By the time I reached the corner, Dr. Jessup rejoined me. His pajamas and the lateness of the hour suggested that he had come to my apartment from his home on Jacaranda Way, five blocks north in a better neighborhood than mine. Now he led me in that direction.

He could fly, but he plodded. I ran, drawing ahead of him.

Although I dreaded what I would find no less than he might have dreaded revealing it to me, I wanted to get to it quickly. As far as I knew, a life might still be in jeopardy.

Halfway there, I realized that I could have taken the Chevy. For most of my driving life, having no car of my own, I borrowed from friends as needed. The previous autumn, I had inherited a 1980 Chevrolet Camaro Berlinetta Coupe.

Often I still act as though I have no wheels. Owning a few thousand pounds of vehicle oppresses me when I think about it too much. Because I try not to think about it, I sometimes forget I have it.

Under the cratered face of the blind moon, I ran.

On Jacaranda Way, the Jessup residence is a white-brick Georgian with elegant ornamentation. It is flanked by a delightful American Victorian with so many decorative moldings that it resembles a wedding cake, and by a house that is baroque in all the wrong ways.

None of these architectural styles seems right for the desert, shaded by palm trees, brightened by climbing bougainvillea. Our town was founded in 1900 by newcomers from the East Coast, who fled the harsh winters but brought with them cold-climate architecture and attitude.

Terri Stambaugh, my friend and employer, owner of the Pico Mundo Grille, tells me that this displaced architecture is better than the dreary acres of stucco and graveled roofs in many California desert towns.

I assume that she is right. I have seldom crossed the city line of Pico Mundo and have never been beyond the boundaries of Maravilla County.

My life is too full to allow either a jaunt or a journey. I don't even watch the Travel Channel.

The joys of life can be found anywhere. Far places only offer exotic ways to suffer.

Besides, the world beyond Pico Mundo is haunted by strangers, and I find it difficult enough to cope with the dead who, in life, were known to me.

Upstairs and down, soft lamplight shone at some windows of the Jessup residence. Most panes were dark.

By the time I reached the foot of the front-porch steps, Dr. Wilbur Jessup waited there.

The wind stirred his hair and ruffled his pajamas, although why he should be subject to the wind, I do not know. The moonlight found him, too, and shadow.

The grieving radiologist needed comforting before he could summon sufficient strength to lead me into his house, where he himself no doubt lay dead, and perhaps another.

I embraced him. Only a spirit, he was invisible to everyone but me, yet he felt warm and solid.

Perhaps I see the dead affected by the weather of this world, and see them touched by light and shadow, and find them as warm as the living, not because this is the way they are but because this is the way I want them to be. Perhaps by this device, I mean to deny the power of death.

My supernatural gift might reside not in my mind but instead in my heart. The heart is an artist that paints over what profoundly disturbs it, leaving on the canvas a less dark, less sharp version of the truth.

Dr. Jessup had no substance, but he leaned heavily upon me, a weight. He shook with the sobs that he could not voice.

The dead don't talk. Perhaps they know things about death that the living are not permitted to learn from them.

In this moment, my ability to speak gave me no advantage. Words would not soothe him.

Nothing but justice could relieve his anguish. Perhaps not even justice.

When he'd been alive, he had known me as Odd Thomas, a local character. I am regarded by some people—wrongly—as a hero, as an eccentric by nearly everyone.

Odd is not a nickname; it's my legal handle.

The story of my name is interesting, I suppose, but I've told it before. What it boils down to is that my parents are dysfunctional. Big-time.

I believe that in life Dr. Jessup had found me intriguing, amusing, puzzling. I think he had liked me.

Only in death did he know me for what I am: a companion to the lingering dead.

I see them and wish I did not. I cherish life too much to turn the dead away, however, for they deserve my compassion by virtue of having suffered this world.

When Dr. Jessup stepped back from me, he had changed. His wounds were now manifest.

He had been hit in the face with a blunt object, maybe a length of pipe or a hammer. Repeatedly. His skull was broken, his features distorted.

Torn, cracked, splintered, his hands suggested that he had desperately tried to defend himself—or that he had come to the aid of someone. The only person living with him was his son, Danny.

My pity was quickly exceeded by a kind of righteous rage, which is a dangerous emotion, clouding judgment, precluding caution.

In this condition, which I do not seek, which frightens me, which comes over me as though I have been possessed, I can't turn away from what must be done. I plunge.

My friends, those few who know my secrets, think my compulsion has a divine inspiration. Maybe it's just temporary insanity.

Step to step, ascending, then crossing the porch, I considered phoning Chief Wyatt Porter. I worried, however, that Danny might perish while I placed the call and waited for the authorities.

The front door stood ajar.

I glanced back and saw that Dr. Jessup preferred to haunt the yard instead of the house. He lingered in the grass.

His wounds had vanished. He appeared as he had appeared before Death had found him—and he looked scared.

Until they move on from this world, even the dead can know fear. You would think they have nothing to lose, but sometimes they are wretched with anxiety, not about what might lie Beyond, but about those whom they have left behind.

I pushed the door inward. It moved as smoothly, as silently as the mechanism of a well-crafted, spring-loaded trap.

CHAPTER 2

FROSTED FLAME-SHAPED BULBS IN SILVER-PLATED sconces revealed white paneled doors, all closed, along a hallway, and stairs rising into darkness.

Honed instead of polished, the marble floor of the foyer was cloud-white, looked cloud-soft. The ruby, teal, and sapphire Persian rug seemed to float like a magic taxi waiting for a passenger with a taste for adventure.

I crossed the threshold, and the cloud floor supported me. The rug idled underfoot.

In such a situation, closed doors usually draw me. Over the years, I have a few times endured a dream in which, during a search, I open a white paneled door and am skewered through the throat by something sharp, cold, and as thick as an iron fence stave.

Always, I wake before I die, gagging as if still impaled. After that, I am usually up for the day, no matter how early the hour.

My dreams aren't reliably prophetic. I have never, for instance, ridden bareback on an elephant, naked, while having sexual relations with Jennifer Aniston.

Seven years have passed since I had that memorable night fantasy as a boy of fourteen. After so much time, I no longer have any expectation that the Aniston dream will prove predictive.

I'm pretty sure the scenario with the white paneled door will come to pass. I can't say whether I will be merely wounded, disabled for life, or killed.

You might think that when presented with white paneled doors, I would avoid them. And so I would...if I had not learned that fate cannot be sidestepped or outrun. The price I paid for that lesson has left my heart an almost empty purse, with just two coins or three clinking at the bottom.

I prefer to kick open each door and confront what waits rather than to turn away—and thereafter be required to remain alert, at all times, for the creak of the turning knob, for the quiet rasp of hinges behind my back.

On this occasion, the doors did not attract me. Intuition led me to the stairs, and swiftly up.

The dark second-floor hallway was brightened only by the pale outfall of light from two rooms.

I've had no dreams about open doors. I went to the first of these two without hesitation, and stepped into a bedroom.

The blood of violence daunts even those with much experience of it. The splash, the spray, the drip and drizzle create infinite Rorschach patterns in every one of which the observer reads the same meaning: the fragility of his existence, the truth of his mortality.

A desperation of crimson hand prints on a wall were the victim's sign language: *Spare me, help me, remember me, avenge me.*

On the floor, near the foot of the bed, lay the body of Dr. Wilbur Jessup, savagely battered.

Even for one who *knows* that the body is but the vessel and that the spirit is the essence, a brutalized cadaver depresses, offends.

This world, which has the potential to be Eden, is instead the hell before Hell. In our arrogance, we have made it so.

The door to the adjacent bathroom stood half open. I nudged it with one foot.

Although blood-dimmed by a drenched shade, the bedroom lamplight reached into the bathroom to reveal no surprises.

Aware that this was a crime scene, I touched nothing. I stepped cautiously, with respect for evidence.

Some wish to believe that greed is the root of murder, but greed seldom motivates a killer. Most homicide has the same dreary cause:

The bloody-minded murder those whom they envy, and for what they covet.

That is not merely a central tragedy of human existence: It is also the political history of the world.

Common sense, not psychic power, told me that in this case, the killer coveted the happy marriage that, until recently, Dr. Jessup had enjoyed. Fourteen years previously, the radiologist had wed Carol Makepeace. They had been perfect for each other.

Carol came into their marriage with a seven-year-old son, Danny. Dr. Jessup adopted him.

Danny had been a friend of mine since we were six, when we had discovered a mutual interest in Monster Gum trading cards. I traded him a Martian brain-eating centipede for a Venusian methane slime beast, which bonded us on first encounter and ensured a lifelong brotherly affection.

We've also been drawn close by the fact that we are different, each in his way, from other people. I see the lingering dead, and Danny has osteogenesis imperfecta, also called brittle bones.

Our lives have been defined—and deformed—by our afflictions. My deformations are primarily social; his are largely physical.

A year ago, Carol had died of cancer. Now Dr. Jessup was gone, too, and Danny was alone.

I left the master bedroom and hurried quietly along the hallway toward the back of the house. Passing two closed rooms, heading toward the open door that was the second source of light, I worried about leaving unsearched spaces behind me.

After once having made the mistake of watching television news, I had worried for a while about an asteroid hitting the earth and wiping out human civilization. The anchorwoman had said it was not merely possible but probable. At the end of the report, she smiled.

I worried about that asteroid until I realized I couldn't do anything to stop it. I am not Superman. I am a short-order cook on a leave of absence from his grill and griddle.

For a longer while, I worried about the TV news lady. What kind of person can deliver such terrifying news—and then smile?

If I ever did open a white paneled door and get skewered through the throat, the iron pike—or whatever—would probably be wielded by that anchorwoman.

I reached the next open door, stepped into the light, crossed the threshold. No victim, no killer.

The things we worry about the most are never the things that bite us. The sharpest teeth always take their nip of us when we are looking the other way.

Unquestionably, this was Danny's room. On the wall behind the disheveled bed hung a poster of John Merrick, the real-life Elephant Man.

Danny had a sense of humor about the deformities—mostly of the limbs—with which his condition had left him. He looked nothing like Merrick, but the Elephant Man was his hero.

They exhibited him as a freak, Danny once explained. Women fainted at the sight of him, children wept, tough men flinched. He was loathed and reviled. Yet a century later a movie was based on his life, and we know his name. Who knows the name of the bastard who owned him and put him on exhibit, or the names of those who fainted or wept, or flinched? They're dust, and he's immortal. Besides, when he went out in public, that hooded cloak he wore was way cool.

On other walls were four posters of ageless sex goddess Demi Moore, who was currently more ravishing than ever in a series of Versace ads.

Twenty-one years old, two inches short of the five feet that he claimed, twisted by the abnormal bone growth that sometimes had occurred during the healing of his frequent fractures, Danny lived small but dreamed big.

No one stabbed me when I stepped into the hall once more. I wasn't expecting anyone to stab me, but that's when it's likely to happen.

If Mojave wind still whipped the night, I couldn't hear it inside this thick-walled Georgian structure, which seemed to be like in its stillness, in its conditioned chill, with a faint scent of blood on the cool air.

I dared not any longer delay calling Chief Porter. Standing in the upstairs hall, I pressed 2 on my cell-phone keypad and speed-dialed his home.

When he answered on the second ring, he sounded awake.

Alert for the approach of a mad anchorwoman or worse, I spoke softly: "Sir, I'm sorry if I woke you."

"Wasn't asleep. I've been sitting here with Louis L'Amour."

"The writer? I thought he was dead, sir."

"About as dead as Dickens. Tell me you're just lonesome, son, and not in trouble again."

"I didn't *ask* for trouble, sir. But you better come to Dr. Jessup's house."

"I'm hoping it's a simple burglary."

"Murder," I said. "Wilbur Jessup on the floor of his bedroom. It's a bad one."

"Where's Danny?"

"I'm thinking kidnapped."

"Simon," he said.

Simon Makepeace—Carol's first husband, Danny's father—had been released from prison four months ago, after serving sixteen years for manslaughter.

"Better come with some force," I said. "And quiet."

"Someone still there?"

"I get the feeling."

"You hold back, Odd."

"You know I can't."

"I don't understand your compulsion."

"Neither do I, sir."

I pressed END and pocketed the cell phone.

CHAPTER 3

ASSUMING THAT DANNY MUST BE STILL NEARBY and under duress, and that he was most likely on the ground floor, I headed toward the front stairs. Before I began to descend, I found myself turning and retracing the route that I'd just followed.

I expected that I would return to the two closed doors on the right side of the hall, between the master bedroom and Danny's room, and that I would discover what lay behind them. As before, however, I wasn't drawn to them.

On the left side were three other closed doors. None of those had an attraction for me, either.

In addition to the ability to see ghosts, a gift I'd happily trade for piano artistry or a talent for flower arranging, I've been given what I call psychic magnetism.

When someone isn't where I expect to find him, I can go for a walk or ride my bicycle, or cruise in a car, keeping his name or face in my mind, turning randomly from one street to another; and sometimes in minutes, sometimes in an hour, I encounter the one I'm seeking. It's like setting a pair of those Scottie-dog magnets on a table and watching them slide inexorably toward each other.

The key word is *sometimes*.

On occasion, my psychic magnetism functions like the finest Cartier watch. At other times, it's like an egg timer bought at a cheap discount store's going-out-of-business sale; you set it for poached, and it gives you hard-boiled.

The unreliability of this gift is not proof that God is either cruel or indifferent, though it might be one proof among many that He has a sense of humor.

The fault lies with me. I can't stay sufficiently relaxed to let the gift work. I get distracted: in this case, by the possibility that Simon Makepeace, in willful disregard of his surname, would throw open a door, leap into the hallway, and bludgeon me to death.

I continued through the lamplight that spilled from Danny's room, where Demi Moore still looked luminous and the Elephant Man still looked pachydermous. I paused in the gloom at an intersection with a second, shorter hallway.

This was a big house. It had been built in 1910 by an immigrant from Philadelphia, who had made a fortune in either cream cheese or gelignite. I can never remember which.

Gelignite is a high explosive consisting of a gelatinized mass of nitroglycerin with cellulose nitrate added. In the first decade of the previous century, they called it gelatin dynamite, and it was quite the rage in those circles where they took a special interest in blowing up things.

Cream cheese is cream cheese. It's delicious in a wide variety of dishes, but it rarely explodes.

I would like to have a firmer grasp of local history, but I've never been able to devote as much time to the study of it as I have wished. Dead people keep distracting me.

Now I turned left into the secondary hallway, which was black but not pitch. At the end, pale radiance revealed the open door at the head of the back stairs.

The stairwell light itself wasn't on. The glow rose from below.

In addition to rooms and closets on both sides, which I had no impulse to search, I passed an elevator. This hydraulic-ram lift had been installed prior to Wilbur and Carol's wedding, before Danny—then a child of seven—had moved into the house.

If you are afflicted with osteogenesis imperfecta, you can occasionally break a bone with remarkably little effort. When six, Danny had fractured his right wrist while snap-dealing a game of Old Maid.

Stairs, therefore, pose an especially grave risk. As a child, at least, if he had fallen down a flight of stairs, he would most likely have died from severe skull fractures.

Although I had no fear of falling, the back stairs spooked me. They were spiral and enclosed, so it wasn't possible to see more than a few steps ahead.

Intuition told me someone waited down there.

As an alternative to the stairs, the elevator would be too noisy. Alerted, Simon Makepeace would be waiting when I arrived below.

I could not retreat. I was compelled to go down—and quickly—into the back rooms of the lower floor.

Before I quite realized what I was doing, I pushed the elevator-call button. I snatched my finger back as though I'd pricked it on a needle.

The doors did not at once slide open. The elevator was on the lower floor.

As the motor hummed to life, as the hydraulic mechanism sighed, as the cab rose through the shaft with a faint swish, I realized that I had a plan. Good for me.

In truth, the word *plan* was too grandiose. What I had was more of a trick, a diversion.

The elevator arrived with a *bink* so loud in the silent house that I twitched, though I had expected that sound. When the doors slid open, I tensed, but no one lunged out at me.

I leaned into the cab and pushed the button to send it back to the ground floor.

Even as the doors rolled shut, I hurried to the staircase and rushed blindly down. The value of the diversion would diminish to zero when the cab arrived below, for then Simon would discover that I wasn't, after all, on board.

The claustrophobia-inducing stairs led into a mud room off the kitchen. Although a stone-floored mud room might have been essential in Philadelphia, with that city's dependably rainy springs and its snowy winters, a residence in the sun-seared Mojave needed it no more than it needed a snowshoe rack.

At least it wasn't a storeroom full of gelignite.

From the mud room, one door led to the garage, another to the backyard. A third served the kitchen.

The house had not originally been designed to have an elevator. The remodel contractor had been forced to situate it, not ideally, in a corner of the large kitchen.

No sooner had I arrived in the mud room, dizzy from negotiating the tight curve of the spiral staircase, than a *bink* announced the arrival of the cab on the ground floor.

I snatched up a broom, as though I might be able to sweep a murderous psychopath off his feet. At best, surprising him by jamming the bristles into his face might damage his eyes and startle him off balance.

The broom wasn't as comforting as a flamethrower would have been, but it was better than a mop and certainly more threatening than a feather duster.

Positioning myself by the door to the kitchen, I prepared to take Simon off his feet when he burst into the mud room in search of me. He didn't burst.

After what seemed to be enough time to paint the gray walls a more cheerful color, but what was in reality maybe fifteen seconds, I glanced at the door to the garage. Then at the door to the backyard.

I wondered if Simon Makepeace had already forced Danny out of the house. They might be in the garage, Simon behind the wheel of Dr. Jessup's car, Danny bound and helpless in the backseat.

Or maybe they were headed across the yard, toward the gate in the fence. Simon might have a vehicle of his own in the alleyway behind the property.

I felt inclined, instead, to push through the swinging door and step into the kitchen.

Only the under-the-cabinet lights were on, illuminating the countertops around the perimeter of the room. Nevertheless, I could see that I was alone.

Regardless of what I could see, I sensed a presence. Someone could have been crouched, hiding on the farther side of the large center work island.

Fierce with broom, gripping it like a cudgel, I cautiously circled the room. The gleaming mahogany floor pealed soft squeaks off my rubber-soled shoes.

When I had rounded three-quarters of the island, I heard the elevator doors roll open behind me.

I spun around to discover not Simon, but a stranger. He'd been waiting for the elevator, and when I hadn't been in it, as he had expected, he'd realized that it was a ruse. He'd been quick-witted, hiding in the cab immediately before I entered from the mud room.

He was sinuous and full of coiled power. His green gaze shone bright with terrible knowledge; these were the eyes of one who knew the many ways out of the Garden. His scaly lips formed the curve of a perfect lie: a smile in which malice tried to pass as friendly intent, in which amusement was in fact dripping venom.

Before I could think of a serpent metaphor to describe his nose, the snaky bastard struck. He squeezed the trigger of a Taser, firing two darts that, trailing thin wires, pierced my T-shirt and delivered a disabling shock.

I fell like a high-flying witch suddenly deprived of her magic: hard, and with a useless broom.

CHAPTER 4

WHEN YOU TAKE MAYBE FIFTY THOUSAND volts from a Taser, some time has to pass before you feel like dancing.

On the floor, doing a broken-cockroach imitation, twitching violently, robbed of basic motor control, I tried to scream but wheezed instead.

A flash of pain and then a persistent hot pulse traced every nerve pathway in my body with such authority that I could see them in my mind's eye as clearly as highways on a road map.

I cursed my attacker, but the invective issued as a whimper. I sounded like an anxious gerbil.

He loomed over me, and I expected to be stomped. He was a guy who would enjoy stomping. If he wasn't wearing hobnail boots, that was only because they were at the cobbler's shop for the addition of toe spikes.

My arms flopped, my hands spasmed. I couldn't cover my face.

He spoke, but his words meant nothing, sounded like the sputter and crackle of short-circuiting wires.

When he picked up the broom, I knew from the way he held it that he intended to drive the blunt metal handle into my face repeatedly, until the Elephant Man, compared to me, would look like a GQ model.

He raised that witchy weapon high. Before he slammed it into my face, however, he turned abruptly away, looking toward the front of the house.

Evidently he heard something that changed his priorities, for he threw the broom aside. He split through the mud room and no doubt left the house by the back door.

A persistent buzzing in my ears prevented me from hearing what my assailant had heard, but I assumed that Chief Porter had arrived with deputies. I had told him that Dr. Jessup lay dead in the master bedroom on the second floor; but he would order a by-the-book search of the entire house.

I was anxious not to be found there.

In the Pico Mundo Police Department, only the chief knows about my gifts. If I am ever again the first on the scene of a crime, a lot of deputies will wonder about me more than they do already.

The likelihood was small to nonexistent that any of them would leap to the conclusion that sometimes the dead come to me for justice. Still, I didn't want to take any chances.

My life is already *my* strange and so complex that I keep a grip on sanity only by maintaining a minimalist lifestyle. I don't travel. I walk almost everywhere. I don't party. I don't follow the news or fashion. I have no interest in politics. I don't plan for the future. My only job has been as a short-order cook, since I left home at sixteen. Recently I took a leave of absence from that position because even the challenge of making sufficiently fluffy pancakes and BLTs with the proper crunch seemed too taxing on top of all my other problems.

If the world knew what I am, what I can see and do, thousands would be at my door tomorrow. The grieving. The remorseful. The suspicious. The hopeful. The faithful. The skeptics.

They would want me to be a medium between them and their lost loved ones, would insist that I play detective in every unsolved murder case. Some would wish to venerate me, and others would seek to prove that I was a fraud.

I don't know how I could turn away the bereft, the hopeful. In the event that I learned to do so, I'm not sure I'd like the person I would have become.

Yet if I could turn no one away, they would wear me down with their love and their hate. They would grind me on their wheels of

need until I had been reduced to dust.

Now, afraid of being found in Dr. Jessup's house, I flopped, twitched, and scrabbled across the floor. No longer in severe pain, I was not yet fully in control of myself, either.

As if I were Jack in the giant's kitchen, the knob on the pantry door appeared to be twenty feet above me. With rubbery legs and arms still spastic, I don't know how I reached it, but I did.

I've a long list of things I don't know how I've done, but I've done them. In the end, it's always about perseverance.

Once in the pantry, I pulled the door shut behind me. This close dark space reeked of pungent chemical scents the likes of which I had never before smelled.

The taste of scorched aluminum made me half nauseous. I'd never previously tasted scorched aluminum; so I don't know how I recognized it, but I felt sure that's what it was.

Inside my skull, a Frankenstein laboratory of arcing electrical currents snapped and sizzled. Overloaded resistors hummed.

Most likely my senses of smell and taste weren't reliable. The Taser had temporarily scrambled them.

Detecting a wetness on my chin, I assumed blood. After further consideration, I realized I was drooling.

During a thorough search of the house, the pantry would not be overlooked. I'd only gained a minute or two in which to warn Chief Porter.

Never before had the function of a simple pants pocket proved too complicated for me to understand. You put things in, you take things out.

Now for the longest time, I couldn't get my hand into my jeans pocket; someone seemed to have sewn it shut. Once I finally got my hand in, I couldn't get it back out. At last I extracted my hand from the clutching pocket, but discovered that I'd failed to bring my cell phone with it.

Just when the bizarre chemical odors began to resolve into the familiar scents of potatoes and onions, I regained possession of the phone and flipped it open. Still drooling but with pride, I pressed and held 3, speed-dialing the chief's mobile number.

If he was personally engaged in the search of the house, he most likely wouldn't stop to answer his cell phone.

"I assume that's you," Wyatt Porter said.

"Sir, yes, right here."

"You sound funny."

"Don't feel funny. Feel Tasered."

"Say what?"

"Say Tasered. Bad guy buzzed me."

"Where are you?"

"Hiding in the pantry."

"Not good."

"It's better than explaining myself."

The chief is protective of me. He's as concerned as I am that I avoid the misery of public exposure.

"This is a terrible scene here," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Terrible. Dr. Jessup was a good man. You just wait there."

"Sir, Simon might be moving Danny out of town right now."

"I've got both highways blocked."

There were only two ways out of Pico Mundo—three, if you counted death.

"Sir, what if someone opens the pantry door?"

"Try to look like canned goods."

He hung up, and I switched off my phone.

I sat there in the dark awhile, trying not to think, but that never works. Danny came into my mind. He might not be dead yet, but wherever he was, he was not anywhere good.

As had been true of his mother, he lived with an affliction that gravely endangered him. Danny had brittle bones; his mother had been pretty.

Simon Makepeace most likely wouldn't have been obsessed with Carol if she had been ugly or even plain. He wouldn't have killed a man over her, for sure. Counting Dr. Jessup, two men.

I had been alone in the pantry up to this point. Although the door didn't open, I suddenly had company.

A hand clasped my shoulder, but that didn't startle me. I knew my visitor had to be Dr. Jessup, dead and restless.

CHAPTER 5

DR. JESSUP HAD BEEN NO DANGER TO ME when he was alive, nor was he a threat now.

Occasionally, a poltergeist—which is a ghost who can energize his anger—is able to do damage, but they're usually just frustrated, not genuinely malicious. They feel they have unfinished business in this world, and they are people for whom death has not diminished the stubbornness that characterized them in life.

The spirits of thoroughly evil people do not hang around for extended periods of time, wreaking havoc and murdering the living. That's pure Hollywood.

The spirits of evil people usually leave quickly, as though they have an appointment, upon death, with someone whom they dare not keep waiting.

Dr. Jessup had probably passed through the pantry door as easily as rain through smoke. Even walls were no barrier to him anymore.

When he took his hand off my shoulder, I assumed that he would settle on the floor, cross-legged Indian style, as I was sitting, and evidently he did. He faced me in the dark, which I knew when he reached out and gripped my hands.

If he couldn't have his life back, he wanted reassurance. He did not have to speak to convey to me what he needed.

"I'll do my best for Danny," I said too softly to be heard beyond the pantry.

I did not intend my words to be taken as a guarantee. I haven't earned that level of confidence from anyone.

"The hard truth is," I continued, "my best might not be good enough. It hasn't always been enough before."

His grip on my hands tightened.

My regard for him was such that I wanted to encourage him to let go of this world and accept the grace that death offered him.

"Sir, everyone knows you were a good husband to Carol. But they might not realize just how very good a father you were to Danny."

The longer a liberated spirit lingers, the more likely he will get stuck here.

"You were so kind to take on a seven-year-old with such medical problems. And you always made him feel that you were proud of him, proud of how he suffered without complaint, his courage."

By virtue of the way that he had lived, Dr. Jessup had no reason to fear moving on. Remaining here, on the other hand—a mute observer incapable of affecting events—guaranteed his misery.

"He loves you, Dr. Jessup. He thinks of you as his real father, his only father."

I was thankful for the absolute darkness and for his ghostly silence. By now I should be somewhat armored against the grief of others and against the piercing regret of those who meet untimely deaths and must leave without good-byes, yet year by year I become more vulnerable to both.

"You know how Danny is," I continued. "A tough little customer. Always the wisecrack. But I know what he really feels. And surely you know what you meant to Carol. She seemed to *shine* with love for you."

For a while I matched his silence. If you push them too hard, they clutch up, even panic.

In that condition, they can no longer see the way from here to there, the bridge, the door, whatever it is.

I gave him time to absorb what I'd said. Then: "You've done so much of what you were put here to do, and you did it well, you got it right. That's all we can expect—the chance to get it right."

After another mutual silence, he let go of my hands.

Just as I lost touch with Dr. Jessup, the pantry door opened. Kitchen light dissolved the darkness, and Chief Wyatt Porter loomed over me.

He is big, round-shouldered, with a long face. People who can't read the chief's true nature in his eyes might think he's steeped in sadness.

As I got to my feet, I realized that the residual effects of the Taser had not entirely worn off. Phantom electrical sounds sizzled inside my head again.

Dr. Jessup had departed. Maybe he had gone on to the next world. Maybe he had returned to haunting the front yard.

"How do you feel?" the chief asked, stepping back from the pantry.

"Fried."

"Tasers don't do real harm."

"You smell burnt hair?"

"No. Was it Makepeace?"

"Not him," I said, moving into the kitchen. "Some snaky guy. You find Danny?"

"He's not here."

"I didn't think so."

"The way's clear. Go to the alley."

"I'll go to the alley," I said.

"Wait at the tree of death."

"I'll wait at the tree of death."

"Son, are you all right?"

"My tongue itches."

"You can scratch it while you wait for me."

"Thank you, sir."

"Odd?"

"Sir?"

"Go."

CHAPTER 6

THE TREE OF DEATH STANDS ACROSS THE alley and down the block from the Jessup place, in the backyard of the Ying residence.

In the summer and autumn, the thirty-five-foot brugmansia is festooned with pendant yellow trumpet flowers. At times, more than a hundred blooms, perhaps two hundred, each ten to twelve inches long, depend from its branches.

Mr. Ying enjoys lecturing on the deadly nature of the lovely brugmansia. Every part of the tree—roots, wood, bark, leaves, calyxes, flowers—is toxic.

One shred of its foliage will induce bleeding from the nose, bleeding from the ears, bleeding from the eyes, and explosive terminal diarrhea. Within a minute, your teeth will fall out, your tongue will turn black, and your brain will begin to liquefy.

Perhaps that is an exaggeration. When Mr. Ying first told me about the tree, I was a boy of eight, and that is the impression I got from his disquisition on brugmansia poisoning.

Why Mr. Ying—and his wife as well—should take such pride in having planted and grown the tree of death, I do not know.

Ernie and Pooka Ying are Asian Americans, but there's nothing in the least Fu Manchu about them. They're too amiable to devote any time whatsoever to evil scientific experiments in a vast secret laboratory carved out of the bedrock deep beneath their house.

Even if they have developed the capability to destroy the world, I for one cannot picture anyone named Pooka pulling the GO lever on

a doomsday machine.

The Yings attend Mass at St. Bartholomew's. He's a member of the Knights of Columbus. She donates ten hours each week to the church thrift shop.

The Yings go to the movies a lot, and Ernie is notoriously sentimental, weeping during the death scenes, the love scenes, the patriotic scenes. He once even wept when Bruce Willis was unexpectedly shot in the arm.

Yet year after year, through three decades of marriage, while they adopted and raised two orphans, they diligently fertilized the tree of death, watered it, pruned it, sprayed it to ward off spider mite and whitefly. They replaced their back porch with a much larger redwood deck, which they furnished to provide numerous viewpoints where they can sit together at breakfast or during a warm desert evening, admiring this magnificent lethal work of nature.

Wishing to avoid being seen by the authorities who would be going to and coming from the Jessup house during the remaining hours of the night, I stepped through the gate in the picket fence at the back of the Ying property. Because taking a seat on the deck without invitation seemed to be ill-mannered, I sat in the yard, under the brugmansia.

The eight-year-old in me wondered if the grass could have absorbed poison from the tree. If sufficiently potent, the toxin might pass through the seat of my jeans.

My cell phone rang.

"Hello?"

A woman said, "Hi."

"Who's this?"

"Me."

"I think you have the wrong number."

"You do?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I'm disappointed," she said.

"It happens."

"You know the first rule?"

“Like I said—”

“You come alone,” she interjected.

“—you’ve got a wrong number.”

“I’m so disappointed in you.”

“In me?” I asked.

“Very much so.”

“For being a wrong number?”

“This is pathetic,” she said, and terminated the call.

The woman’s caller ID was blocked. No number had appeared on my screen.

The telecom revolution does not always facilitate communication.

I stared at the phone, waiting for her to misdial again, but it didn’t ring. I flipped it shut.

The wind seemed to have swirled down a drain in the floor of the desert.

Beyond the motionless limbs of the brugmansia, which were leafy but flowerless until late spring, in the high vault of the night, the stars were sterling-bright, the moon a tarnished silver.

When I checked my wristwatch, I was surprised to see 3:17 A.M. Only thirty-six minutes had passed since I had awakened to find Dr. Jessup in my bedroom.

I had lost all awareness of the hour and had assumed that dawn must be drawing near. Fifty thousand volts might have messed with my watch, but it had messed more effectively with my sense of time.

If the tree branches had not embraced so much of the sky, I would have tried to find Cassiopeia, a constellation with special meaning for me. In classic mythology, Cassiopeia was the mother of Andromeda.

Another Cassiopeia, this one no myth, was the mother of a daughter whom she named Bronwen. And Bronwen is the finest person I have ever known, or ever will.

When the constellation of Cassiopeia is in this hemisphere and I am able to identify it, I feel less alone.

This isn’t a reasoned response to a configuration of stars, but the heart cannot flourish on logic alone. Unreason is an essential medicine as long as you do not overdose.

In the alley, a police car pulled up at the gate. The headlights were doused.

I rose from the yard under the tree of death, and if my buttocks had been poisoned, at least they hadn't yet fallen off.

When I got into the front passenger's seat and pulled the door shut, Chief Porter said, "How's your tongue?"

"Sir?"

"Still itch?"

"Oh. No. It stopped. I hadn't noticed."

"This would work better if you took the wheel, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah. But that would be hard to explain, this being a police car and me being just a fry cook."

As we drifted along the alleyway, the chief switched on the headlights and said, "What if I cruise where I want, and when you feel I should turn left or right, you tell me."

"Let's try it." Because he had switched off the police radio, I said, "Won't they be wanting to reach you?"

"Back there at the Jessup house? That's all aftermath. The science boys are better at that than I am. Tell me about the guy with the Taser."

"Mean green eyes. Lean and quick. Snaky."

"Are you focusing on him now?"

"No. I only got a glimpse of him before he zapped me. For this to work, I've got to have a better mental picture—or a name."

"Simon?"

"We don't know for certain that Simon's involved."

"I'd bet my eyes against a dollar that he is," Chief Porter said. "The killer beat on Wilbur Jessup long after he was dead. This was a *passionate* homicide. But he didn't come alone. He's got a kill buddy, maybe someone he met in prison."

"Just the same, I'll try for Danny."

We drove a couple of blocks in silence.

The windows were down. The air looked clear yet carried the silica scent of the Mojave vastness by which our town is embraced. Scatterings of crisp leaves, shed by Indian laurels, crunched under the tires.

Pico Mundo appeared to have been evacuated.

The chief glanced sideways at me a couple times, then said, “You ever going back to work at the Grille?”

“Yes, sir. Sooner or later.”

“Sooner would be better. Folks miss your home fries.”

“Poke makes good ones,” I said, referring to Poke Barnett, the other short-order cook at the Pico Mundo Grille.

“They’re not so bad you have to choke them down,” he admitted, “but they’re not in the same league with yours. Or his pancakes.”

“Nobody can match the fluff factor in my pancakes,” I agreed.

“Is it some culinary secret?”

“No, sir. It’s a born instinct.”

“A gift for pancakes.”

“Yes, sir, it seems to be.”

“You feel magnetized yet or whatever it is you feel?”

“No, not yet. And it would be better if we don’t talk about it, just let it happen.”

Chief Porter sighed. “I don’t know when I’m ever going to get used to this psychic stuff.”

“I never have,” I said. “Don’t expect I ever will.”

Strung between the boles of two palm trees in front of the Pico Mundo High School, a large banner declared GO, MONSTERS!

When I attended PMHS, the sports teams were called the Braves. Each cheerleader wore a headband with a feather. Subsequently, this was deemed an insult to local Indian tribes, though none of the Indians ever complained.

School administrators engineered the replacement of *Braves* with *Gila Monsters*. The reptile was said to be an ideal choice because it symbolized the endangered environment of the Mojave.

In football, basketball, baseball, track, and swimming, the Monsters haven’t equaled the winning record of the Braves. Most people blame it on the coaches.

I used to believe that all educated people knew an asteroid might one day strike the earth, destroying human civilization. But perhaps a lot of them haven’t heard about it yet.

As though reading my mind, Chief Porter said, “Could’ve been worse. The Mojave yellow-banded stink bug is an endangered species. They could’ve called the team *Stink Bugs*.”

“Left,” I suggested, and he turned at the next intersection.

“I figured if Simon was ever coming back here,” Chief Porter said, “he would’ve done it four months ago, when he was released from Folsom. We ran special patrols in the Jessup neighborhood during October and November.”

“Danny said they were taking precautions at the house. Better door locks. An upgraded security system.”

“So Simon was smart enough to wait. Gradually everyone let down their guard. Fact is, though, when the cancer took Carol, I didn’t expect Simon would come back to Pico Mundo.”

Seventeen years previously, jealous to the point of obsession, Simon Makepeace had become convinced that his young wife had been having an affair. He’d been wrong.

Certain that assignments had occurred in his own home, when he had been at work, Simon tried to coax the name of any male visitor from his then four-year-old son. Because there had been no visitor to identify, Danny had not been able to oblige. So Simon picked up the boy by the shoulders and tried to *shake* the name out of him.

Danny’s brittle bones snapped. He suffered fractures of two ribs, the left clavicle, the right humerus, the left humerus, the right radius, the right ulna, three metacarpals in his right hand.

When he couldn’t shake a name out of his son, Simon threw the boy down in disgust, breaking his right femur, his right tibia, and every tarsal in his right foot.

Carol had been grocery shopping at the time. Returning home, she found Danny alone, unconscious, bleeding, a shattered humerus protruding through the flesh of his right arm.

Aware that charges of child abuse would be filed against him, Simon had fled. He understood that his freedom might be measured in hours.

With less to lose and therefore with less to constrain him, he set out to take vengeance on the man whom he most suspected of being

his wife's lover. Because no lover existed, he merely perpetrated a second act of mindless violence.

Lewis Hallman, whom Carol had dated a few times before her marriage, was Simon's prime suspect. Driving his Ford Explorer, he stalked Hallman until he caught him on foot, then ran him down and killed him.

In court, he claimed that his intention had been to frighten Lewis, not to murder him. This assertion seemed to be contradicted by the fact that after running down his victim, Simon had turned and driven over him a second time.

He expressed remorse. And self-loathing. He wept. He offered no defense except emotional immaturity. More than once, sitting at the defendant's table, he prayed.

The prosecution failed to get him on second-degree murder. He was convicted of manslaughter.

If that particular jury could be reconstituted and polled, no doubt it would unanimously support the change from *Braves* to *Gila Monsters*.

"Turn right at the next corner," I advised the chief.

As the consequence of a conviction for assault involving a violent altercation in prison, Simon Makepeace had served his full sentence for manslaughter and a shorter term for the second offense. He had not been paroled; therefore, on release, he had been free to consort with whomever he wished and to go wherever he wanted.

If he had returned to Pico Mundo, he was now holding his son captive.

In letters he had written from prison, Simon had judged Carol's divorce and second marriage to be infidelity and betrayal. Men with his psychological profile frequently concluded that if they couldn't have the women they wanted, then no one would have them.

Cancer had taken Carol from Wilbur Jessup and from Simon; but Simon might still have felt a need to punish the man who had taken his role as her lover.

Wherever Danny might be, he was in a desperate place.

Although neither as psychologically nor as physically vulnerable as he had been seventeen years ago, Danny was no match for Simon

Makepeace. He could not protect himself.

“Let’s drive through Camp’s End,” I suggested.

Camp’s End is a ragged, burnt-out neighborhood where bright dreams go to die and dark dreams are too often born. Other trouble had more than once led me to those streets.

As the chief accelerated and drove with greater purpose, I said, “If it’s Simon, he won’t put up with Danny very long. I’m surprised he didn’t kill him at the house, when he killed Dr. Jessup.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Simon never quite believed he could have produced a son with a birth defect. The osteogenesis imperfecta suggested to him that Carol had cheated on him.”

“So every time he looks at Danny...” The chief didn’t need to finish the thought. “The boy’s a wise-ass, but I’ve always liked him.”

Descending toward the west, the moon had yellowed. Soon it might be orange, a jack-o’-lantern out of season.

CHAPTER 7

EVEN STREET LAMPS WITH TIME-OCHERED glass, even moonlight failed to smooth a layer of romance over the crumbling stucco, the warped clapboard, and the peeling paint of the houses in Camp's End. A porch roof swagged. A zigzag of tape bandaged a wound in window glass.

While I waited for inspiration, Chief Porter cruised the streets as if conducting a standard patrol.

"Since you've not been working at the Grille, how do you fill the hours these days?"

"I read quite a bit."

"Books are a blessing."

"And I think a lot more than I used to."

"I wouldn't recommend thinking too much."

"I don't carry it so far as brooding."

"Even pondering is sometimes too far."

Next door to an unweeded lawn lay a dead lawn, which itself lay next door to a lawn in which grass had long ago been replaced by pea gravel.

Skilled landscapers had rarely touched the trees in this neighborhood. What had not been permanently misshapen by bad pruning had instead been allowed to grow unchecked.

"I wish I could believe in reincarnation," I said.

"Not me. Once down the track is enough of a test. Pass me or fail me, Dear Lord, but don't make me go through high school again."

I said, "If there's something we want so bad in this life but we can't have it, maybe we could get it the next time around."

"Or maybe not getting it, accepting less without bitterness, and being grateful for what we have is a part of what we're here to learn."

"You once told me that we're here to eat all the good Mexican food we can," I reminded him, "and when we've had our fill, it's time to move on."

"I don't recollect being taught that in Sunday school," Chief Porter said. "So it's possible I'd consumed two or three bottles of Negra Modelo before that theological insight occurred to me."

"It would be hard to accept a life here in Camp's End without some bitterness," I said.

Pico Mundo is a prosperous town. But no degree of prosperity can be sufficient to eliminate all misfortune, and sloth is impervious to opportunity.

Where an owner showed pride in his home, the fresh paint, the upright picket fence, the well-barbered shrubs only emphasized the debris, decay, and dilapidation that characterized the surrounding properties. Each island of order did not offer hope of a community-wide transformation, but instead seemed to be a dike that could not long hold back an inevitably rising tide of chaos.

These mean streets made me uneasy, but though we cruised them for some time, I didn't feel that we were close to Danny and Simon.

At my suggestion, we headed for a more welcoming neighborhood, and the chief said, "There's worse lives than those in Camp's End. Some are even content here. Probably some Camp Enders could teach us a thing or two about happiness."

"I'm happy," I assured him.

For a block or so, he didn't say anything. Then: "You're at peace, son. There's a big difference."

"Which would be what?"

"If you're still, and if you don't hope too much, peace will come to you. It's a grace. But you have to *choose* happiness."

"It's that easy, is it? Just choose?"

"Making the decision to choose isn't always easy."

I said, "This sounds like you've been thinking too much."

"We sometimes take refuge in misery, a strange kind of comfort."

Although he paused, I said nothing.

He continued: "But no matter what happens in life, happiness is there for us, waiting to be embraced."

"Sir, did this come to you after three bottles of Negra Modelo, or was it four?"

"It must have been three. I never drink as many as four."

By the time we were circling through the heart of town, I had decided that for whatever reason, psychic magnetism wasn't working. Maybe I needed to be driving. Maybe the shock from the Taser had temporarily shorted my psychic circuits.

Or maybe Danny was already dead, and subconsciously I resisted being drawn to him, only to find him brutalized.

At my request, at 4:04 A.M. according to the Bank of America clock, Chief Porter pulled to the curb to let me out at the north side of Memorial Park, around which the streets define a town square.

"Looks like I'm not going to be any help with this one," I said.

In the past, I've had reason to suspect that when a situation involves people especially close to me, about whom I have the most intense personal feelings, my gifts do not serve me as well as they do when there is even a slight degree of emotional detachment. Maybe feelings interfere with psychic function, as also might a migraine headache or drunkenness.

Danny Jessup was as close to me as a brother could have been. I loved him.

Assuming that my paranormal talents have a higher source than genetic mutation, perhaps the explanation for uneven function is more profound. This limitation might be for the purpose of preventing the exploitation of these talents toward selfish ends; but more likely, fallibility is meant to keep me humble.

If humility is the lesson, I have learned it well. More than a few days have dawned in which an awareness of my limitations filled me with a gentle resignation that, till afternoon or even twilight, kept me in bed as effectively as would have shackles and hundred-pound lead weights.

As I opened the car door, Chief Porter said, “You sure you don’t want me to drive you home?”

“No, thank you, sir. I’m awake, fully charged, and hungry. I’m going to be the first through the door for breakfast at the Grille.”

“They don’t open till six.”

I got out, bent down, looked in at him. “I’ll sit in the park and feed the pigeons for a while.”

“We don’t have pigeons.”

“Then I’ll feed the pterodactyls.”

“What you’re gonna do is sit in the park and think.”

“No, sir, I promise I won’t.”

I closed the door. The patrol car pulled away from the curb.

After watching the chief drive out of sight, I entered the park, sat on a bench, and broke my promise.

CHAPTER 8

AROUND THE TOWN SQUARE, CAST-IRON LAMPPOSTS, painted black, were crowned with three globes each.

At the center of Memorial Park, a handsome bronze statue of three soldiers—dating from World War II—was usually illuminated, but at the moment it stood in darkness. The spotlight had probably been vandalized.

Recently a small but determined group of citizens had been demanding that the statue be replaced, on the grounds that it was militaristic. They wanted Memorial Park to memorialize a man of peace.

The suggestions for the subject of the new memorial ranged from Gandhi to Woodrow Wilson, to Yasir Arafat.

Someone had proposed that a statue of Gandhi should be modeled after Ben Kingsley, who had played the great man in the movie. Then perhaps the actor could be induced to be present at the unveiling.

This had led Terri Stambaugh, my friend and the owner of the Grille, to suggest that a statue of Gandhi should be modeled after Brad Pitt in the hope that *he* would then attend the ceremony, which would be a big deal by Pico Mundo standards.

At the same town meeting, Ozzie Boone had offered himself as the subject of the memorial. “Men of my formidable diameter are never sent to war,” he said, “and if everyone were as fat as I am, there could be no armies.”

Some had taken this as mockery, but others had found merit in the idea.

Perhaps someday the current statue will be replaced by one of a very fat Gandhi modeled after Johnny Depp, but for the moment, the soldiers remain. In darkness.

Old jacarandas, drenched with purple flowers come spring, line the main streets downtown, but Memorial Park boasts magnificent phoenix palms; under the fronds of one, I settled on a bench, facing the street. The nearest street lamp was not near, and the tree shaded me from the increasingly ruddy moonlight.

Although I sat in gloom, Elvis found me. He materialized in the act of sitting beside me.

He was dressed in an army uniform dating from the late 1950s. I can't say with any authority whether it was actually a uniform from his service in the military or if it might have been a costume that he wore in *G.I. Blues*, which had been filmed, edited, and released within five months of his leaving the army in 1960.

All the other lingering dead of my acquaintance appear in the clothes in which they died. Only Elvis manifests in whatever wardrobe he fancies at the moment.

Perhaps he meant to express solidarity with those who wished to preserve the statue of the soldiers. Or he just thought he looked cool in army khaki, which he did.

Few people have lived so publicly that their lives can reliably be chronicled day by day. Elvis is one of those.

Because even his mundane activities have been so thoroughly documented, we can be all but certain that he never visited Pico Mundo while alive. He never passed through on a train, never dated a girl from here, and had no other connection whatsoever with our town.

Why he should choose to haunt this well-fried corner of the Mojave instead of Graceland, where he died, I did not know. I had asked him, but the rule of silence among the dead was one that he would not break.

Occasionally, usually on an evening when we sit in my living room and listen to his best music, which we do a lot lately, I try to

engage him in conversation. I've suggested that he use a form of sign language to reply: thumbs-up for *yes*, thumbs-down for *no*....

He just looks at me with those heavy-lidded, half-bruised eyes, even bluer than they appear in his movies, and keeps his secrets to himself. Often he'll smile and wink. Or give me a playful punch on the arm. Or pat my knee.

He's an affable apparition.

Here on the park bench, he raised his eyebrows and shook his head as if to say that my propensity for getting in trouble never ceased to amaze him.

I used to think that he was reluctant to leave this world because people here had been so good to him, had loved him in such numbers. Even though he had lost his way badly as a performer and had become addicted to numerous prescription medications, he had been at the height of his fame when he died, and only forty-two.

Lately, I've evolved another theory. When I have the nerve, I'll propose it to him.

If I've got it right, I think he'll weep when he hears it. He sometimes does weep.

Now the King of Rock 'n' Roll leaned forward on the bench, peered west, and cocked his head as if listening.

I heard nothing but the faint thrum of wings as bats fished the air above for moths.

Still gazing along the empty street, Elvis raised both hands palms-up and made come-to-me gestures, as though inviting someone to join us.

From a distance, I heard an engine, a vehicle larger than a car, approaching.

Elvis winked at me, as if to say that I was engaged in psychic magnetism even if I didn't realize it. Instead of cruising in search, perhaps I had settled where I knew—somehow—that my quarry would cruise to me.

Two blocks away, a dusty white-paneled Ford van turned the corner. It came toward us slowly, as if the driver might be looking for something.

Elvis put a hand on my arm, warning me to remain seated in the shrouding shadows of the phoenix palm.

Light from a street lamp washed the windshield, sluiced through the interior of the van as it passed us. Behind the wheel was the snaky man who had Tasered me.

Without realizing that I moved, I had sprung to my feet in surprise.

My movement didn't catch the driver's attention. He drove past and turned left at the corner.

I ran into the street, leaving Sergeant Presley on the bench and the bats to their airborne feast.

CHAPTER 9

THE VAN SWUNG OUT OF SIGHT AT THE corner, and I ran in its windless wake, not because I am brave, which I am not, neither because I am addicted to danger, which I also am not, but because inaction is not the mother of redemption.

When I reached the cross street, I saw the Ford disappearing into an alley half a block away. I had lost ground. I sprinted.

When I reached the mouth of the alley, the way ahead lay dark, the street brighter behind me, with the consequence that I stood as silhouetted as a pistol-range target, but it wasn't a trap. No one shot at me.

Before I arrived, the van had turned left and vanished into an intersecting passage. I knew where it had gone only because the wall of the corner building blushed with the backwash of taillights.

Racing after that fading red trace, certain that I was gaining now because they had to slow to take the tight turn, I fumbled the cell phone from my pocket.

When I arrived where alley met alley, the van had vanished, also every glimmer and glow of it. Surprised, I looked up, half expecting to see it levitating into the desert sky.

I speed-dialed Chief Porter's mobile number—and discovered that no charge was left in the battery. I hadn't plugged it in overnight.

Dumpsters in starlight, hulking and odorous, bracketed back entrances to restaurants and shops. Most of the wire-caged security

lamps, managed by timers, had switched off in this last hour before dawn.

Some of the two- and three-story buildings featured roll-up doors. Behind most would be small receiving rooms for deliveries of merchandise and supplies; only a few might be garages, but I had no way to determine which they were.

Pocketing the useless phone, I hurried forward a few steps. Then I halted: unsettled, uncertain.

Holding my breath, I listened. I heard only my storming heart, the thunder of my blood, no engine either idling or receding, no doors opening or closing, no voices.

I had been running. I couldn't hold my breath for long. The echo of my exhalation traveled the narrow throat of the alleyway.

At the nearest of the big doors, I put my right ear to the corrugated steel. The space beyond seemed to be as soundless as a vacuum.

Crossing and recrossing the alley, from roll-up to roll-up, I heard no clue, saw no evidence, but felt hope ticking away.

I thought of the snake man driving. Danny must have been in back, with Simon.

Again I was running. Out of the alley, into the next street, right to the intersection, left onto Palomino Avenue, before I fully understood that I had given myself to psychic magnetism once more, or rather that it had seized me.

As reliably as a homing pigeon returns to its dovecote, a dray horse to its stable, a bee to its hive, I sought not home and hearth, but trouble. I left Palomino Avenue for another alley, and surprised three cats into hissing flight.

The boom of a gun startled me more than I had frightened the cats. I almost tucked and rolled, but instead dodged between two Dumpsters, my back to a brick wall.

Echoes of echoes deceived the ear, concealed the source. The report had been loud, most likely a shotgun blast. But I couldn't determine the point of origin.

I had no weapon at hand. A dead cell phone isn't much of a blunt instrument.

In my strange and dangerous life, I have only once resorted to a gun. I shot a man with it. He had been killing people with a gun of his own.

Shooting him dead saved lives. I have no intellectual or moral argument with the use of firearms any more than I do with the use of spoons or socket wrenches.

My problem with guns is emotional. They fascinate my mother. In my childhood, she made much grim use of a pistol, as I have recounted in a previous manuscript.

I cannot easily separate the rightful use of a gun from the sick purpose to which she put hers. In my hand, a firearm feels as if it has a life of its own, a cold and squamous kind of life, and also a wicked intent too slippery to control.

One day my aversion to firearms might be the death of me. But I've never been under the illusion that I will live forever. If not a gun, a germ will get me, a poison or a pickax.

After huddling between the Dumpsters for a minute, perhaps two, I came to the conclusion that the shotgun blast had not been meant for me. If I'd been seen and marked for death, the shooter would have approached without delay, pumping another round into the chamber and then into me.

Above some of these downtown businesses were apartments. Lights had bloomed in a few of them, the shotgun having made moot the later settings of alarm clocks.

On the move again, I found myself drawn to the next intersection of alleyways, then left without hesitation. Less than half a block ahead stood the white van, this side of the kitchen entrance to the Blue Moon Cafe.

Beside the Blue Moon is a parking lot that runs through to the main street. The van appeared to have been abandoned at the rear of this lot, nose out toward the alleyway.

Both front doors stood open, spilling light, no one visible beyond the windshield. As I drew cautiously closer, I heard the engine idling.

This suggested that they had fled in haste. Or intended to return for a quick getaway.

The Blue Moon doesn't serve breakfast, only lunch and dinner. Kitchen workers do not begin to arrive until a couple hours after dawn. The cafe should have been locked. I doubted that Simon had shot his way inside to raid the restaurant refrigerators.

There are easier ways to get a cold chicken leg, though maybe none quicker.

I couldn't imagine where they had gone—or why they abandoned the van if in fact they were not returning.

From one of the second-floor lighted apartment windows, an elderly woman in a blue robe gazed down. She appeared less alarmed than curious.

I eased to the passenger's side of the vehicle, slowly circled toward the rear.

At the back, the pair of doors on the cargo hold also stood open. Interior light revealed no one inside.

Sirens rose in the night, approaching.

I wondered who had fired the shotgun, at whom, and why.

As deformed and vulnerable as he is, Danny couldn't have wrested the weapon away from his tormentors. Even if he had tried to use the shotgun, the recoil would have broken his shoulder, if not also one of his arms.

Turning in a circle, mystified, I wondered what had happened to my friend with brittle bones.

CHAPTER 10

P. OSWALD BOONE, FOUR-HUNDRED-POUND culinary black belt in white silk pajamas, whom I'd recently awakened, moved with the grace and swiftness of a dojo master as he whipped up breakfast in the kitchen of his Craftsman-style house.

At times his weight scares me, and I worry about his suffering heart. But when he's cooking, he seems weightless, floating, like those gravity-defying warriors in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*—though he didn't actually bound over the center island.

Watching him that February morning, I considered that if he had spent his life killing himself with food, it might also be true that without the solace and refuge of food, he would have been dead long ago. Every life is complicated, every mind a kingdom of unmapped mysteries, and Ozzie's more than most.

Although he never speaks of how or what or why, I know that his childhood was difficult, that his parents broke his heart. Books and excess poundage are his insulation against pain.

He is a writer, with two successful series of mystery novels and numerous nonfiction books to his credit. He is so productive that the day may come when one copy of each of his books, stacked on a scale, will surpass his body weight.

Because he had assured me that writing would prove to be psychic chemotherapy effective against psychological tumors, I had written my true story of loss and perseverance—and had put it in a

drawer, at peace if not happy. To his dismay, I had told him that I was done with writing.

I believed it, too. Now here I am again, putting words to paper, serving as my own psychological oncologist.

Perhaps in time I will follow Ozzie's every example, and weigh four hundred pounds. I won't be able to run with ghosts and slip down dark alleyways in quite the swift and stealthy fashion that I do now; but perhaps children will be amused by my hippopotamic heroics, and no one will disagree that bringing laughter to children in a dark world is admirable.

While Ozzie cooked, I told him about Dr. Jessup and all that had occurred since the dead radiologist had come to me in the middle of the night. Although as I recounted events I worried about Danny, I worried as well about Terrible Chester.

Terrible Chester, the cat about which every dog has nightmares, allows Ozzie to live with him. Ozzie cherishes this feline no less than he loves food and books.

Although Terrible Chester has never clawed me with the ferocity of which I believe he is capable, he *has* more than once urinated on my shoes. Ozzie says this is an expression of affection. This theory holds that the cat is marking me with his scent to identify me as an approved member of his family.

I have noticed that when Terrible Chester wishes to express his affection for Ozzie, he does so by cuddling and purring.

Since Ozzie opened the front door to me, as we passed through the house, and during the time that I sat in the kitchen, I had not seen Terrible Chester. This made me nervous. My shoes were new.

He is a big cat, so fearless and self-impressed that he disdains sneaking. He doesn't creep into a room, but always makes an entrance. Although he expects to be the center of attention, he projects an air of indifference—even contempt—that makes it clear he wishes for the most part to be adored from a distance.

Although he does not sneak, he can appear at your shoes suddenly and by surprise. The first indication of trouble can be a briefly mystifying warm dampness of the toes.

Until Ozzie and I moved to the back porch to take our breakfast al fresco, I kept my feet off the floor, on a chair rung.

The porch overlooks a lawn and a half-acre woodlot of laurels, podocarpus, and graceful California peppers. In the golden morning sunshine, songbirds trilled and death seemed like a myth.

Had the table not been a sturdy redwood model, it would have groaned under the plates of lobster omelets, bowls of potatoes au gratin, stacks of toast, bagels, Danish, cinnamon rolls, pitchers of orange juice and milk, pots of coffee and cocoa....

“What is food to one is to others bitter poison,” Ozzie quoted happily, toasting me with a raised forkful of omelet.

“Shakespeare?” I asked.

“Lucretius, who wrote before the birth of Christ. Lad, I promise you this—I shall never be one of these health wimps who views a pint of heavy cream with the same horror that saner men reserve for atomic weapons.”

“Sir, those of us who care about you would suggest that vanilla *soy milk* isn’t the abomination you say it is.”

“I do not permit blasphemy, the F-word, or obscenities such as soy milk at my table. Consider yourself chastised.”

“I stopped in Gelato Italiano the other day. They now have some flavors with half the fat.”

He said, “The horses stabled at our local racetrack produce tons of manure each week, and I don’t stock my freezer with that, either. So where does Wyatt Porter think Danny might be?”

“Most likely Simon earlier stashed a second set of wheels in the lot beside the Blue Moon, in case things went bad at the Jessup house and someone saw him leaving there in the van.”

“But no one saw the van at the Jessup house, so it wasn’t a hot vehicle.”

“No.”

“Yet he switched at the Blue Moon anyway.”

“Yes.”

“Does that make sense to you?”

“It makes more sense than anything else.”

“For sixteen years, he remained obsessed with Carol, so obsessed that he wanted Dr. Jessup dead for having married her.”

“So it seems.”

“What does he want with Danny?”

“I don’t know.”

“Simon doesn’t seem like the type who’d yearn for an emotionally satisfying father-son relationship.”

“It doesn’t fit the profile,” I agreed.

“How’s your omelet?”

“Fantastic, sir.”

“There’s cream in it, and butter.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Also parsley. I’m not opposed to a portion of green vegetables now and then. Roadblocks won’t be effective if Simon’s second vehicle has four-wheel drive and he goes overland.”

“The sheriff’s department is assisting with aerial patrols.”

“Do you have any sense whether Danny’s still in Pico Mundo?”

“I get this strange feeling.”

“Strange—how?”

“A wrongness.”

“A wrongness?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, everything’s crystal-clear now.”

“Sorry. I don’t know. I can’t be specific.”

“He isn’t...dead?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“More orange juice? It’s fresh-squeezed.”

As he poured, I said, “Sir, I’ve been wondering—where’s Terrible Chester?”

“Watching you,” he said, and pointed.

When I turned in my chair, I saw the cat ten feet behind me and above, perched on an exposed ceiling truss that supported the porch roof.

He is reddish-orange with black markings. His eyes are as green as emeralds fired by sunlight.

Ordinarily, Terrible Chester favors me—or anyone—with only a casual glance, as if human beings bore him beyond tolerance. With his eyes and attitude, he can express a dismissive judgment of humanity, a contempt, that even a minimalist writer like Cormac McCarthy would need twenty pages to convey.

Never previously had I been an object of intense interest to Chester. Now he held my gaze, did not look away, did not blink, and seemed to find me to be as fascinating as a three-headed extraterrestrial.

Although he didn't appear to be poised to pounce, I did not feel comfortable turning my back on this formidable cat; however, I felt less comfortable engaging in a staring match with him. He would *not* look away from me.

When I faced the table again, Ozzie was taking the liberty of spooning another serving of potatoes onto my plate.

I said, "He's never stared at me like that before."

"He was staring at you much the same way the entire time we were in the kitchen."

"I didn't see him in the kitchen."

"When you weren't looking, he crept into the room, pawed open a cabinet door, and hid under the sink."

"He must've been quick."

"Oh, Odd, he was a prince of cats, lightning-quick and quiet. I was so proud of him. Once inside the cabinet, he held the door ajar with his body and watched you from concealment."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"Because I wanted to see what he would do next."

"Most likely it involves shoes and urine."

"I don't think so," Ozzie said. "This is all new."

"Is he still up there on the beam?"

"Yes."

"And still watching me?"

"Intently. Would you like a Danish?"

"I've sort of lost my appetite."

"Don't be silly, lad. Because of Chester?"

“He has something to do with it. I’m remembering once before when he was this intense.”

“Refresh my memory.”

I couldn’t prevent my voice from thickening. “August...and all of that.”

Ozzie stabbed the air with a fork: “Oh. You mean, the ghost.”

The previous August, I had discovered that, like me, Terrible Chester can see those troubled souls who linger this side of death. He had regarded that spirit no less intently than he now studied me.

“You aren’t dead,” Ozzie assured me. “You’re as solid as this redwood table, though not as solid as me.”

“Maybe Chester knows something I don’t.”

“Dear Odd, because you’re such a naive young man in some ways, I’m sure there’s a great deal he knows that you don’t. What did you have in mind?”

“Like that my time’s soon up.”

“I’m sure it’s something less apocalyptic.”

“Such as?”

“Are you carrying any dead mice in your pockets?”

“Just a dead cell phone.”

Ozzie studied me solemnly. He was genuinely concerned. At the same time, he is too good a friend ever to coddle me.

“Well,” he said, “if your time is soon up, all the more reason to have a Danish. The one with pineapple and cheese would be the perfect thing with which to end a last meal.”

CHAPTER 11

WHEN I SUGGESTED THAT I HELP CLEAN OFF the table and wash the dishes before going, Little Ozzie—who is actually fifty pounds heavier than his father, Big Ozzie—dismissed the suggestion by gesturing emphatically with a slice of buttered toast.

“We’ve only been sitting here forty minutes. I’m never at the morning table less than an hour and a half. I do some of my finest plotting over breakfast coffee and raisin brioche.”

“You should write a series set in the culinary world.”

“Already, bookstore shelves overflow with mysteries about chefs who are detectives, food critics who are detectives....”

One of Ozzie’s series features a hugely obese detective with a slim sexy wife who adores him. Ozzie has never married.

His other series is about a likable female detective with lots of neuroses—and bulimia. Ozzie is about as likely to develop bulimia himself as he is likely to change his wardrobe entirely to spandex.

“I’ve considered,” he said, “starting a series about a detective who is a pet communicator.”

“One of those people who claims to be able to talk to animals?”

“Yes, but he would be the real thing.”

“So animals would help him solve crimes?” I asked.

“They would, yes, but they’d also complicate his cases. Dogs would almost always tell him the truth, but birds would often lie, and guinea pigs would be earnest but prone to exaggeration.”

“I feel for the guy already.”

In silence, Ozzie spread lemon marmalade on brioche, while I picked at the pineapple-cheese Danish with a fork.

I needed to leave. I needed to *do* something. Sitting still another moment seemed intolerable.

I nibbled some Danish.

We seldom sit in silence. He's never at a loss for words; I can usually find a few of my own.

After a minute or two, I realized that Ozzie was staring at me no less intently than was Terrible Chester.

I had attributed this lull in the conversation to his need to chew. Now I realized this could not be the case.

Brioche is made with eggs, yeast, and butter. It melts in your mouth with very little chewing.

Ozzie had fallen silent because he was brooding. And he was brooding about me.

"What?" I asked.

"You didn't come here for breakfast," he said.

"Certainly not for *this much* breakfast."

"And you didn't come here to tell me about Wilbur Jessup, or about Danny."

"Well, yes, that is why I came, sir."

"Then you've told me, and you obviously don't want that Danish, so I suppose you'll be going now."

"Yes, sir," I said, "I should be going," but I didn't get up from my chair.

Pouring a fragrant Colombian blend from a thermos shaped like a coffeepot, Ozzie did not once shift his eyes from me.

"I've never known you to be deceitful with anyone, Odd."

"I assure you I can dissemble with the best of them, sir."

"No, you can't. You're a poster boy for sincerity. You have all the guile of a lamb."

I looked away from him—and discovered that Terrible Chester had descended from the roof beams. The cat sat on the top porch step, still staring intently at me.

"But more amazing still," Ozzie continued, "I've seldom known you to indulge in *self*-deceit."

“When will I be canonized, sir?”

“Smart-mouthing your elders will forever keep you out of the company of saints.”

“Darn. I was looking forward to having a halo. It would make such a convenient reading lamp.”

“As for self-deceit, most people find it as essential for survival as air. You rarely indulge in it. Yet you insist you came here just to tell me about Wilbur and Danny.”

“Have I been insisting?”

“Not with conviction.”

“Why do *you* think I came here?” I asked.

“You’ve always mistaken my absolute self-assurance for profound thought,” he said without hesitation, “so when you’re looking for deep insight, you seek an audience with me.”

“You mean all the profound insights you’ve given me over the years were actually shallow?”

“Of course they were, dear Odd. Like you, I’m only human, even if I have eleven fingers.”

He does have eleven, six on his left hand. He says one in ninety thousand babies is born with this affliction. Surgeons routinely amputate the unneeded digit.

For some reason that Ozzie has never shared with me, his parents refused permission for the surgery. He was the fascination of other children: the eleven-fingered boy; eventually, the eleven-fingered fat boy; and then the eleven-fingered fat boy with the withering wit.

“As shallow as my insights might have been,” he said, “they were sincerely offered.”

“That’s some comfort, I guess.”

“Anyway, you came here today with a burning philosophical question that’s troubling you, but it troubles you so much you don’t want to ask, after all.”

“No, that isn’t it,” I said.

I looked at the congealing remains of my lobster omelet. At Terrible Chester. At the lawn. At the small woods so green in the morning sun.

Ozzie's moon-round face could be smug and loving at the same time. His eyes twinkled with an expectation of being proved right.

At last I said, "You know Ernie and Pooka Ying."

"Lovely people."

"The tree in their backyard..."

"The brugmansia. It's a magnificent specimen."

"Everything about it is deadly, every root and leaf."

Ozzie smiled as Buddha would have smiled if Buddha had written mystery novels and had relished exotic methods of murder. He nodded approvingly. "Exquisitely poisonous, yes."

"Why would nice people like Ernie and Pooka want to grow such a deadly tree?"

"For one thing, because it's beautiful, especially when it's in flower."

"The flowers are toxic, too."

After popping a final morsel of marmaladed brioche into his mouth and savoring it, Ozzie licked his lips and said, "One of those enormous blooms contains sufficient poison, if properly extracted, to kill perhaps a third of the people in Pico Mundo."

"It seems reckless, even perverse, to spend so much time and effort nurturing such a deadly thing."

"Does Ernie Ying strike you as a reckless and perverse man?"

"Just the opposite."

"Ah, then Pooka must be the monster. Her self-deprecating manner must disguise a heart of the most malevolent intention."

"Sometimes," I said, "it seems to me that a friend might not take such pleasure in making fun of me as you do."

"Dear Odd, if one's friends do not openly laugh at him, they are not in fact his friends. How else would one learn to avoid saying those things that would elicit laughter from strangers? The mockery of friends is affectionate, and inoculates against foolishness."

"That sure sounds profound," I said.

"Medium shallow," he assured me. "May I educate you, lad?"

"You can try."

"There's nothing reckless about growing the brugmansia. Equally poisonous plants are everywhere in Pico Mundo."

I was dubious. “Everywhere?”

“You’re so busy with the supernatural world that you know too little about the natural.”

“I don’t get much time to go bowling, either.”

“Those flowering oleander hedges all over town? *Oleander* in Sanskrit means ‘horse killer.’ Every part of the plant is deadly.”

“I like the variety with red flowers.”

“If you burn it, the smoke is poisonous,” Ozzie said. “If bees spend too much time with oleander, the honey will kill you. Azaleas are equally fatal.”

“Everybody plants azaleas.”

“Oleander will kill you quickly. Azaleas, ingested, take a few hours. Vomiting, paralysis, seizures, coma, death. Then there’s savin, henbane, foxglove, jimsonweed...all here in Pico Mundo.”

“And we call her *Mother Nature*.”

“There’s nothing fatherly about time and what it does to us, either,” Ozzie said.

“But, sir, Ernie and Pooka Ying *know* the brugmansia is deadly. In fact, its deadliness is why they planted and nurtured it.”

“Think of it as a Zen thing.”

“I would—if I knew what that meant.”

“Ernie and Pooka seek to understand death and to master their fear of it by domesticating it in the form of the brugmansia.”

“That sounds medium shallow.”

“No. That’s actually profound.”

Although I didn’t want the Danish, I picked it up and took a huge bite. I poured coffee into a mug, to have something that I could hold.

I couldn’t sit there any longer doing nothing. I felt that if my hands weren’t busy, I’d start tearing at things.

“Why,” I wondered, “do people tolerate murder?”

“Last time I looked, it was against the law.”

“Simon Makepeace killed once. And they let him out.”

“The law isn’t perfect.”

“You should’ve seen Dr. Jessup’s body.”

“Not necessary. I have a novelist’s imagination.”

As my hands had gotten busy with Danish I didn't want and with coffee I didn't drink, Ozzie's hands had gone still. They were folded on the table in front of him.

"Sir, I often think about all those people, shot...."

He did not ask to whom I was referring. He knew that I meant the forty-one shot at the mall the previous August, the nineteen dead.

I said, "Haven't watched or read the news in a long time. But people talk about what's happening in the world, so I hear things."

"Just remember, the news isn't life. Reporters have a saying—'If it bleeds, it leads.' Violence sells, so violence gets reported."

"But why does bad news sell so much better than good?"

He sighed and leaned back in his chair, which creaked. "We're getting close now."

"Close to what?"

"To the question that brought you here."

"That burning philosophical thing? No, sir, there isn't one. I'm just...rambling."

"Ramble for me, then."

"What's wrong with people?"

"Which people?"

"Humanity, I mean. What's wrong with humanity?"

"That was a very short ramble indeed."

"Sir?"

"Your lips should feel scorched. The burning question just fell from them. It's quite a puzzler to put to another mortal."

"Yes, sir. But I'll be happy even with one of your standard shallow answers."

"The correct question has three equal parts. What's wrong with humanity? Then...what's wrong with nature, with its poison plants, predatory animals, earthquakes, and floods? And last...what's wrong with cosmic time, as we know it, which steals everything from us?"

Ozzie may assert that I mistake his absolute self-confidence for profundity; but I do not. He is truly wise. Evidently, however, life has taught him that the wise make targets of themselves.

A lesser mind might try to hide its brilliance behind a mask of stupidity. He chooses, instead, to conceal his true wisdom under a

flamboyant pretense of erudition that he is pleased to let people think is the best of him.

“Those three questions,” he said, “have the same answer.”

“I’m listening.”

“It’s no good if I just give it to you. You’ll resist it—and waste years of your life looking for an answer that pleases you more. When you arrive at it on your own, however, you’ll be convinced by it.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

He smiled and shrugged.

“I come here with a burning philosophical question, and all I get is breakfast?”

“You got quite a lot of breakfast,” he said. “I will tell you this much—you already know the answer and always have. You don’t have to discover it so much as *recognize* it.”

I shook my head. “Sometimes, you’re a frustrating man.”

“Yes, but I’m always gloriously fat and fun to look at.”

“You can be as mystical as a damn...” Terrible Chester still sat on the top porch step, riveted by me. “...as mystical as a damn cat.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t meant as one.” I pushed my chair away from the table. “I’d better go.”

As usual when I leave, he insisted on struggling to his feet. I am always concerned that the effort to get up will spike his blood pressure into the stroke zone and fell him on the spot.

He hugged me, and I hugged him, which we always do on parting, as if we do not expect to see each other again.

I wonder if sometimes the distribution of souls gets screwed up, and the wrong spirit ends up in the wrong baby. I suppose this is blasphemous. But then, with my smart mouth, I’ve already blown any chance of sainthood.

Surely, with his kind heart, Ozzie was meant for slim good health and ten fingers. And my life would make more sense if I had been his son instead of the offspring of the troubled parents who had failed me.

When the hug was done, he said, “What now?”

“I don’t know. I never do. It comes to me.”

Chester did not pee on my shoes.

I walked to the end of the deep yard, through the woodlet, and left by the gate in the back fence.

CHAPTER 12

NOT ENTIRELY TO MY SURPRISE, AGAIN THE Blue Moon Cafe.

The cloak of night had dressed the alleyway with some romance, but daylight had stripped it of the pretense of beauty. This was not a realm of filth and vermin; it was merely gray, grim, drab, and unwelcoming.

All but universally, human architecture values front elevations over back entrances, public spaces over private. For the most part, this is a consequence of limited resources, budgets.

Danny Jessup says that this aspect of architecture is also a reflection of human nature, that most people care more about their appearance than they do about the condition of their souls.

Although I'm not as cynical as Danny, and although I don't think the analogy between back doors and souls is well drawn, I'll admit to seeing some truth in what he says.

What I could not see, here in the pale-lemon morning light, was any clue that might lead me a single step closer to him or to his psychotic father.

The police had done their work and gone. The Ford van had been hauled away.

I hadn't come here with the expectation that I would find a clue overlooked by the authorities and, shifting into Sherlock, would track down the bad guys in a rush of deductive reasoning.

I returned because this was where my sixth sense had failed me. I hoped to find it again, as though it were a spool of ribbon that I'd

dropped and that had rolled out of sight. If I could locate the loose end of the ribbon, I could follow it to the spool.

Opposite the kitchen entrance of the cafe was the second-floor window from which the elderly woman in the blue robe had watched as I had approached the van only hours ago. The drapes were shut.

Briefly I considered having a word with her. But she had already been interviewed by the police. They are far more skilled than I am at teasing valuable observations from witnesses.

I walked slowly north to the end of the block. Then I turned and walked south, past the Blue Moon.

Trucks were angled between the Dumpsters; early deliveries were being received, inspected, inventoried. Shopkeepers, almost an hour ahead of their employees, were busy at the rear entrances of their establishments.

Death came, Death went, but commerce flowed eternal.

A few people noticed me. I knew none of them well, some of them not at all.

The character of their recognition was uncomfortably familiar to me. They knew me as the hero, as the guy who stopped the lunatic who had shot all those people the previous August.

Forty-one were shot. Some were crippled for life, disfigured. Nineteen died.

I might have prevented all of it. *Then* I might have been a hero.

Chief Porter says hundreds would have perished if I hadn't acted when I did, how I did. But the potential victims, those spared, do not seem real to me.

Only the dead seem real.

None of them have lingered. They all moved on.

But too many nights I see them in my dreams. They appear as they were in life, and as they might have been if they had survived.

On those nights, I wake with a sense of loss so terrible that I would prefer not ever to wake again. But I do wake, and I go on, for that is what the daughter of Cassiopeia, one of the nineteen, would want me to do, would *expect* me to do.

I have a destiny that I must earn. I live to earn it, and then to die.

The only benefit of being tagged a hero is that you are regarded by most people with some degree of awe and that, by playing to this awe, by wearing a somber expression and avoiding eye contact, you can almost always ensure that your privacy will be respected.

Wandering the alleyway, occasionally observed but undisturbed, I came to a narrow undeveloped lot. A chain-link fence restricted access.

I tried the gate. Locked.

A sign declared MARAVILLA COUNTY FLOOD-CONTROL PROJECT, and in red letters warned AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

Here I discovered the unspooled ribbon of my sixth sense. Touching the chain-link gate, I felt certain that Danny had gone this way.

A lock would be no impediment to a determined fugitive like Simon Makepeace, whose criminal skills had been enhanced by years of prison learning.

Beyond the fence, in the center of the lot, stood a ten-foot-square slump-stone building with a concrete barrel-tile roof. The two plank doors on the front of this structure were no doubt also locked, but the hardware looked ancient.

If Danny had been forced through this gate and through those doors, as I sensed he had been, Simon had not chosen this route on impulse. This had been part of his plan.

Or perhaps he had intended to retreat here only if things went badly at Dr. Jessup's place. Because of my timely arrival at the radiologist's house and because of Chief Porter's decision to block both highways, they had come here.

After parking in the Blue Moon lot, Simon had not put Danny in another vehicle. They had instead gone through this gate, through those doors, and down into a world below Pico Mundo, a world that I knew existed but that I had never visited.

My first impulse was to reach Chief Porter and to share what I intuited.

Turning away from the fence, I felt restrained by a subsequent intuition: Danny's situation was so tenuous that a traditional search

party, pursuing them into the depths, would likely be the death of him.

Furthermore, I sensed that while his situation might be grave, he was not in *imminent* danger. In this particular chase, speed wasn't as important as stealth, and the pursuit would be successful only if I remained acutely observant of every detail the trail provided.

I had no way of knowing any of this to be true. I *felt* it in a half-arsed precognitive way that is far more than a hunch but far short of an unequivocal vision.

Why I see the dead but cannot hear from them, why I can seek with psychic magnetism and sometimes find, but only sometimes, why I sense the looming threat but not its details, I do not know. Perhaps nothing in this broken world can be pure or of a piece, unfractured. Or perhaps I haven't learned to harness all the power I possess.

One of my most bitter regrets from the previous August is that in the rush and tumble of events, I had at times relied on reason when gut feelings would have served me better.

Daily I walk a high wire, always in danger of losing my balance. The essence of my life is supernatural, which I must respect if I am to make the best use of my gift. Yet I live in the rational world and am subject to its laws. The temptation is to be guided entirely by impulses of an otherworldly origin—but in *this* world a long fall will always end in a hard impact.

I survive by finding the sweet spot between reason and unreason, between the rational and the irrational. In the past, my tendency has been to err on the side of logic, at the expense of faith—faith in myself and in the Source of my gift.

If I failed Danny, as I believed that I had failed others the previous August, I would surely come to despise myself. In failure, I would resent having been given the gift that defines me. If my destiny can be fulfilled only through the use of my sixth sense, too great a loss of self-respect and self-confidence would lead me to another fate different from the one that I desire, making a lie of the fortune-machine card that is framed above my bed.

This time I would choose to err on the side of illogic. I had to trust intuition, and plunge as I had never plunged before, with blind faith.

I would not call Chief Porter. If my heart said I alone must go after Danny, I would obey my heart.

CHAPTER 13

AT MY APARTMENT, I STUFFED A SMALL BACK-PACK with items I might need, including two flashlights and a package of spare batteries.

In the bedroom, I stood at the foot of the bed, silently reading the framed card on the wall: YOU ARE DESTINED TO BE TOGETHER FOREVER.

I wanted to pry out the backing and remove the card from the frame, to take it with me. I would feel safer with it, protected.

This was a variety of irrational thought that could never serve me well. A card dispensed by a machine in a carnival arcade is not the equivalent of a fragment of the true cross.

Another and even less rational thought tormented me. In pursuit of Danny and his father, I might die, and having crossed the sea of death, arriving on the shore of the next world, I would want to have the card to present to whatever Presence met me there.

This, I would say, is the promise I was made. She came here ahead of me, and now you must take me to her.

In truth, although the circumstances in which we had gotten this fortune from the machine had seemed extraordinary and meaningful, no miracle had been involved. The promise was not of divine origin; it was one that she and I had made to each other, with mutual trust in the mercy of God to grant us the grace of eternity together.

If a Presence meets me on the farther shore, I cannot prove a divine contract merely with a card from a fortune-telling machine. If the afterlife I envision is different from the one Heaven has planned for me, I can't invoke the threat of litigation and demand the name of a good attorney.

Conversely, if this grace should be granted and the promise of the card fulfilled, the Presence who meets me on that distant shore will be Bronwen Llewellyn herself, my Stormy.

The proper place for the card was in the frame. There it would be safe and could continue to inspire me if I returned from this expedition alive.

When I went into the kitchen to call Terri Stambaugh at the Pico Mundo Grille, Elvis was sitting at the table, weeping.

I hate seeing him like this. The King of Rock 'n' Roll should never cry.

He shouldn't pick his nose, either, but occasionally he does. I am sure this is a joke. A ghost has no need to pick its nose. Sometimes he pretends to find a nugget and to flick it at me, then grins boyishly.

Lately, he'd been reliably cheerful. But he suffered sudden mood swings.

Dead more than twenty-seven years, with no purpose in this world but unable to move on, as lonely as only the lingering dead can be, he had reason to wallow in melancholy. The cause of his distress, however, appeared to be the salt and pepper shakers on the table.

Terri, as devoted a Presley fan and authority as anyone alive, had given me the two ceramic Elvises, each four inches high, which dated to 1962. The one dressed in white dispensed salt from his guitar; the one in black gave pepper from his pompadour.

Elvis looked at me, pointed at the salt shaker, at the pepper, then at himself.

"What's wrong?" I asked, though I knew that he would not answer.

He turned his face to the ceiling, as though to Heaven, with an expression of abject misery, sobbing silently.

The salt and pepper shakers had stood on the table since the day after Christmas. He had previously been amused by them.

I doubted that he had been moved to despair by the long-delayed realization that his image had been exploited to sell cheap, cheesy merchandise. Of the hundreds if not thousands of Elvis items that had been marketed over the years, scores were tackier than these ceramic collectibles, and he had not disapproved of licensing them.

Tears streamed down his cheeks, dripped off his jaw line, off his chin, but vanished before they spattered the table.

Unable to comfort or even understand Elvis, eager to get back to the Blue Moon alleyway, I used the kitchen phone to call the Grille, where they were in the breakfast rush.

I apologized for my bad timing, and Terri said at once, "Have you heard about the Jessups?"

"Been there," I said.

"You're in it, then?"

"To the neck. Listen, I've got to see you."

"Come now."

"Not in the Grille. All the old gang will want to chat. I'd like to see them, but I'm in a hurry."

"Upstairs," she said.

"I'm on my way."

When I hung up the phone, Elvis gestured to get my attention. He pointed at the salt shaker, pointed at the pepper shaker, formed a V with the forefinger and middle finger of his right hand, and blinked at me tearfully, expectantly.

This appeared to be an unprecedented attempt at communication.

"Victory?" I asked, reading the usual meaning in that hand sign.

He shook his head and thrust the V at me, as though urging me to reconsider my translation.

"Two?" I said.

He nodded vigorously. He pointed at the salt shaker, then at the pepper shaker. He held up two fingers.

"Two Elvises," I said.

This statement reduced him to a mess of shuddering emotion. He huddled, head bowed, face in his hands, shaking.

I rested my right hand on his shoulder. He felt as solid to me as every spirit does.

“I’m sorry, sir. I don’t know what’s upsetting you, or what I should do.”

He had nothing more to convey to me either by expression or by gesture. He had retreated into his grief, and for the time being he was as lost to me as he was lost to the rest of the living world.

Although I regretted leaving him in that bleak condition, my obligation to the living is greater than to the dead.

CHAPTER 14

TERRI STAMBAUGH OPERATED THE PICO Mundo Grille with her husband, Kelsey, until he died of cancer. Now she runs the place herself. For almost ten years, she has lived alone above the restaurant, in an apartment approached by stairs from the alleyway.

Since she lost Kelsey, when she was only thirty-two, the man in her life has been Elvis. Not his ghost, but the history and the myth of him.

She has every song the King ever recorded, and she has acquired encyclopedic knowledge of his life. Terri's interest in all things Presley preceded my revelation to her that his spirit inexplicably haunts our obscure town.

Perhaps as a defense against giving herself to another living man after Kelsey, to whom she has pledged her heart far beyond the requirement of their wedding vows, Terri loves Elvis. She loves not just his music and his fame, not merely the *idea* of him; she loves Elvis the man.

Although his virtues were many, they were outnumbered by his faults, frailties, and shortcomings. She knows that he was self-centered, especially after the early death of his beloved mother, that he found it difficult to trust anyone, that in some ways he remained an adolescent all his life. She knows how, in his later years, he escaped into addictions that spawned in him a meanness and a paranoia that were against his nature.

She is aware of all this and loves him nonetheless. She loves him for his struggle to achieve, for the passion that he brought to his music, for his devotion to his mother.

She loves him for his uncommon generosity even if there were times when he dangled it like a lure or wielded it like a club. She loves him for his faith, although he so often failed to follow its instructions.

She loves him because in his later years he remained humble enough to recognize how little of his promise he had fulfilled, because he knew regret and remorse. He never found the courage for true contrition, though he yearned to achieve it and the rebirth that would have followed it.

Loving is as essential to Terri Stambaugh as constant swimming is essential to the shark. This is an infelicitous analogy, but an accurate one. If a shark stops moving, it drowns; for survival, it requires uninterrupted movement. Terri must love or die.

Her friends know she would sacrifice herself for them, so deeply does she commit. She loves not just a burnished memory of her husband but loves who he truly was, the rough edges and the smooth. Likewise, she loves the potentiality *and* the reality of each friend.

I climbed the stairs, pressed the bell, and when she opened the door, she said at once, as she drew me across the threshold, “What can I do, Oddie, what do you need, what are you getting yourself into this time?”

When I was sixteen and desperate to escape from the psychotic kingdom that was my mother’s home, Terri gave me a job, a chance, a life. She is still giving. She is my boss, my friend, the sister I never had.

After we embraced, we sat cater-corner at the kitchen table, holding hands on the red-and-white-checkered oilcloth. Her hands are strong and worn by work, and beautiful.

Elvis’s “Good Luck Charm” was on her music system. Her speakers are never sullied by the songs of other singers.

When I told her where I believed Danny had been taken and that intuition insisted I go after him alone, her hand tightened on mine.

“Why would Simon take him down there?”

“Maybe he saw the roadblock and turned around. Maybe he had a police-band radio and heard about it that way. The flood tunnels are another route out of town, under the roadblocks.”

“But on foot.”

“Wherever he surfaces with Danny, he can steal a car.”

“Then he’s already done that, hasn’t he? If he took Danny down there hours ago, at least four hours ago, he’s long gone.”

“Maybe. But I don’t think so.”

Terri frowned. “If he’s still in the flood tunnels, he took Danny there for some other reason, not to get him out of town.”

Her instincts do not have the supernatural edge that mine do, but they are sharp enough to serve her well.

“I told Ozzie—there’s something wrong with this.”

“Wrong with what?”

“All this. Dr. Jessup’s murder and all the rest. A *wrongness*. I can feel it, but I can’t define it.”

Terri is one of the handful of people who know about my gift. She understands that I am compelled to use it; she would not attempt to argue me out of action. But she wishes that this yoke would be lifted from me.

So do I.

As “Good Luck Charm” gave way to “Puppet on a String,” I put my cell phone on the table, told her that I had forgotten to plug it in the previous night, and asked to borrow hers while she recharged mine.

She opened her purse, fished out the phone. “It’s not cell, it’s satellite. But will it work down there, underground?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not. But it’ll probably work wherever I am when I come up again. Thanks, Terri.”

I tested the volume of the ringer, dialed it down a little.

“And when mine is recharged,” I said, “if you get any peculiar calls on it...give out the number of your phone, so they can try to reach me.”

“Peculiar—how?”

I'd had time to mull over the call that I received while sitting under the poisonous brugmansia. Maybe the caller had dialed a wrong number. Maybe not.

"If it's a woman with a smoky voice, cryptic, won't give her name—I want to talk to her."

She raised her eyebrows. "What's that about?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "Probably nothing."

As I tucked her phone into a zippered pocket on my backpack, she said, "Are you coming back to work, Oddie?"

"Soon maybe. Not this week."

"We got you a new spatula. Wide blade, microbeveled front edge. Your name's inlaid in the handle."

"That's cool."

"Entirely cool. The handle's red. Your name's in white, and it's in the same lettering as the original Coca-Cola logo."

"I miss frying," I said. "I love the griddle."

The staff of the diner had been my family for more than four years. I still felt close to them.

When I saw them these days, however, two things precluded the easy camaraderie we had enjoyed in the past: the reality of my grief, and their insistence on my heroism.

"Gotta go," I said, getting to my feet and shouldering the backpack once more.

Perhaps to detain me, she said, "So...has Elvis been around lately?"

"Just left him crying in my kitchen."

"Crying again? What about?"

I recounted the episode with the salt and pepper shakers. "He actually made an effort to help me understand, which is something new, but I didn't get it."

"Maybe I do," she said, as she opened the door for me. "You know he was an identical twin."

"I knew that, yeah, but I forgot."

"Jesse Garon Presley was stillborn at four o'clock in the morning, and Elvis Aaron Presley came into the world thirty-five minutes later."

“I half remember you telling me about that. Jesse was buried in a cardboard box.”

“That’s all the family could afford. He was laid to rest in Priceville Cemetery, northeast of Tupelo.”

“How’s that for fate?” I said. “Identical twins—they’re going to look exactly alike, sound alike, and probably have exactly the same talent. But one becomes the biggest star in music history, and the other is buried as a baby in a cardboard box.”

“It haunted him all his life,” Terri said. “People say that he often talked to Jesse late at night. He felt like half of himself was missing.”

“He sort of lived that way, too—like half of him was missing.”

“He sort of did,” she agreed.

Because I knew what that felt like, I said, “I’ve suddenly got more sympathy for the guy.”

We hugged, and she said, “We need you here, Oddie.”

“I need me here,” I agreed. “You’re everything a friend should be, Terri, and nothing that one shouldn’t.”

“When would it be a good idea for me to start worrying?”

“Judging by the look on your face,” I said, “you already have.”

“I don’t like you going down there in the tunnels. It feels like you’re burying yourself alive.”

“I’m not claustrophobic,” I assured her as I stepped out of the kitchen, onto the exterior landing.

“That’s not what I meant. I’m giving you six hours, then I’m calling Wyatt Porter.”

“I’d rather you wouldn’t do that, Terri. I’m as sure as I’ve ever been about anything—I’ve got to do this alone.”

“Are you really? Or is this...something else?”

“What else would it be?”

Clearly, she had a specific fear, but she didn’t want to put it into words. Instead of answering me, or even searching my eyes for an answer, she scanned the sky.

Dirty clouds were scudding in from the north-northeast. They looked like scrub rags that had swabbed a filthy floor.

I said, “There’s more to this than Simon’s jealousies and obsessions. A weirdness, I don’t know what, but a SWAT team isn’t going to bring Danny out of there alive. Because of my gift, I’m his best chance.”

I kissed her on the forehead, turned, and started down the steps toward the alley.

“Is Danny dead already?” she asked.

“No. Like I said, I’m being drawn to him.”

“Is that true?”

Surprised, I halted, turned. “He’s alive, Terri.”

“If Kelsey and I had been blessed with a child, he could’ve been as old as you.”

I smiled. “You’re sweet.”

She sighed. “All right. Eight hours. Not a minute more. You might be a clairvoyant or a medium, or whatever it is you are, but I’ve got women’s intuition, by God, and that counts for something, too.”

No sixth sense was required for me to understand that it would be pointless to try to negotiate her up from eight hours to ten.

“Eight hours,” I agreed. “I’ll call you before then.”

After I had started down the open stairs again, she said, “Oddie, the main reason you came here really *was* to borrow my phone—wasn’t it?”

When I stopped and looked up again, I saw that she had come off the landing, onto the first step.

She said, “I guess for my own peace of mind, I’ve got to lay it out there.... You didn’t come here to say good-bye, did you?”

“No.”

“True?”

“True.”

“Swear to God.”

I raised my right hand as though I were an Eagle Scout making a solemn pledge.

Still dubious, she said, “It would be shitty of you to go out of my life with a lie.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you. Besides, I can’t get where I want to go by conscious or unconscious suicide. I’ve got my strange little life to

lead. Leading it the best I can—that's how I buy the ticket to where I want to be. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah." Terri settled down on the top step. "I'll sit here and watch you go. It feels like bad luck to turn my back on you just now."

"Are you okay?"

"Go. If he's alive, go to him."

I turned away from her and descended the stairs once more.

"Don't look back," she said. "That's bad luck, too."

I reached the bottom of the stairs and followed the alleyway to the street. I didn't look back, but I could hear her softly crying.

CHAPTER 15

I DID NOT SCOUT FOR OBSERVERS, DID NOT loiter in the hope that an ideal opportunity would arise, but walked directly to the nine-foot chain-link barrier and scaled it. I dropped onto the property of the Maravilla County Flood-Control Project less than ten seconds after reaching the alley side of the fence.

Few people expect bold trespassing in daylight. If anyone saw me scale the fence, he would most likely assume that I was one of the authorized personnel referenced on the gate sign and that I had lost my key.

Clean-cut young men, neatly barbered and beardless, are not readily suspected of nefarious activity. I am not only barbered and beardless but have no tattoos, no earring, no eyebrow ring, no nose ring, no lip ring, and have not subjected my tongue to a piercing.

Consequently, the most that anyone might suspect about me is that I am a time-traveler from some distant future in which the oppressive cultural norms of the 1950s have been imposed once more on the populace by a totalitarian government.

The slump-stone utility building featured screened ventilation cutouts under the eaves. They were not large enough to admit even a trim young man with a low-profile haircut.

Earlier in the morning, peering through the chain-link, I had noticed that the hardware on the plank doors appeared ancient. It might have been installed back when California's governor believed in the healing potential of crystals, confidently predicted the

obsolescence of the automobile by 1990, and dated a rock star named Linda Ronstadt.

On closer inspection, I saw that the lock cylinder was not only old but cheap. The collar did not feature a guard ring. This offered a level of security half a step up from a padlock.

During the walk here from the Grille, I had paused in Memorial Park to take a pair of sturdy locking tongs from my backpack. Now I withdrew them from under my belt and used them to rip the lock cylinder out of the door.

That was a noisy business, but it lasted no more than half a minute. Boldly, as if I belonged there, I went inside, found a light switch, and closed the doors behind me.

The shed contained a rack of tools, but primarily it served as a vestibule from which to gain access to the network of storm drains under Pico Mundo. Wide spiral stairs led down.

On the twisting staircase, picking out the perforated metal treads with my flashlight, I was reminded of the back stairs at the Jessup house. For a moment, it seemed that I had been swept into some dark game in which I had already once circled the board and had been brought by the roll of the dice to another dangerous descent.

I didn't turn on the stair lights because I didn't know if perhaps the same switch activated service lamps in the storm drains, which would announce my presence sooner than necessary.

I counted the steps, calculating eight inches for each riser. I descended over fifty feet, much deeper than I expected.

At the bottom, a door. The half-inch-diameter latch bolt could be operated from either side.

I thumbed off the flashlight.

Although I expected the bolt to scrape, the hinges to creak, instead the door opened without protest. It was remarkably heavy but smooth in action.

Blind and breathless, listening for a hostile presence, I heard nothing. When I had heard enough of it, I felt sufficiently safe to use the flashlight again.

Beyond the threshold lay a corridor that led to my right: twelve feet long, five feet wide, a low ceiling. Following it, I discovered

that it was an L, with an eight-foot short arm. Here stood another heavy door with a bolt action that worked from both sides.

This arrangement of access to the storm drains was more elaborate than I had imagined—and seemed unnecessarily complicated.

Again I doused the flashlight. Again the door eased open with not a sound.

In the absolute darkness, I listened and heard a faint silken sinuous sound. My mind's eye conjured an immense serpent slithering through the gloom.

Then I recognized the whisper of easy-flowing water as it slid without turbulence along the smooth walls of the conduit.

I switched on the flashlight, crossed the threshold. Immediately beyond lay a two-foot-wide concrete walkway, which seemed to lead to infinity both to my left and to my right.

A foot and a half below the walkway, gray water, perhaps taking much of its color by reflection from the concrete walls of the drain, swept past not in a churning rush but in a stately flow. The beam of the flashlight stitched silver filigrees across the gently undulating surface.

Based on the arc of the walls, I estimated that the water in the center of the channel measured, at its deepest, eighteen inches. Next to the walkway, it would plumb at less than a foot.

The storm drain appeared to be approximately twelve feet in diameter, a massive artery in the body of the desert. It bored away toward some distant dark heart.

I'd been concerned that switching on the service lamps in this maze would alert Simon that I was coming. But a flashlight would pinpoint me for anyone waiting in the darkness ahead.

Taking the only logical alternative to feeling my way in the dark, I retreated through the stairwell door and found a pair of switches. The nearest one brightened the drain.

Returning to the walkway, I saw that sandwiches of glass and wire protected lamps embedded in the ceiling of the tunnel at thirty-foot intervals. They did not shed the equivalent of daylight in this

deep realm; repetitive bat-wings of shadow scalloped the walls, but visibility proved good enough.

Although this was a storm drain, not a sewer, I had expected a foul smell if not a full stink. The cool air had a dank scent, but it wasn't offensive, and had that almost appealing limy smell common to concrete places.

Most of the year, these passages carried no water. They dried out and therefore did not support lingering molds of any kind.

I considered the moving water for a moment. We'd not had rain in five days. This couldn't be the last runoff from the heights in the eastern part of the county. The desert isn't that slow to drain.

The clouds crawling down the northeast sky when I'd left Terri's place might have been the outrunners of a storming horde still hours distant.

You might wonder why a desert county would need flood-control tunnels as elaborate as these. The answer has two parts, one involving climate and terrain, the other geopolitics.

Although we have little rain in Maravilla County, when storms come, they are frequently fierce deluges. Large parts of the desert are less sand than shale, less shale than rock, with little soil or vegetation to absorb a downpour or to slow the runoff from higher elevations.

Flash floods can turn low-lying desert areas into vast lakes. Without aggressive diversion of storm runoff, a significant portion of Pico Mundo would be at risk.

We can go a year without a monster storm that makes us think nervously of Noah—and then have five the next year.

Nevertheless, flood control in desert towns usually consists of a network of concrete V ditches, weather-carved arroyos, and culverts feeding either a natural dry riverbed or one engineered to carry water away from human habitations. If not for the fact that Fort Kraken, a major air-force base, backed up to Pico Mundo, we would be served by an equally low-tech and imperfect system.

For six decades, Fort Kraken had been one of the nation's most vital military resources. The flood-control system that benefited Pico Mundo had been constructed largely to ensure that the runways and

the vast facilities of the base were protected from Mother Nature in her most thunderous moods.

Some believe that under Kraken lies a deep-rock command-and-control complex that was designed to ride out nuclear strikes by the former Soviet Union and to serve as a governmental center for the reconstruction of the southwestern United States subsequent to an atomic war.

Following the end of the Cold War, Fort Kraken was downsized but not decommissioned as were many other military bases. Some say that because a chance exists that we may one day face an aggressive China armed with thousands of nuclear missiles, this hidden facility is maintained in readiness.

Rumors have it that these tunnels serve clandestine functions in addition to flood control. Maybe they disguise the venting of that deep-rock complex. Maybe some of them double as secret entrances.

All this may be true or it may be the equivalent of the urban legend that claims pet alligators, flushed down toilets when they were babies and grown to full adulthood, live in the New York City sewer system, feeding on rats and unwary sanitation workers.

One of the people who believe all or part of the Kraken story is Horton Barks, publisher of the *Maravilla County Times*. Mr. Barks also claims that twenty years ago, while hiking in the Oregon woods, he had a pleasant dinner of trail mix and canned sausages with Big Foot.

Being the person I am, with the experiences I've had, I tend to believe him about the Sasquatch.

Now, in search of Danny Jessup, trusting to my unique intuition, I turned right and followed the service walkway upstream, through ordered patterns of shadow and light, toward one kind of storm or another.

CHAPTER 16

A BOBBING TENNIS BALL, A PLASTIC BAG pulsing as if it were a jellyfish, a playing card—the ten of diamonds—a gardening glove, a cluster of red petals that might have been cyclamen: Every object on the gray tide was luminous with mysterious meaning. Or so it all seemed to me, for I had fallen into a *mood* for meaning.

Because this water poured into the flood-control system not from Pico Mundo but from a storm far to the east, it carried less flotsam than it would later if the volume increased and the downpour washed in from city streets.

Tributary tunnels fed the one in which I walked. Some were dry, but others added to the flow. Many were about two feet in diameter, although several loomed as large as this passage by which I had entered.

At each intersection, the walkway ended but resumed on the farther side. At the first ford, I considered taking off my shoes and rolling up my jeans. Barefoot, I might step on something sharp in the water—a concern that kept me shod.

My new white sneakers were at once a mess. Terrible Chester might as well have peed on them.

Mile by mile, as I moved eastward, barely aware of the gradual incline, I found the subterranean structure increasingly impressive. The pleasurable curiosity that arises from exploration gradually matured into admiration for the architects, engineers, and skilled tradesmen who had conceived and executed this project.

Admiration began to ripen into something almost like wonder.

The complex of tunnels proved to be immense. Of those large enough to provide human passage, some were lighted, but others were dark. Those that were illuminated either dwindled away as if to infinity or curved gracefully out of sight.

I saw no terminations, only the openings to new branches.

A fantastic perception arose that I had ventured into a construction that stood between worlds, or linked them, as if uncountable nautilus shells intersected in myriad dimensions, the fluid geometries of their spiral passages offering pathways to new realities.

Beneath the city of New York supposedly lie seven levels of infrastructure. Some are cramped and tortuous to service, others grand in scale.

But this was Pico Mundo, home of the Gila Monsters. Our biggest cultural event is the annual cactus festival.

At key stress points, arches and buttresses lent reinforcement, and in some places the curved walls were ribbed. These elements had been executed with rounded edges that didn't detract from the organic quality of the whole.

The immense volume of these tunnels seemed excessive for their reputed purpose. I found it difficult to believe that, with so many routes to follow, the runoff from even a hundred-year storm would rise as far as the midpoint of one of the larger arteries.

I had no difficulty, however, believing that these tunnels were only secondarily drains and were primarily one-lane highways. Trucks could travel through them, even eighteen-wheelers, and transfer from one passage to another with a two-maneuver turn.

Ordinary trucks or mobile missile launchers.

I suspected that this labyrinth lay under not only Fort Kraken and Pico Mundo. It also extended miles north and south through the Maravilla Valley.

If you needed to move around hot-target nuclear assets during the first hours of the Last War, to get them out of the devastation of the initial strike zone to points from which they could be taken to the surface and launched, these subterranean highways might meet your

requirements. They had been constructed at sufficient depth to allow considerable hardening against blast penetration.

Indeed, having accumulated this far below the surface, storm runoff eventually must be dumped not into a reservoir but into an underground lake or other geological formation that supported the area water table.

How peculiar to think of myself, in the days before my loss, at the griddle of the Pico Mundo Grille, frying cheeseburgers, wrecking eggs, turning bacon, dreaming of marriage, unaware that far beneath me, the highways of Armageddon lay in silent anticipation of sudden convoys of death.

Although I see the dead, whom others cannot see, the world wears many veils and is layered with secrets that cannot be perceived with merely a sixth sense.

Mile after mile, I progressed less quickly than I would have preferred. My psychic magnetism served me less well than usual, often leaving me standing in uncertainty when I arrived at the option of another conduit.

Doggedly nonetheless, I proceeded eastward, or suspected that I did. Holding fast to an accurate sense of direction underground is not easy.

For the first time, I encountered a depth-marker post—white with black numbers at one-foot intervals—situated in the center of the watercourse. This six-inch-square fixture rose eleven and a half feet, nearly to the apex of the curved ceiling.

The gray water reached three or four inches shy of the two-foot line, close to the estimation that I'd made earlier, but of greater interest was the corpse. It had snared on the post.

The cadaver bobbed facedown in the flow. The murky water, the billowing pants and shirt, prevented me from determining even the sex of the deceased from where I stood on the elevated walkway.

My heart knocked, knocked, and the sound of it echoed through me as though I were an empty house.

If this was Danny, I was done. Done not just with the search for him, but finished.

Two feet of fast-moving water could in an instant sweep a grown man off balance. This conduit had only a minimal slope, however, and the unchanging depth of the flow, plus the lazy look of it, suggested that the velocity was—and would continue to be for a while—less than overwhelming.

After dropping my backpack on the walkway, I stepped down into the channel and waded toward the marker post. As lazy as the water appeared to be, it still had power.

Rather than dawdle in midstream and tempt the gods of the drain, I didn't at once try to roll the body over and look at its face, but grabbed a fistful of its clothing and towed it to the walkway.

Although I am comfortable with the spirits of the dead, cadavers spook me. They seem like empty vessels in which a new and malevolent entity might take up residence.

I've never actually known this to happen, though there's a clerk at the Pico Mundo 7-Eleven that I wonder about.

On the walkway, I flopped the body on its back and recognized the snaky man who had Tasered me.

Not Danny. A thin whimper of relief escaped me.

At the same time my nerves coiled tight and I shuddered. The dead man's face was unlike the faces of other corpses that I had seen.

His eyes had rolled so far back in his head that I could not see the thinnest crescent of green. Although he could have been dead, at most, only a couple hours, his eyes also seemed to swell forward as though pressure within the skull might force them from their sockets.

Had his face been a bloodless white, I wouldn't have been surprised. Had the skin already turned a pale green, as it always will within a day of death, I would have wondered what had hastened the process of decomposition, but I would not have been startled.

The skin was neither bloodless nor pale green, nor even livid, but several shades of gray, mottled from ash-pale to charcoal. He looked drawn, too, as if life were a juice that had been sucked out of him.

His mouth hung open. His tongue was gone. I didn't think anyone had cut it out. He appeared to have swallowed it. Aggressively.

His head bore no obvious injuries. Although I was curious about the cause of death, I had no intention of undressing him in a search for wounds.

I *did* roll him over, facedown, to check for a wallet. He wasn't carrying one.

If this man had not died accidentally, if he had been murdered, surely Danny Jessup had not killed him. Which seemed to leave only the possibility that he had been offed by one of his associates.

After retrieving my backpack and shrugging my arms through the straps, I continued in the direction that I had been headed. Several times, I glanced back, half expecting to discover that he had risen, but he never did.

CHAPTER 17

EVENTUALLY I TURNED EAST-SOUTHEAST INTO another tunnel. This one was dark.

Sufficient light intruded past the intersection to reveal the GFI switch on the wall of the new passage. The stainless-steel plate was set at six feet, suggesting the designers of the flood-control system had not expected water ever to rise within a foot of that mark, confirming that the volume of the drains was far greater than a worst-case storm required.

I flicked the switch. The tunnel ahead brightened, as perhaps did other branches related to it.

Because I now proceeded east-southeast and because the storm was evidently coming in from the north, this new passageway brought no water toward me.

The concrete had nearly dried from its most recent soaking. The floor featured a skin of pale sediment littered with small items that had fallen out of the last spate of runoff from a previous storm.

I looked for footprints in the silt, but saw none. If Danny and his captors had come this way, they had stayed on the elevated walkway that I used.

My sixth sense compelled me forward. As I walked somewhat faster than before, I wondered....

In the streets of Pico Mundo are manhole covers. Those heavy cast-iron discs must be disengaged from integrating latch slots and lifted with a special tool.

Logic argued that the conduits belonging to the department of power and water and those under the authority of the sewer department must be systems separate from—and much more humble than—the flood-control tunnels. Otherwise, I would by now have encountered numerous maintenance shafts with stairs or ladders.

Although I had walked miles in the first tunnel, I had not seen a single service entrance after the one through which I had arrived. Less than two hundred yards into the new passageway, I came to an unmarked steel door in the wall.

The psychic magnetism that drew me toward Danny Jessup did not pull me toward this exit. Simple curiosity motivated me.

Beyond the door—heavy to the point of massiveness, as had been the two through which I had entered—I located a light switch and a T-shaped corridor. Other doors stood at the ends of the short arms of the T.

One of these revealed a vestibule where an open spiral of metal stairs led up to what was clearly another slump-stone shed like the one into which I had broken, property of the Maravilla County Flood-Control Project.

At the other end of the T, a door opened into a high-ceilinged transition space that housed a steep flight of conventional stairs. They rose twenty feet to a door marked PMDPW.

I interpreted this to mean *Pico Mundo Department of Power and Water*. Also stenciled on the steel was 16S-SW-V2453, which meant nothing to me.

I explored no farther. I had discovered that the subterranean systems of the department of power and water interfaced with the flood-control-project tunnels at least at a few points.

Why this might eventually be useful information, I didn't know, but I felt that it would.

After returning to the drain and discovering that the white-eyed snaky man was not waiting for me, I proceeded east-southeast.

When another tunnel met this one, the elevated walkway ended. In the powdery sediment below were footprints crossing the intersection to the place where the walkway resumed.

I dropped two feet to the drain floor and studied the prints in the silt.

Danny's tracks were different from the others. His numerous fractures over the years—and the unfortunate distortions in the bones that often accompanied healing in a victim of osteogenesis imperfecta—had left his right leg an inch shorter than his left, and twisted. He hobbled with a roll of the hips and tended to drag his right foot.

If I was also hunchbacked, he had once said, I'd have a lifelong job in the bell tower at Notre Dame, with good fringe benefits, but as usual, Mother Nature hasn't played fair with me.

In keeping with his diminutive stature, his feet were no bigger than those of a ten- or twelve-year-old. In addition, his right was a size larger than his left.

No one else could have made these tracks.

When I considered how far they had brought him on foot, I felt sick, angry, and afraid for him.

He could take short walks—a few blocks, a tour of the mall—without pain, sometimes even without discomfort. But a trek as long as this would be agony for him.

I had thought Danny had been taken by two men—his biological father, Simon Makepeace, and the nameless snaky man, now deceased. In the powdery silt, however, were *three* additional sets of footprints.

Two were the prints of grown men, one with larger feet than the other. The third appeared to have been made by a boy or a woman.

I tracked them across the confluence of tunnels to the next section of walkway. Thereafter, I again had nothing to follow except my uniquely intense intuition.

This dry section of the labyrinth lacked even the silken whisper of shallow water flowing unimpeded. This was deeper than a silence; this was a *hush*.

I have a light tread; and having proceeded at a measured pace, I was not breathing hard. Even as I walked, I could listen to the tunnel without masking any noises my quarry might make. But no telltale footfalls or voices came to me.

A couple of times, I halted, closed my eyes to concentrate on listening. I heard only a deep hollow *potential* for sound, and not a throb or gurgle that wasn't internal to me.

The evidence of such profound silence suggested that somewhere ahead, the four had departed the flood tunnels.

Why would Simon have kidnapped a son he didn't want and whom he refused to believe he had fathered?

Answer: If he thought that Danny was the offspring of the man with whom Carol had cuckolded him, Simon might take satisfaction in killing him. He was a sociopath. Neither logic nor ordinary emotions served as a foundation for his actions. Power—and the pleasure he got from exercising it—and survival were his only motivations.

That answer had satisfied me thus far—but no longer.

Simon could have murdered Danny in his bedroom. Or if my arrival at the Jessup house had interrupted him, he could have done the job in the van, while the snaky guy drove, and would have had time for torture if that was what he wanted.

Bringing Danny into this maze and hiking him through miles of tunnels qualified as a form of torture, but it was neither dramatic enough nor physically invasive enough to thrill a homicidal sociopath who liked *wet* work.

Simon—and his remaining two companions—had some use for poor Danny that eluded me.

Neither had they come this way to circumvent the roadblocks, nor the sheriff's-department aerial patrols. They could have found better places in which to lie low until the blockades were removed.

With grim expectations, I walked faster now, not because psychic magnetism pulled me more effectively, which it did not, but because at each intersection, I had the confirmation of their footprints in the silt.

The endless gray walls, the monotony of the patterns of shadow and light thrown by the overhead lamps, the silence: This might have served as Hell for any hopeless sinner whose two greatest fears were solitude and boredom.

Following the discovery of the first footprints, I hurried along for more than another thirty minutes, not running but walking briskly—and came to the place at which they had exited the maze.

CHAPTER 18

WHEN I TOUCHED THE STAINLESS-STEEL service door in the wall of the tunnel, a psychic hook bit deep, and I felt myself being reeled forward, as if my quarry were the fishermen and I the fish.

Beyond the door, an L-shaped hallway. At the end of the L, a door. Pushing through the door, I found a vestibule, spiral stairs, and at the top another slump-stone shed with tool rack.

Although the February day was pleasantly warm, not blistering, the air in here was stuffy. The smell of dry rot settled from the rafters under the sun-baked metal roof.

Apparently Simon had picked the lock as he had done at the first shed off the alleyway near the Blue Moon Cafe. Leaving, they had closed the door, and it had latched securely behind them.

With my laminated driver's license, I could spring a simple latch, but although cheap and flimsy, this model would be impervious to a plastic loid. I retrieved the pair of locking tongs from my backpack.

I was not concerned about the noise alerting Simon and his crew. They would have passed this way hours ago; and I had every reason to believe that they had kept moving.

As I was about to apply the tongs to the lock cylinder, Terri's satellite phone rang, startling me.

I fumbled it from my pocket and answered on the third ring.
"Yeah?"

"Hi."

From that single word, I recognized the smoky-voiced woman who had called while I'd been sitting under the branches of the poisonous brugmansia behind the Ying house, the previous night.

"You again."

"Me."

She could have obtained this number only by calling my recharged cell phone and talking to Terri.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"You still think I have the wrong number?"

"No. Who are you?"

She said, "You have to ask?"

"Didn't I just?"

"You shouldn't have to ask."

"I don't know your voice."

"So many men know it well."

If she wasn't speaking in riddles, she was at least being obscure, taunting.

"Have I ever met you?" I asked.

"No. But can't you dream me up?"

"Dream you up?"

"I'm disappointed in you."

"Again?"

"Still."

I thought of the footprints in the silt. One pair had belonged to either a boy or a woman.

Not sure of the game, I waited.

She waited, too.

In most of the rafter junctions, spiders had spun webs. Those architects hung, glossy and black, among the pale carcasses of flies and moths on which they had feasted.

Finally I said, "What do you want?"

"Miracles."

"By which you mean—what?"

"Fabulous impossible things."

"Why call me?"

"Who else?"

“I’m a fry cook.”

“Astonish me.”

“I sling hash.”

She said, “Icy fingers.”

“What?”

“That’s what I want.”

“You want icy fingers?”

“Up and down my spine.”

“Get an Eskimo masseuse.”

“Masseuse?”

“For the icy fingers.”

The humorless always need to ask, and she did: “Is that a joke?”

“Not a great one,” I admitted.

“You think everything’s funny? Is that the way you are?”

“Not everything.”

“Not very much at all, asshole. You laughing now?”

“No, not now.”

“You know what I think would be funny?”

I didn’t reply.

“What I think would be funny is I take a hammer to the little creep’s arm.”

Overhead, an eight-legged harpist moved, and silent arpeggios trembled through taut strings of spider silk.

She said, “Will his bones shatter like glass?”

I didn’t at once respond. I thought before I spoke, then said, “I’m sorry.”

“What’re you sorry for?”

“I’m sorry for offending you with the joke about the Eskimo.”

“Baby, I don’t offend.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“I just get pissed off.”

“I’m sorry. I mean it.”

“Don’t be boring,” she said.

I said, “Please don’t hurt him.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Why should you?”

“To get what I want,” she said.

“What do you want?”

“Miracles.”

“Maybe it’s me, I’m sure it is, but you aren’t making sense.”

“Miracles,” she repeated.

“Tell me what I can do?”

“Amazements.”

“What can I do to get him back unhurt?”

“You disappoint me.”

“I’m trying to understand.”

“He’s proud of his face, isn’t he?” she asked.

“Proud? I don’t know.”

“It’s the only part of him not screwed up.”

My mouth had gone dry, but not because the shed was hot and layered with dust.

“He’s got a pretty face,” she said. “For now.”

She terminated the call.

Briefly I considered pressing *69 to see if I could ring her back even though she had a block on her caller ID. I did not do it because I suspected this would be a mistake.

Although her cryptic statements shed no light on her enigmatic agenda, one thing seemed clear. She was accustomed to control, and at the mildest challenge to it, she responded with hostility.

Having assigned to herself the aggressive role in this, she expected me to be passive. If I star-sixty-nined her, she would no doubt be pissed off.

She was capable of cruelty. What anger I inspired in her, she might vent on Danny.

The smell of dry rot. Of dust. Of something dead and desiccated in a shadowy corner.

I returned the phone to my pocket.

On a silken thread, a spider descended from its web, lazily turning in the still air, legs trembling.

CHAPTER 19

I RIPPED OUT THE LOCK CYLINDER, SHOVED open the door, and left the spiders to their preying.

So otherworldly and disturbing had been the flood-control system, so eerie the phone conversation that followed, had I stepped across the threshold into Narnia, I would not have been more than mildly surprised.

In fact, I found myself beyond the limits of Pico Mundo, but not in a land ruled by magic. On all sides lay desert scrub, rocky and remorseless.

This shed stood on a concrete pad twice its size. A chain-link fence enclosed the facility.

I walked the perimeter of this enclosure, studying the rugged landscape, seeking any sign of an observer. The encircling terrain offered no good hiding places.

When it appeared that retreat to the shed, to avoid gunfire, would not be necessary, I climbed the chain-link gate.

The stony ground immediately before me took no impressions. Relying on intuition, I headed south.

The sun had reached its apex. Perhaps five hours of daylight remained before the early winter nightfall.

To the south and west, the pale sky looked three shades short of the ideal blue, as though it had been faded by millennia of sunshine reflected upon it from the Mojave.

In contrast, behind me, the northern third of the heavens had been consumed by ravenous masses of threatening clouds. They were dirty, as they had been earlier, but now also bruised.

Within a hundred yards, I topped a low hill and descended into a swale where the soft soil took prints. Before me again were the tracks of the fugitives and their captive.

Danny had been dragging his right foot worse here than in the flood tunnels. The evidence of his gait suggested acute pain and desperation.

Most victims of osteogenesis imperfecta—OI—experience a marked decrease in fractures following puberty. Danny had been one of those.

Upon reaching adulthood, the most fortunate discover that they are only minimally—if at all—more prone to broken bones than are people without their affliction. They are left with the legacy of bodies distorted by deformed healing and abnormal bone growth, and some of them eventually go deaf from otosclerosis, but otherwise the worst ravages of this genetic disorder are behind them.

While not ten percent as fragile as he had been as a child, Danny was one of an unfortunate minority of OI adults who must remain cautious. He had not in a long time *casually* broken a bone, as when he had at the age of six cracked his wrist while snap-dealing Old Maid. But a year ago, in a fall, he had fractured his right radius.

For a moment I studied the woman's footprints, wondering who she was, what she was, why.

I followed the swale about two hundred yards before the tracks departed it. They vanished on a stony slope.

As I started to climb the hillside, the satellite phone rang.

She said, "Odd Thomas?"

"Who else?"

"I've seen your picture," she said.

"My ears always photograph bigger than they are."

"You have the look," she said.

"What look?"

"*Mundunugu.*"

“Is that a word?”

“You know what it means.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t.”

“Liar,” she said, but not angrily.

This was the equivalent of table conversation at the Mad Hatter’s tea party.

She said, “You want the little creep?”

“I want Danny. Alive.”

“You think you can find him?”

I said, “I’m trying.”

“You were so fast, now you’re damn slow.”

“What do you think you know about me?”

In a coy voice, she said, “What is there to know, baby?”

“Not much.”

“For Danny’s sake, I hope that’s not true.”

I began to have the queasy if inexplicable feeling that somehow Dr. Jessup had been murdered...because of me.

“You don’t want to be in trouble this bad,” I said.

“Nobody can hurt me,” she declared.

“Is that right?”

“I’m invincible.”

“Good for you.”

“You know why?”

“Why?”

“I have thirty in an amulet.”

“Thirty what?” I asked.

“*Ti bon ange.*”

I had never heard the term before. “What does that mean?”

“You know.”

“Not really.”

“Liar.”

When she didn’t hang up but didn’t immediately say anything more, either, I sat on the ground, facing west again.

Except for an occasional clump of mesquite and a bristle of bunch-grass, the land was ash-gray and acid-yellow.

“You still there?” she asked.

“Where would I go?”

“So *where* are you?”

I traded another question: “Can I speak to Simon?”

“Simple or says?”

“What’s that mean?”

“Simple Simon or Simon Says?”

“Simon Makepeace,” I said patiently.

“You think he’s here?”

“Yes.”

“Loser.”

“He killed Wilbur Jessup.”

“You’re half-assed at this,” she said.

“At what?”

“Don’t disappoint me.”

“I thought you said I already had.”

“Don’t disappoint me *anymore*.”

“Or what?” I asked, and immediately wished that I had not.

“How about this...”

I waited.

Finally she said, “How about, you find us by sundown or we break both his legs.”

“If you want me to find you, just tell me where you are.”

“What would be the point of that? If you don’t find us by nine o’clock, we also break both his arms.”

“Don’t do this. He never harmed you. He never harmed anyone.”

“What’s the first rule?” she asked.

Remembering our shortest and most cryptic conversation, from the previous night, I said, “I have to come alone.”

“You bring cops or anyone, we break his pretty face, and then the rest of his life, he’ll be butt ugly from top to bottom.”

When she hung up, I pressed END.

Whoever she might be, she was crazy. Okay. I’d dealt with crazy before.

She was crazy *and* evil. Nothing new about that, either.

CHAPTER 20

I SHRUGGED OUT OF MY BACKPACK AND rummaged in it for an Evian bottle. The water wasn't cold but tasted delicious.

The plastic bottle did not actually contain Evian. I had filled it at the tap in my kitchen.

If you would pay a steep price for bottled water, why wouldn't you pay even more for a bag of fresh Rocky Mountain air if someday you saw it in the market?

Although I am not a skinflint, for years I have lived frugally. As a short-order cook with plans to marry, paid a fair but not lavish salary, I had needed to save for our future.

Now she is gone, and I am alone, and the last thing I need money for is a wedding cake. Yet from long habit, when it comes to spending on myself, I still pinch each penny hard enough to press it into the size of a quarter.

Given my peculiar and adventurous life, I don't expect to live long enough to develop an enlarged prostate, but if I *do* miraculously reach ninety before I croak, I'll probably be one of those eccentrics who, assumed to be poor, leaves a million dollars' cash rolled up in old coffee cans with instructions to spend it on the care of homeless poodles.

After finishing the faux Evian, I returned the empty bottle to my backpack, and then watered a patch of desert with Odd's finest.

I suspected that I had drawn close to my objective, and now I had a deadline. Sundown.

Before completing the final leg of the journey, however, I needed to know about a few things that were happening in the real world.

None of Chief Porter's numbers were programmed for speed dial on Terri's phone, but I had long ago memorized all of them.

He answered his mobile phone on the second ring. "Porter."

"Sir, sorry to interrupt."

"Interrupt what? You think I'm in a whirl of busy police work?"

"Aren't you?"

"Right now, son, I feel like a cow."

"A cow, sir?"

"A cow standing in a field, chewing its cud."

"You don't sound as relaxed as a cow," I said.

"It's not cow-relaxed I'm feeling. It's cow-dumb."

"No leads on Simon?"

"Oh, we've got Simon. He's jailed in Santa Barbara."

"That's pretty fast work."

"Faster than you think. He was arrested two days ago for starting a bar fight. He struck the arresting officer. They're holding him for assault."

"Two days ago. So the case..."

"The case," he said, "isn't what we thought it was. Simon didn't kill Dr. Jessup. Though he says he's happy someone did."

"Was it maybe murder-for-hire?"

Chief Porter laughed sourly. "With Simon's prison record, the job he was able to get was pumping out septic tanks. He lives in a rented room."

"Some people would do a hit for a thousand bucks," I said.

"They sure would, but the most they'd be likely to get from Simon is a free septic clean-out."

The dead desert did a Lazarus, breathed and seemed about to rise. Bunch-grass shivered. Jimsonweed whispered briefly, but then fell silent as the air went still.

Gazing north, toward the distant thunderheads, I said, "What about the white van?"

"Stolen. We didn't get any prints off it worth spit."

"No other leads?"

“Not unless county CSI finds some strange DNA or other trace evidence at the Jessup place. What’s the situation with you, son?”

I surveyed the surrounding wasteland. “I’m out and about.”

“Feeling at all magnetic?”

Lying to him would be harder than lying to myself. “I’m being pulled, sir.”

“Pulled where?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m still on the move.”

“Where are you now?”

“I’d rather not say, sir.”

“You’re not gonna Lone Ranger this,” he worried.

“If that seems best.”

“No Tonto, no Silver—that’s not smart. Use your head, son.”

“Sometimes you’ve got to trust your heart.”

“No point in me arguing with you, is there?”

“No, sir. But something you could do is run a search of Danny’s room, look for evidence that a woman might’ve come into his life lately.”

“You know I’m not cruel, Odd, but as a cop, I have to stay *real*. If that poor kid went on a date, it would be all over Pico Mundo the next morning.”

“This might be a discreet relationship, sir. And I’m not saying Danny got anything from it that he hoped to. Fact is, maybe he got a world of hurt.”

After a silence, the chief said, “He would be vulnerable, you mean. To a predator.”

“Loneliness can lower your defenses.”

The chief said, “But they didn’t steal anything. They didn’t ransack the house. They didn’t even bother taking the money out of Dr. Jessup’s wallet.”

“So they wanted something other than money from Danny.”

“Which would be—what?”

“That’s still a blind spot for me, sir. I can sort of feel a shape in it, but I can’t yet see the thing.”

Far to the north, between the charred sky and the ashen earth, the rain resembled shimmering curtains of smoke.

“I have to get moving,” I said.

“If we turn up anything about a woman, I’ll call you.”

“No, sir, I’d rather you didn’t. I need to keep the line open and save the battery. I just called because I wanted you to know there’s a woman in it, so if anything happens to me, you’ve got a starting place. A woman and three men.”

“Three? The one who Tasered you—and who else?”

“Thought one must be Simon,” I said, “but now he can’t be. All I know about the others is, one of them has big feet.”

“Big feet?”

“Say a prayer for me, sir.”

“I do each night.”

I terminated the call.

After hoisting my backpack, I continued the climb that had been interrupted by the woman’s call. The slope rose a long way but at a gentle incline. Rotten shale crunched and slid from under my feet, repeatedly testing my agility and balance.

A few small lizards skittered out of my way. I remained watchful for rattlesnakes.

Rugged leather hiking boots would have been better than the softer sneakers that I was wearing. Eventually, I would probably have to do some sneaking, and these once-white shoes would be ideal for that.

Maybe I shouldn’t have worried about footwear, snakes, and balance if I was destined to be killed by someone waiting behind a white paneled door. On the other hand, I didn’t want to rely on the theory that the repetitive dream was reliably predictive, because perhaps it had just been the consequence of too much fried food and spicy salsa.

Distant and celestial, a great door rolled open, rumbling in its tracks, and a breeze stirred the day again. When the faraway thunder faded, the air did not fall still as it had earlier, but continued to chase through the sparse vegetation, like a ghost pack of coyotes.

When I reached the top of the hill, I knew that my destination lay before me. Danny Jessup would be found here, captive.

In the distance lay the interstate. A four-lane approach road led from that highway to the plain below. At the end of the road stood the ruined casino and the blackened tower, where Death had gone to gamble and had, as always, won.

CHAPTER 21

THEY WERE THE PANAMINT TRIBE, OF THE Shoshoni-Comanche family. These days we are told that throughout their history—like all the natives of this land prior to Columbus and the imposition of Italian cuisine on the continent—they had been peaceful, deeply spiritual, selfless, and unfailingly reverent toward nature.

The gambling industry—feeding on weakness and loss, indifferent to suffering, materialistic, insatiably greedy, smearing across nature some of the ugliest, gaudiest architecture in the history of human construction—was seen by Indian leaders as a perfect fit for them. The state of California agreed, granting to Native Americans a monopoly on casino gambling within its borders.

Concerned that the Great Spirit alone might not provide enough guidance to squeeze every possible drop of revenue out of their new enterprises, most tribes made deals with experienced gaming companies to manage their casinos. Cash rooms were established, games were set up and staffed, the doors were opened, and under the watchful eyes of the usual thugs, the river of money flowed.

The golden age of Indian wealth loomed, every Native American soon to be rich. But the flow did not reach as deeply or as quickly into the Indian population as expected.

Funny how that happens.

Addiction to gambling, impoverishment therefrom, and associated crime rose in the community.

Not so funny how that happens.

On the plain below the hilltop where I stood, about a mile away, on tribal land, waited the Panamint Resort and Spa. Once it had been as glittering, as neon-splashed, as tacky as any facility of its kind, but its glory days were gone.

The sixteen-story hotel had all the grace of a high-rise prison. Five years ago, it had withstood an earthquake with minor damage, but it had failed to weather the subsequent fire. Most of its windows had been shattered by the temblor or had exploded from the heat as the rooms blazed. Great lapping tongues of smoke had licked black patterns across the walls.

The two-story casino, wrapping three sides of the tower, had collapsed at one corner. Cast in tinted concrete, a facade of mystic Indian symbols—many of which were not actual Indian symbols but New Age interpretations of Indian spiritualism as previously conceived by Hollywood film designers—had mostly torn away from the building and collapsed into the surrounding parking lot. A few vehicles remained, crushed and corroding under the debris.

Concerned that a sentinel with binoculars might be surveying the approaches, I retreated from the hilltop, hoping that I had not been spotted.

Within days of the resort disaster, many had predicted that, considering the money to be made, the place would be rebuilt within a year. Four years later, demolition of the burned-out hulk had not begun.

Contractors were accused of having cut corners in construction that weakened the structure. County building inspectors were brought up on charges of having accepted bribes; they in turn blew the whistle on corruption in the county board of supervisors.

So much blame could be widely assessed that a farrago of both legitimate and frivolous litigation, of battling public-relations firms, resulted in several bankruptcies, two suicides, uncounted divorces, and one sex-change operation.

Most of those Panamints who had made fortunes had been stripped of them by settlements or were hemorrhaging still to attorneys. Those who had never gotten wealthy but had become

compulsive gamblers were inconvenienced by the need to travel farther to lose what little they had.

Currently, half the litigations await final resolution, and no one knows if the resort will rise like a phoenix. Even the right—some would say the obligation—to bulldoze the ruins has been frozen by a judge pending the fate of an appeal of a key court decision.

Staying below the crest, I traversed south until the rocky slope rolled into a declivity.

Numerous hills fold to form a crescent collar around the west, south, and east of the plain on which the ravaged resort stands, with flatlands and bustling interstate to the north. Among these folds, I followed a series of narrow divides that eventually widened into a dry wash, progressing east by a serpentine route forced upon me by the topography.

If Danny's kidnappers had camped on one of the higher floors of the hotel, the better to keep a lookout, I needed to approach from an unexpected direction. I wanted to get as close to the property as possible before coming out in the open.

How the nameless woman knew that I would be able to follow them, how she knew that I would be compelled to follow, why she *wanted* me to follow, I couldn't explain with certainty. Reason, however, led me to the inescapable suspicion that Danny had shared with her the secret of my gift.

Her cryptic conversation on the phone, her taunting, seemed designed to tease admissions from me. She sought confirmation of facts that she already knew.

A year ago, he had lost his mother to cancer. As his closest friend, I had been a companion in his grief—until my own loss in August.

He was not a man with many friends. His physical limitations, his appearance, and his acerbic wit limited his social opportunities.

When I had turned inward, giving myself entirely to my grief, and then to writing about the events of August, I had not comforted him any longer, not as generously as I should have done.

For consolation, he had his adoptive father. But Dr. Jessup had been grieving, too, and being a man of some ambition, had probably sought solace in his work.

Loneliness comes in two basic varieties. When it results from a desire for solitude, loneliness is a door we close against the world. When the world instead rejects us, loneliness is an open door, unused.

Someone had come through that door when Danny was at his most vulnerable. She had a smoky, silken voice.

CHAPTER 22

IN A BELLY CRAWL, OUT OF THE DRY WASH, onto flat land, leaving the hills behind, I squirmed fast through bush sage three feet high, which gave me cover. My objective was a wall that separated the desert from the grounds of the resort.

Jackrabbits and a variety of rodents shelter from the sun and nibble leaves in just such vegetation. Where rabbits and rats went, snakes would follow, feeding.

Fortunately snakes are shy; not as shy as church mice, but shy enough. To warn them off, I made plenty of noise before slithering out of the wash and into the sage, and as I moved, I grunted and spat dirt and sneezed and, in general, produced enough noise to annoy all wildlife into relocating.

Assuming that my adversaries had camped high in the hotel, and considering that I was still a few hundred yards from that structure, what noise I made would not alert them.

If they happened to be looking in this direction, they would be scanning for movement. But the rustle of the bush sage would not draw special notice; the breeze out of the north had stiffened, shuddering all the scrub and weeds. Tumbleweed tumbled, and here and there a dust devil danced.

Having avoided the bite of snake, the sting of scorpion, the nip of spider, I reached the edge of the resort grounds. I got to my feet and leaned with my back against the wall.

I was covered in pale dust and in a powdery white substance acquired from the undersides of the sage leaves.

The unfortunate consequence of psychic magnetism is not only that it too often draws me into dangerous circumstances but also into dirty places. I'm perpetually behind in my laundry.

After brushing myself off, I followed the resort wall, which gradually curved northeast. On this side, exposed concrete block had been painted white; on the farther side, where paying customers had been able to see it, the eight-foot-high barrier had been plastered and painted pink.

Following the quake and the fire, tribal officials posted metal signs at hundred-foot intervals, sternly warning would-be trespassers of the dangers of the damaged structures beyond and of toxic residues they might contain. The Mojave sun had faded those warnings, but they remained readable.

Along the wall, on the grounds of the resort, were irregularly planted clusters of palm trees. Because they were not native to the Mojave and hadn't been watered after the quake wrecked the landscape-irrigation system, they were dead.

Some of the fronds had fallen off; others hung as if limp; and the rest bristled, shaggy and brown. Nevertheless, I found a cluster that screened a portion of the wall from the hotel.

I jumped, got a handhold, clambered up, over, and dropped into a drift of debris from the palms, not as fluidly as those words imply, but with enough thrashing and elbow-knocking to prove beyond doubt that I couldn't have descended from apes. I crouched behind the thick palm boles.

Beyond the ragged trees lay an enormous swimming pool crafted to imitate a natural rock formation. Man-made waterfalls doubled as water slides.

Nothing fell from the falls. The drained pool was half full of windblown debris.

If Danny's captors were keeping a watch, they would most likely focus their attention to the west, the direction from which they themselves had come. They might also be monitoring the road that linked the resort and the interstate in the north.

The three of them could not guard four sides of the hotel. Furthermore, I doubted that each would go off alone to a separate post. At most, their vigilance encompassed two of the approaches.

Chances were that I could get from the palms to the building without being seen.

They would have more weapons than the shotgun, but I didn't worry about taking a bullet. If they had wanted to kill me, I would not have been Tasered at the Jessup house; I would have been shot in the face.

Later, perhaps, they would be pleased to kill me. Now they wanted something else. Miracles. Amazements. Icy fingers. Fabulous impossible things.

So...get inside, scout the terrain, find out where they were holding Danny. Once I understood the situation, if I could not spring him without help, I'd have to call Wyatt Porter regardless of the fact that in this case my intuition equated police involvement with certain death.

I broke from the cover of the trees and raced across artificial-stone decking where once well-oiled sunbathers had drowsed on padded lounge chairs, prepping themselves for melanoma.

Instead of tropical rum drinks, an open-air tiki-style poolside bar offered formidable piles of bird droppings. These were produced by feathered presences that I could not see, but that I heard. The flock roosted on the crisscrossing lengths of imitation bamboo that supported the densely thatched roof of plastic palm fronds, and as I hurried past, they flapped and shrilled to warn me off.

By the time I rounded the pool and reached the back entrance to the hotel, I'd had a chance to draw a lesson from the unseen birds. Broken, burned, abandoned, wind-worn, sand-scoured, even if more structurally sound than not, the Panamint Resort and Spa no longer merited even a single star in the Michelin Guide; but it might have become the home to various desert fauna that found the place more hospitable than their usual holes in the ground.

In addition to the threat posed by the mystery woman and her two murderous male friends, I would need to be alert for predators that had no mobile phones.

The sliding glass doors at the back of the hotel, shattered in the quake, had been replaced with sheets of plywood to deny easy access to the morbidly curious. Stapled to these panels were plastic sleeves holding notices of the vigorous civil actions that would be taken against anyone caught on the premises.

The screws that held one of the sheets of plywood in place had been removed, and the panel had been laid aside. Judging by the sand and scraps of weeds that had drifted over the panel, it had not been taken down as recently as the past twenty-four hours, but weeks or months ago.

For two years or so after the destruction of the resort, the tribe had paid for a roving security patrol 24/7. As the suits and countersuits proliferated and the likelihood grew that the property might be surrendered to creditors—much to the creditors' horror—the patrols had become an expense it no longer made sense to incur.

With the hotel open before me, with a breeze churning itself into a wind at my back, with a storm coming and Danny at risk, I nevertheless hesitated to cross the threshold. I am not as fragile as Danny Jessup, neither physically nor emotionally, yet everyone has a breaking point.

I delayed not because of the people or the other living menaces that lurked in the ruined resort. I was given pause, instead, by the thought of the lingering dead who might still haunt its soot-stained spaces.

CHAPTER 23

INSIDE THE REAR DOORS OF THE HOTEL LAY what might have been a secondary lobby illuminated only by ashen light that sifted through the gap in the plywood barrier.

My shadow before me, a gray ghost, was visible from its legs to its neck. Its head became one with the murk, as though it were cast by a decapitated man.

I switched on a flashlight and swept the walls. The fire itself had not raged here, but smoke stains mottled everything.

At first the presence of furniture—sofas, armchairs—surprised me, as it seemed they should have been salvaged. Then I realized that their grungy condition resulted not simply from smoke and from five years of abandonment, but also from having been saturated by fire hoses, which had left their stuffing sodden and their frames badly warped.

Even five years after the tragedy, the air smelled of char, of scorched metal, of melted plastics, of fried insulation. Underlying that miasma were other smells less astringent but also less pleasing, which perhaps were best left unanalyzed.

Footprints patterned the carpet of soot, ashes, dust, and sand. Danny's unique tracks were not among them.

On closer inspection, I saw that none of the tread patterns of the shoes appeared crisp. They had been smoothed by drafts, softened by later siftings of ashes and dust.

These prints had been made weeks if not months ago. My quarry had not entered by this route.

A set or perhaps two sets of paw prints looked fresh. Maybe the Panamints of a hundred years ago—close to nature and unfamiliar with the roulette wheel—could have read these impressions at a glance.

With nothing of the tracker in my heritage and nothing in my fry-cook training applicable to the problem, I had to rely not on knowledge but on imagination to summon a creature to fit those tracks. My mind leapt directly to an image of a saber-toothed tiger, though that species had been extinct over ten thousand years.

In the unlikely event that a single immortal saber-tooth had survived millennia beyond all others of his species, I supposed I could escape intact from a confrontation. After all, I had thus far survived Terrible Chester.

To the left of this lobby had been a coffee shop with a view of the hotel pool. A partial collapse of the ceiling, just beyond the entrance to the restaurant, presented extreme geometries of Sheetrock and two-by-fours.

To the right, a wide hallway led into darkness that a flashlight could not entirely relieve, into silence. Bronze letters fixed to the wall above the entrance to that passage promised REST ROOMS, CONFERENCE ROOMS, LADY LUCK BALLROOM.

Luckless people had died in the ballroom. A massive chandelier, suspended not from a red-steel beam as the construction drawings had required, but from a wooden beam, had fallen on the crowd, crushing and skewering those under it, when the initial shock of the quake had cracked some four-by-sixes as though they were balsa wood.

I crossed the littered lobby, weaving through the sagging sofas and the overturned armchairs, and departed by a third route, another wide hall that evidently led toward the front of the hotel. The tracks of the saber-tooth also proceeded in that direction.

Belatedly, I thought of the satellite phone. I took it from my pocket, switched off the ringer, and set it to vibrate instead. If the seeker of miracles called me again, and if I happened to be close to

her position in the hotel, I didn't want the phone to reveal my presence.

I'd never visited this place during the years that it had been a thriving enterprise. When it is within my power to do so, when the dead are making no demands on me, I seek serenity, not excitement. The turn of the cards and the roll of the dice offer me no chance to win freedom from the destiny that my gift imposes upon me.

My unfamiliarity with the resort, combined with the damage wrought by the earthquake and the fire, presented me with a man-made wilderness: hallways and rooms no longer always clearly defined due to the collapse of partitions, a maze of passages and spaces, here barren and bleak, here chaotic and threatening, revealed only in wedges defined by the flashlight beam.

By a route that I could not have retraced, I entered the burned-out casino.

Casinos have no windows, no clocks. The masters of the games want their customers to forget the passage of time, to lay down just one more bet, and then one more. Cavernous, larger than a football field, the room was too long for my light to find the farther end.

One corner of the casino had suffered partial collapse. Otherwise, the immense chamber remained structurally intact.

Hundreds of broken slot machines were tumbled on the floor. Others stood in long rows, as they had before the quake, half-melted but at attention, like ranks of war machines, robot soldiers halted in their march when a blast of radiation had fried their circuits.

Most of the games and pit-boss stations had been reduced to charred debris. A couple of scorched craps tables remained, filled with blackened chunks of plaster ornamentation that had fallen from the ceiling.

Amidst the charred and splintered rubble, two damaged blackjack games stood upright. A pair of stools waited at one of those games, as though the devil and his date had been playing when the fire broke out, had wished not to be distracted from their cards, commanding respect from the flames.

Instead of the devil, a pleasant-looking man with receding hair perched on a stool. He had been sitting in the dark until my light

found him. His arms rested on the padded rim of the crescent-shaped table, as if he were waiting for a dealer to shuffle the deck.

This did not appear to be the kind of man who would collaborate in murder and assist with a kidnapping. Fiftyish, pale, with a full mouth and a dimpled chin, he might have been a librarian or a small-town pharmacist.

As I approached and he looked up, I could not be certain of his status. I knew that he was a spirit only when I saw him register surprise as he realized that I could see him.

On the day of the disaster, perhaps he had been brained by falling debris. Or burned alive.

He did not reveal to me the true condition of his corpse at the time he died, a courtesy for which I was grateful.

Peripheral movement in the shadows snared my attention. From out of the darkness came the lingering dead.

CHAPTER 24

STEPPING INTO THE LIGHT BEFORE ME, A pretty young blonde in a blue-and-yellow cocktail dress revealed immodest décolletage. She smiled, but at once her smile faltered.

From my right came an old woman with a long face, eyes vacant of hope. She reached out to me, then frowned at her hand, withdrew it, lowered her head, as if she thought, for whatever reason, that I would find her repellent.

From my left appeared a short, red-headed, cheerful-looking man whose anguished eyes belied his amused smile.

I turned, revealing others with my flashlight. A cocktail waitress in her Indian-princess uniform. A casino guard with a gun on his hip.

A young black man dressed in cutting-edge fashion ceaselessly fingered his silk shirt, his jacket, the jade pendant that hung from his neck, as though in death he was embarrassed to have been so fashion-conscious in life.

Counting the player at the blackjack table, seven appeared to me. I couldn't know if all had perished in the casino or if some had died elsewhere in the hotel. Perhaps they were the only ghosts haunting the Panamint, perhaps not.

One hundred and eighty-two people had perished here. Most would have moved on the moment they expired. At least, for my sake, I hoped that was true.

Most commonly, spirits who have dwelled this long in a self-imposed state of purgatory will manifest in a mood of melancholy or anxiety. These seven conformed to that rule.

Yearning draws them to me. I am not always certain for what it is they yearn, though I think most of them desire resolution, the courage to let go of this world and to discover what comes next.

Fear inhibits them from doing what they must. Fear and regret, and love for those they leave behind.

Because I can see them, I bridge life and death, and they hope I can open for them the door they are afraid to open for themselves. Because I am who I am—a California boy who looks like surfers looked in *Beach Blanket Bingo*, half a century ago, less coiffed and even less threatening than Frankie Avalon—I inspire their trust.

I'm afraid that I have less to offer them than they believe I do. What counsel I give them is as shallow as Ozzie *pretends* his wisdom is.

That I will touch them, embrace them, seems always to be a comfort for which they're grateful. They embrace me in return. And touch my face. And kiss my hands.

Their melancholy drains me. Their need exhausts me. I am wrung by pity. Sometimes it seems that to exit this world, they must go through my heart, leaving it scarred and sore.

Moving now from one to the other, I told each of them what I intuited he or she needed to hear.

I said, "This world is lost forever. There's nothing here for you but desire, frustration, sadness."

I said, "You know now that part of you is immortal and that your life had meaning. To discover that meaning, embrace what comes next."

And to another, I said, "You think you don't deserve mercy, but mercy is yours if you'll put aside your fear."

As one by one I spoke to the seven, an eighth spirit appeared. A tall, broad brick of a man, he had deep-set eyes, blunt features, and buzz-cut hair. He stared at me over the heads of the others, his gaze the color of bile and no less bitter.

To the young black man who fussed ceaselessly and with apparent embarrassment at his fine clothes, I said, “Truly evil people aren’t given the license to linger. The fact that you’ve been here so long since death means you don’t have any reason to fear what comes next.”

As I turned from one of the encircling dead to the next, the newcomer prowled beyond the perimeter of the group, keeping my face in sight. His mood appeared to darken as he listened to me.

“You think what I’m telling you is bullshit. Maybe it is. I haven’t been across. How can I know what waits on the other side?”

Their eyes were lustrous pools of longing, and I hoped they recognized in me not pity, but sympathy.

“The grace and beauty of this world enchant me. But it’s all broken. I want to see the version we didn’t screw up. Don’t you?”

Finally, I said, “The girl I love...she thought we might have three lives, not two. She called this first life *boot camp*.”

I paused. I had no choice. For a moment, I belonged more to their purgatory than I did to this world, in the sense that words failed me.

Eventually I continued: “She said we’re in boot camp to learn, to fail or succeed of our own free will. Then we move on to a second life, which she called *service*.”

The red-haired man, whose cheerful smile was belied by anguished eyes, came to me and put a hand on my shoulder.

“Her name is Bronwen, but she prefers to be called Stormy. In service, Stormy said, we have fantastic adventures in some cosmic campaign, some wondrous undertaking. Our reward comes in our third life, and that one lasts forever.”

Reduced to silence again, I could not meet their stares with the confidence I owed them, and so I closed my eyes and in memory saw Stormy, who gave me strength, as she had always done.

Eyes closed, I said, “She is a kick-ass kind of girl, who not only knows what she wants, but what she *should* want, which makes all the difference. When you meet her in service, you’ll know her, sure enough. You’ll know her, and you’ll love her.”

After a further silence, when I opened my eyes and turned in a circle, probing with my flashlight, four of the initial seven were

gone: the young black man, the cocktail waitress, the pretty blonde, and the red-haired man.

I can't be sure if they moved Beyond or merely elsewhere.

The big man with the buzz-cut looked angrier than ever. His shoulders were hunched, as if under a burden of rage, and his hands curled into fists.

He stalked away into the burned-out room, and though he had no physical substance that could affect this world, gray ashes rose in shimmering shapes around him, and settled to the floor again in his wake. Lightweight debris—scorched playing cards, splintery scraps of wood—trembled as he passed. A five-dollar casino chip stood on edge, spun, wobbled, fell flat once more, and heat-yellowed dice rattled on the floor.

He had poltergeist potential, and I was glad to see him go.

CHAPTER 25

A DAMAGED FIRE DOOR HUNG OPEN AND askew on two of three hinges. The stainless-steel threshold reflected the flashlight in those few places where it was not crusted with dark material.

If memory served me well, people had been trampled to death in this doorway when the crowd of gamblers stampeded for the exits. No horror came over me at that recollection, only a deeper sadness.

Beyond the door, patinaed by smoke and water, spalling from the effects of efflorescing lime, looking as if they had been transported from an ancient temple of a long-forgotten faith, thirty flights of wide concrete emergency stairs led to the north end of the sixteenth floor. Perhaps two additional flights ascended all the way to the roof of the hotel.

I climbed only halfway to the first landing before I halted, cocked my head, and listened. I don't believe a sound had alarmed me. No tick, no click, no whisper stepped down to me from higher floors.

Perhaps a scent alerted me. Compared to other spaces in the devastated structure, the stairwell smelled less of chemicals and hardly at all of char. This cooler, limy air was clean enough to allow the recognition of an odor as exotic as—but different from—those of the fire's aftermath.

The faint essence I could not identify was musky, mushroomy. But it also had a quality of fresh raw meat, by which I don't mean a bloody stink, but that subtle smell you get from a butcher's case, where ready flesh is presented.

For a reason I could not define, into my mind's eye came the dead face of the man I had fished from the storm drain. Mottled gray skin. Eyes rolled back in a blind white gaze.

The fine hairs on the nape of my neck quivered as if the air had been charged by the advancing storm.

I switched off the flashlight and stood in absolute, monster's-gonna-get-you blackness.

Because the stairs were enclosed by concrete walls, the sharp turn at each landing provided an effective baffle to light. A sentry one floor above, or at most two, might have noticed the radiant bloom below, but no light could have transferred, angle after angle, to any higher floors.

After a minute, when I hadn't heard the rustle of clothing or the scrape of a shoe on concrete, when no scaly tongue had licked my face, I backed cautiously out of the stairwell, across the threshold. I retreated into the casino before switching on the flashlight.

A few minutes later, I located the south stairs. Here the door still hung from all its hinges, but it stood open like the first.

Shuttering the lens of the flash with my fingers, to reduce its reach, I ventured across the threshold.

This silence, like that in the north stairwell, had an expectant quality, as though I might not be the only listening presence. Here, too, after a moment, I detected that subtle and disturbing smell that had discouraged me from ascending at the other end of the building.

As before, into my mind came the dead face of the man who had Tasered me: eyes protuberant and white, mouth open wide and tongue swallowed.

On the basis of a bad feeling and a smell, real or imagined, I decided that the emergency stairs were under observation. I could not use them.

Yet my sixth sense told me that Danny lay imprisoned somewhere high above. He (the magnet) waited, and I (the magnetized), in some strange power's employ, was drawn upward with an insistence that I could not ignore.

CHAPTER 26

OFF THE MAIN LOBBY, I LOCATED AN ALCOVE with ten elevators, five on each side. Eight sets of doors were closed, though I'm sure I could have pried them open.

The last two sets of doors on the right were fully retracted. In the first of these openings, an empty cab waited, its floor a foot below the floor of the alcove. The second offered only a void.

Leaning into the shaft, I played the flashlight up and down, over guide rails and cables. The missing cab lay two floors below, in the sub-basement.

To the right, the wall featured a service ladder. It receded to the very top of the building.

After raiding my backpack for a spelunker's flashlight strap, I fitted the handle of the light in the tight collar, and secured the Velcro fastener around my right forearm. Like a telescopic sight on a shotgun barrel, the light surmounted my arm, the beam spearing across the back of my hand and out past my fingertips into the dark.

With both hands free, I was able to get a grip on a rung and swing off the alcove threshold. I mounted the ladder.

After ascending several rungs, I paused to savor the odors in the shaft. I didn't detect the scent that had warned me off both the north and the south stairs.

The shaft was resonant, however; it would amplify every sound. If the wrong set of doors stood open above, and if someone was near that alcove, he would hear me coming.

I needed to climb as silently as possible, which meant not so fast that I began to breathe hard with the exertion.

The flashlight seemed problematic. Holding the ladder with my right hand, I used my left to switch off the beam.

How unsettling: to climb into perfect darkness. In the most primitive foundations of the mind, at the level of race memory or even deeper, lay the expectation that any ascent should be toward light. Rising higher, higher into unrelenting blackness proved to be disorienting.

I estimated eighteen feet of height for the first story, twelve feet per story thereafter. I guessed there were twenty-four rungs in twelve feet.

By that measure, I had climbed two stories when a protracted rumble passed through the shaft. I thought *Earthquake*, and I froze on the ladder, held fast, expecting plummeting masonry and further destruction.

When the shaft did not shake, when the cables did not sing with vibrations, I realized that the rumble was a long peal of thunder. Although still distant, it sounded closer than it had been earlier.

Hand over hand, foot after foot, climbing again, I wondered how I would get Danny down from his high prison, assuming that I would be able to free him. If armed sentries had been posted on the stairs, we could not escape the hotel by either of those routes. Considering his deformities and his physical uncertainty, he could not descend on this ladder.

One thing at a time. First, find him. Second, free him.

Thinking too far ahead might paralyze me, especially if every strategy that I considered led inevitably to the need to kill one or all of our adversaries. The determination to kill did not come easily to me, not even when survival depended on it, not even when my target was unarguably evil.

You don't get James Bond with me. I'm even less bloodthirsty than Miss Money Penny.

At what must have been the fifth floor, I encountered an open set of elevator doors, the first since I had entered the shaft on the lobby

level. The gap revealed itself as a dark-gray rectangle in an otherwise pitch landscape.

The alcove beyond the retracted doors would open onto a fifth-floor hall. Along that corridor, the doors to some guest rooms would be standing open; others would have been broken down by firemen or would have burned away. The windows in those rooms, which had not been boarded over to keep out trespassers, as on the ground floor, admitted light to the public hall; and meager rays filtered from there into the alcove.

Intuition told me that I had not climbed high enough. The low voice of faraway thunder spoke again when I was between the seventh and eighth floors. Just past the ninth floor, I wondered how many bodachs had swarmed the hotel prior to the catastrophe.

A bodach is a mythical beast of the British Isles, a sly thing that comes down chimneys during the night to carry away naughty children.

In addition to the lingering dead, I occasionally see menacing spirits that I call bodachs. That's not what they are, but I need to call them something, and that name seems to fit.

A young English boy, the only person I have known who shared my gift, called them bodachs in my presence. Minutes after he had used that word, he was crushed to death by a runaway truck.

I never speak of the bodachs when they are near. I pretend not to see them, do not react to them either with curiosity or fear. I suspect that if they knew I see them, there would be a runaway truck for me.

These creatures are utterly black and without features, so thin they can slip through a crack in a door, or enter by a keyhole. They have no more substance than shadows.

They are soundless in movement, often slinking like cats, though cats as big as men. Sometimes they run semi-erect and seem to be half man, half dog.

I have written about them before, in my first manuscript. I will not spend many words on them here.

They are not human spirits, and they do not belong here. Their natural realm, I suspect, is a place of eternal darkness and much

screaming.

Their presence always signifies an oncoming event with a high body count—like the shootings at the mall last August. A single murder, like that of Dr. Jessup, does not draw them forth from wherever they dwell. They thrill only to natural disasters and to human violence on an operatic scale.

In the hours before the quake and the fire, they surely swarmed the casino and the hotel by the hundreds, in frenzied anticipation of the impending misery, pain, and death, which is their favorite three-course meal.

Two deaths in this case—Dr. Jessup and the snaky man—elicited no bodach interest. Their continued absence suggested that whatever showdown lay ahead might not result in a bloodbath.

Nevertheless, as I climbed, my churning imagination populated the lightless shaft with bodachs that, like cockroaches, crawled the walls, fleet and quivering.

CHAPTER 27

AT THE NEXT SET OF RETRACTED ELEVATOR doors, on the twelfth floor, I knew in a certain-to-the-bones way that I had climbed past the stairwell guards. In fact, I sensed that I had arrived at the level on which the kidnappers were holding Danny.

The muscles of my arms and legs burned, not because the climb had been physically demanding, but because I had ascended in a state of extreme and constant tension. Even my jaws ached because I'd been grinding my teeth.

I preferred not to transition from the shaft to the elevator alcove in darkness. But I dared risk using the light only briefly, to locate the first of the recessed handholds and footholds that allowed transfer from the service ladder to the doorway.

I switched on the flashlight, quickly studied the situation, and switched it off.

Although I had repeatedly blotted them on my jeans, my hands were slippery with sweat.

No matter how ready I may be to join Stormy in service, I do not have nerves of steel. If I'd been wearing boots instead of sneakers, I would have quaked in them.

I reached into the thwarting gloom, located the first of the recessed handgrips, which was like an in-wall holder for a roll of toilet paper, but three times as wide. I clutched it with my right hand, hesitated as I was overcome with nostalgia for the griddle and

the grill and the deep-fryer, then grabbed it with my left hand, as well, and stepped off the ladder.

For a moment I hung from my arms, by my sweaty hands, toeing the wall in search of the footholds. When it seemed that I would never find them, I found them.

Having left the ladder, the act of leaving the ladder now struck me as folly.

The top of the elevator cab was in the sub-basement, thirteen floors below. Thirteen stories is a long fall in any lighting condition, but the prospect of plunging that far in inky darkness struck me as especially terrifying.

Lacking a safety harness, I also did not have a sturdy tether to snap to the handhold. Or a parachute. I had committed myself to total freestyle.

Among other items in my rucksack were Kleenex, a couple of coconut-raisin protein bars, and foil packets of lemon-scented moist towelettes. My packing priorities had seemed entirely sensible at the time.

If I plummeted thirteen floors onto the roof of the elevator cab, at least I would be able to blow my nose, have a last snack, and scrub my hands, thereby avoiding the indignity of dying with snotty nostrils and sticky fingers.

By the time that I had fumbled sideways from the ladder to the open doorway and had swung across the threshold into the elevator alcove, the *compelling* nature of psychic magnetism, the *irresistible* insistence of it had been forcefully impressed upon me, although not for the first time.

I leaned against a wall, relieved not to have a yawning void at my back, waiting for my clammy palms to stop perspiring, for my heart to cease hammering. Repeatedly I flexed and extended my left arm to work a mild cramp out of the biceps.

Beyond the shadow-cloaked alcove, there appeared to be sources of watery-gray light both from north and from south along the public hallway.

No voices. If I could judge by her performance on the phone, the mystery woman was a talker. She liked the sound of herself.

When I eased to the open end of the alcove and peered cautiously around the corner, I saw a long, deserted hall. Here and there, open doorways on both sides admitted daylight from guest rooms, as I had expected.

The I-shaped hotel featured a shorter hall with more rooms at each end of the main corridor. The guarded stairs that I had chosen to avoid were in those secondary wings.

Left or right would have been a choice to ponder for any other searcher, but not for me. Less equivocal here than it had been in the storm drains, my sixth sense drew me to the right, south.

From the foundation to the highest level, the floors of the hotel were steel-reinforced concrete. The fire had not been intense enough to buckle let alone collapse them.

Consequently, the flames had worked upward through the structure by way of plumbing and electrical chases. Only about sixty percent of those internal pathways had been fully fireproofed and sprinklered as specified by the construction documents.

This resulted in a hopscotch pattern of destruction. Some floors were virtually gutted, while others fared far better.

The twelfth story had suffered extensive smoke and water damage, but I encountered nothing eaten by flames, nothing scorched. Carpet matted with soot and filth. Wallpaper stained, peeling. A few glass shades had been shaken loose of ceiling lights; sharp shards required wariness.

A Mojave vulture evidently had swooped in through one shattered window or another and had not been able to find its way out. In its frantic search, it had broken a wing against a wall or a door frame. Now its macabre carcass, having half rotted before it desiccated in the dry heat, lay with tattered pinions spread in the center of the corridor.

Although the twelfth floor might be in good shape by comparison to other levels of the hotel, you wouldn't want to check in for your next vacation.

I moved cautiously from open room to open room, scouting each from its threshold. None was occupied.

The furniture violently redistributed by the quake, tipped on its side, jammed the same end of each room, where the power of the temblor had thrown it. Everything was soiled and sagging and not worth the effort to salvage.

Beyond those windows that were broken out or that were free of soot, the lowering sky revealed a metastasis of storm clouds, healthy blue holding only in the south, and even there succumbing.

The closed doors didn't concern me. I would be warned by a rasp of rusted knob and a screech of corroded hinges if one began to open. Besides, these were neither white nor paneled, as were the mortal doors of my dream.

Halfway between the elevator alcove and the intersection with the next corridor, I came to a closed door that I was not able to pass. Tarnished metal numbers identified it as Room 1242. As though guided by a puppet master whose strings were invisible, my right hand reached for the knob.

I restrained myself long enough to rest my head against the jamb and listen. Nothing.

Listening at a door is always a waste of time. You listen and listen, and when you feel confident that the way ahead is safe, you open the door, whereupon some guy with BORN TO DIE tattooed on his forehead shoves a monster revolver in your face. It's almost as reliable as the three laws of thermodynamics.

When I eased open the door, I encountered no tattooed thug, which meant that gravity would soon fail and that bears would henceforth leave the woods to toilet in public lavatories.

Here as elsewhere, the earthquake five years ago had rearranged the furniture, shoving everything to one end of the space, stacking the bed on top of chairs, on top of a dresser. Search dogs would have been needed to certify that no victims, either alive or dead, had remained under the debris.

In this instance, a single chair had been retrieved from the scrap heap and placed in the quake-cleared half of the room. In the chair, secured to it by duct tape, sat Danny Jessup.

CHAPTER 28

EYES CLOSED, PALE, UNMOVING, DANNY looked dead. Only the throb of a pulse in his temple and the tension in his jaw muscles revealed that he was alive, and in the grip of dread.

He resembles that actor, Robert Downey Jr., though without the edge of heroin-addict glamour that would give him true star quality in contemporary Hollywood.

Past the face, the resemblance to *any* actor drops to zero. Danny has a lot better brain than any movie star of the past few decades.

His left shoulder is somewhat misshapen from excess bone growth during the healing of a fracture. That arm twists unnaturally from shoulder to wrist, with the consequence that it doesn't hang straight at his side, and the hand twists away from his body.

His left hip is deformed. The right leg is shorter than the other. The right tibia thickened and bowed as it healed from a break. His right ankle contains so much excess bone that he has only forty percent function in that joint.

Strapped to the hotel-room chair, dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt with a yellow lightning bolt on the chest, he could have been a fairy-tale character. The handsome prince suffering under a witch's spell. The love child of a forbidden romance between a princess and a kind troll.

I closed the door behind me before I said softly, "Wanna get out of here?"

His blue eyes opened, owlsh with surprise. Fear made room for mortification, but he didn't appear to be at all relieved.

"Odd," he whispered, "you shouldn't have come."

Dropping the backpack, zipping it open, I whispered, "What am I gonna do? There was nothing good on TV."

"I knew you'd come, but you shouldn't, it's hopeless."

From the backpack, I withdrew a fishing knife, flipped the blade out of the handle. "Always the optimist."

"Get out of here while you can. She's crazier than a syphilitic suicide bomber with mad-cow disease."

"I don't know anybody else who says stuff like that. Can't leave you here when you talk that good."

His ankles were bound to the chair legs with numerous turns of duct tape. Bonds of tape wound around his chest, securing him to the back of the chair. In addition, his arms were taped to the arms of the chair at the wrists and at the crooks of the elbows.

I started sawing rapidly at the loops of tape that bound his left wrist.

"Odd, stop it, listen, even if you have time to cut me loose, I can't stand up—"

"If your leg's broken or something," I interrupted, "I can carry you at least to a hiding place."

"Nothing's broken, that's not it," he said urgently, "but if I stand up, it'll detonate."

Although I finished freeing his left wrist, I said, "*Detonate*. That's a word I like even less than *decapitate*."

"Check out the back of the chair."

I went around behind him to have a look. Being a guy who has seen a few movies as well as some weird action in real life, I at once recognized the kilo of plastic explosives held to the back of the chair by the same tape that bound Danny.

A battery, lots of colorful wires, an instrument that resembled a small version of a carpenter's level (with the indicator bubble measuring a perfect horizontal plane), and other arcane paraphernalia suggested that whoever had put the bomb together had a flair for such work.

Danny said, “The instant I raise my ass off the chair—boom. If I try to *walk* with the chair and the level measures too far off the horizontal—boom.”

“We have a problem here,” I agreed.

CHAPTER 29

IN WHISPERS, IN MURMURS, WITH BATED breath, *sotto voce*, in *voce velata*, softly we conducted the conversation, not solely because the syphilitic-suicide-bomber-mad-cow woman and her pals might hear us, but I think also because we superstitiously felt that the wrong word, spoken too loud, would trigger the bomb.

Stripping the spelunker's strap off my arm and setting it aside with the flashlight, I said, "Where are they?"

"I don't know. Odd, you have to get out of here."

"Do they leave you by yourself for long periods?"

"They check in maybe once an hour. She was just here about fifteen minutes ago. Call Wyatt Porter."

"This isn't in his jurisdiction."

"So he'll call Sheriff Amory."

"If police get into this, you'll die."

"So who do you want to call—the sanitation department?"

"I just know you'll die. The way I know things. Can this package be detonated whenever they want?"

"Yeah. She showed me a remote control. She said it would be as easy as changing TV channels."

"Who is she?"

"Her name's Datura. Two guys are with her. I don't know their names. There was a third sonofabitch."

"I found his body. What happened to him?"

"I didn't see it. He was...strange. So are the other two."

As I began to cut the tape on his left forearm, I said, “What’s her first name?”

“Datura. I don’t know her last. Odd, what’re you doing? I can’t get up from this chair.”

“You might as well be *ready* to get up in case the situation changes. Who is she?”

“Odd, she’ll kill you. She will. You’ve got to get out of here.”

“Not without you,” I said, sawing the tape that bound his right wrist to the chair.

Danny shook his head. “I don’t want you to die for me.”

“Then who am I gonna die for? Some total stranger? What sense does that make? Who is she?”

He let out a low sound of abject misery. “You’re gonna think I’m such a loser.”

“You’re not a loser. You’re a geek, I’m a geek, but we’re not losers.”

“You’re not a geek,” he said.

Cutting the second set of bonds on his right arm, I said, “I’m a fry cook *when* I’m working, and when I added a sweater vest to my wardrobe it was more change than I could handle. I see dead people, and I talk to Elvis, so don’t tell me I’m not a geek. Who is she?”

“Promise you won’t tell Dad.”

He wasn’t talking about Simon Makepeace, his biological father. He meant his stepfather. He didn’t know Dr. Jessup was dead.

This wasn’t the best time to tell him. He would be devastated. I needed him to be focused, and game.

Something he saw in my eyes, in my expression, made him frown, and he said, “What?”

“I won’t tell him,” I promised, and turned my attention to the bonds securing his right ankle to the leg of the chair.

“You swear?”

“If I ever tell him, I’ll give back my Venusian-methane-slime-beast card.”

“You still have it?”

“I *told* you I’m a geek. Who is Datura?”

Danny took a deep breath, held it until I thought that he was going after a Guinness World Record, then let it out with two words: "Phone sex."

I blinked at him, briefly confused. "Phone sex?"

Blushing, mortified, he said, "I'm sure this is a colossal surprise to you, but I've never done the real thing with a girl."

"Not even with Demi Moore?"

"Bastard," he hissed.

"Could *you* have passed up a shot like that?"

"No," he admitted. "But being a virgin at twenty-one makes me the king of losers."

"No way I'm gonna start calling you *Your Highness*. Anyway, a hundred years ago, guys like you and me would be called gentlemen. Funny what a big difference a century makes."

"You?" he said. "Don't try to tell me *you* are a member of the club. I'm inexperienced but I'm not naive."

"Believe what you want," I said, sawing the bonds at his left ankle, "but I'm a member in good standing."

Danny knew that Stormy and I had been an item since we were sixteen, in high school. He didn't know that we'd never made love.

As a child, she had been molested by an adoptive father. For a long time, she'd felt unclean.

She wanted to wait for marriage before we did the deed because she felt that by delaying our gratification, we would be purifying her past. She was determined that those bad memories of abuse would not haunt her in our bed.

Stormy had said sex between us should feel clean and right and wonderful. She wanted it to be sacred; and it would have been.

Then she died, and we never experienced that one bliss together, which was all right, because we experienced so many others. We packed a lifetime into four years.

Danny Jessup didn't need to hear any details. They are my most private memories, and precious to me.

Without looking up from his left ankle, I said, "Phone sex?"

After a hesitation, he said, "I wanted to know what it was like to talk about it, you know, with a girl. A girl who didn't know what I

look like.”

I took longer cutting the tape than was required, keeping my head down, giving him time.

He said, “I have some money of my own.” He designs web sites. “I pay the bills for my phone. Dad didn’t see the nine-hundred-number charges.”

Having freed his ankle, I busied myself cleaning the tape-gummed blade of the knife on my jeans. I couldn’t cut the bonds around his chest because the same loops held the bomb level and in place.

“For a couple minutes,” he continued, “it was exciting. But then pretty soon it seemed gross. Ugly.” His voice quavered. “You probably think I’m a pervert.”

“I think you’re human. I like that in a friend.”

He took a deep breath and went on: “It seemed gross...and then stupid. So I asked the girl, could we just talk, not about sex, about other things, anything. She said sure, that was all right.”

Phone-sex services charge by the minute. Danny could have held forth for hours about the qualities of various laundry soaps, and she would have pretended to be enthralled.

“We chatted half an hour, just about things we like and don’t like—you know, books, movies, food. It was wonderful, Odd. I can’t explain how wonderful it was, the *glow* I got from it. It was just...it was so nice.”

I wouldn’t have thought that the word *nice* could break my heart, but it almost did.

“That particular service will let you make an appointment with a girl you like. I mean for another conversation.”

“This was *Datura*.”

“Yes. The second time I talked to her, I found out she has this real fascination with the supernatural, ghosts and stuff.”

I folded shut the knife and returned it to my backpack.

“She’s read like a thousand books on the subject, visited lots of haunted houses. She’s into all kinds of paranormal phenomena.”

I went around behind his chair and knelt on the floor.

“What’re you doing?” he asked nervously.

“Nothing. Relax. I’m just studying the situation. Tell me about Datura.”

“This is the hardest part, Odd.”

“I know. It’s okay.”

His voice grew even softer: “Well...the third time I called her, pretty much the *only* thing we talked about was supernatural stuff—from the Bermuda Triangle to spontaneous human combustion to the ghosts that supposedly haunt the White House. I don’t know...I don’t know why I wanted so bad to impress her.”

I am no expert on bomb-making. I had encountered only one other in my life—the previous August, in the same incident that involved the mall shootings.

“I mean,” Danny said, “she was just this girl who talked filthy to men for money. But it was important to me that she liked me, maybe even thought I was a little cool. So I told her I had a friend who could see ghosts.”

I closed my eyes.

“I didn’t use your name at first, and at first she didn’t really believe me. But the stories I told her about you were so detailed and so unusual, she began to realize they were true.”

The bomb at the mall had been a truck packed with hundreds of kilos of explosives. The detonator had been a crude device.

“Our talks got to be so much fun. Then the sweetest thing. It *seemed* so sweet. She started calling me on her own time. It didn’t cost me anything anymore.”

I opened my eyes and gazed at the package on the back of Danny’s chair. This was a lot more sophisticated than the truck bomb at the mall. It was meant to challenge me.

“We didn’t always get around to talking about you,” Danny said. “I realize now, she was clever. She didn’t want to be obvious.”

Careful not to disturb the carpenter’s level, I traced a coiled red wire with one finger, and then a straighter yellow wire. Then green.

“But after a while,” Danny continued, “I didn’t have any more to tell her about you...except the thing at the mall last year. That was such a big story nationwide, all over the newspapers and TV, so then she knew your name.”

Black wire, blue wire, white wire, red again.... Neither the sight of them nor the feel of them against my fingertip engaged my sixth sense.

“I’m so sorry, Odd. So damn sorry. I sold you out.”

I said, “Not for money. For love. That’s different.”

“I don’t love her.”

“All right. Not love. For the *hope* of love.”

Frustrated by the indecipherable wiring of the bomb, I went around to the front of the chair.

Danny rubbed his right wrist, around which the duct tape had been drawn so tight that it had left angry red impressions in his skin.

“For the *hope* of love,” I repeated. “What friend wouldn’t cut you a little slack in a case like that?”

Tears welled in his eyes.

“Listen,” I said, “you and I weren’t meant to have our tickets punched in a cheesy casino resort. If fate says we’ve got to croak in a hotel, then we’ll rent a suite someplace that rates five stars. You okay?”

He nodded.

Tucking my backpack in among the earthquake-pitched furniture where it was unlikely to be found, I said, “I know why they brought you here, of all places. If she thinks somehow I can conjure spirits, she figures a bunch of them have to be hanging around this joint. But why through the flood-control tunnels?”

“She’s beyond psychotic, Odd. It never came across on the phone, or maybe I didn’t want to hear it when I was...romancing her. Damn. That’s pathetic. Anyway, she’s a weird kind of crazy, delusional but not stupid, a real hard-nosed nutty bitch. She wanted to bring me to the Panamint by an unusual route, something that would be a serious test of your psychic magnetism, prove to her it was real. And there’s something else going on with her....”

His hesitation told me that this something else would not be a cheerful revelation, such as that Datura had taken up gospel singing or that she had baked my favorite cake.

“She wants you to show her ghosts. She thinks you can summon them, make them speak. I never told her anything like that, it’s just what she insists on believing. But she wants something else, too. I don’t know why....” He thought about it, shook his head. “But I get the feeling she wants to kill you.”

“I seem to rub a lot of people the wrong way. Danny, last night in the alley behind the Blue Moon Cafe—someone fired a shotgun.”

“One of her guys. The one you found dead.”

“Who was he shooting at?”

“Me. They were careless for a moment as we were getting out of the van. I tried to make a break for the street. The shotgun was a warning to stop.”

He wiped his eyes with one hand. Three of the fingers, once having been broken, were larger than they should have been and misshapen by excess bone.

“I shouldn’t have stopped,” he said. “I should’ve kept running. All they could have done was shoot me in the back. Then we wouldn’t be here.”

I went to him and poked the yellow lightning bolt on the front of his black T-shirt. “No more of that. You keep swimming in that direction, soon you’ll find yourself drowning in self-pity. That isn’t you, Danny.”

Shaking his head, he said, “What a mess.”

“Self-pity isn’t you, and it never has been. We’re a couple of tough little virgin geeks, and don’t you forget it.”

He couldn’t suppress a smile, though it was tremulous and came with a fresh welling of tears. “I still have my Martian-brain-eating-centipede card.”

“Are we sentimental fools, or what?”

“That crack about Demi Moore was funny,” he said.

“I know. Listen, I’m going out there to have a look around. After I’m gone, you might think you can just tip over your chair and set off the bomb.”

His evasive eyes revealed that self-sacrifice had indeed crossed his mind.

“You might think blowing yourself into pâté would get me off the hook, then I’d call Wyatt Porter for help, but you’d be way wrong,” I assured him. “I’d feel more obligated than ever to get all three of them myself. I wouldn’t leave this place until I did. You understand that, Danny?”

“What a mess.”

“Besides, you’ve got to live for your dad. Don’t you think so?”

He sighed, nodded. “Yeah.”

“You’ve got to live for your dad. That’s your job now.”

Danny said, “He’s a good man.”

Picking up the flashlight, I said, “If Datura checks on you before I get back, she’ll see your arms and legs have been freed. That’s all right. Just tell her I’m here.”

“What’re you going to do now?”

I shrugged. “You know me. I make it up as I go along.”

CHAPTER 30

STEPPING OUT OF ROOM 1242 AND PULLING the door shut behind me, I glanced left and right along the corridor. Still deserted. Silent.

Datura.

That sounded like a name not given but instead chosen. She had been born Mary or Heather, or something equally common, and she had taken *Datura* later. It was an exotic word with some meaning that she was amused to apply to herself.

I visualized my mind as a pool of dark water in moonlight, her name as a leaf. I imagined the leaf settling upon the water, floating for a moment. Saturated, the leaf sank. Currents moved it around the pool, deeper, deeper.

Datura.

In seconds, I felt drawn north toward—and beyond—the elevator alcove in which I had arrived earlier by way of the shaft ladder. If the woman waited on this floor, she was in a room distant from 1242.

Perhaps she didn't keep Danny with her because she, too, had sensed in him a potential for self-destruction that gave her second thoughts about having strapped him to a bomb that he could choose to detonate.

Although I could have allowed myself to be drawn to *Datura* right away, I wasn't urgently compelled to locate her. She was Medusa, with a voice—instead of eyes—that could turn men to stone, but for

the moment I was content to be a man of weary, aching, and fallible flesh.

Ideally, I would find some way to disable Datura and the two men with her—and gain possession of the remote control that could trigger the explosives. When they were no longer a threat, I could call Chief Porter.

My chances of overpowering three dangerous people, especially if all of them had guns, were not much better than the odds that the dead gamblers in the burned-out casino could win their lives back with a roll of the fire-yellowed dice.

Other than ignoring my convincing premonition that calling in the police would be the certain death of Danny, the only alternative to disabling the kidnappers was to disable the bomb. I had less desire to fiddle with that complex detonator than I had to French-kiss a rattlesnake.

Nevertheless, I had to prepare for the possibility that events would lead me inevitably to precisely that fiddling. And if I freed Danny, we would still have to get out of the Panamint.

Not agile to begin with, exhausted by the trek from Pico Mundo, he would not be able to move fast. On a good day, in peak form, my brittle-boned friend was not surefooted enough to dare to rush down a flight of stairs.

To get to the ground floor of this hotel, he would be required to descend *twenty-two* flights. Then he would have to make his way through treacherous rubble-strewn public areas—while three homicidal psychopaths pursued us.

Throw in a few dumb, manipulative, scantily clad women, add a few even dumber but hunky guys, include the requirement to eat a bowl of live worms, and we pretty much had the premise for a new reality-TV show.

I quickly searched several rooms along the south end of the main corridor, looking for a place where Danny could hide in the unlikely event that I proved able to separate him from the explosives.

If I didn't have to worry about keeping him on the move with gunmen chasing us down, and if he was beyond easy discovery, I would be better able to deal with our enemies. With Danny in

hiding, I might even feel that circumstances had changed sufficiently to make it safe to bring in Chief Porter.

Unfortunately, one hotel room is pretty much like another, and they don't offer any challenges to a determined searcher. Datura and her thugs would breeze through them as quickly as I did and would be aware of the same possible hiding places as those that caught my attention.

Briefly I considered artfully rearranging a jumble of quake-tossed furniture and decorative items to create a hollow in which Danny could be tucked out of sight. An unstable mound of chairs and beds and nightstands was likely to shift noisily when I tried to reconfigure it, drawing unwanted attention before I could complete the job.

In the fourth room, I glanced out a window and saw that the land had grown darker, shadowed by a warship fleet of iron clouds that had expanded their dominion to three-quarters of the sky. The landscape flickered as if with muzzle flashes, and a cannonade, still distant but closer than before, shook the day.

Remembering the eerie quality of the thunder that earlier had echoed down through the elevator shaft, I turned from the window.

The corridor was still deserted. I hurried north, passing Room 1242, and returned to the alcove.

Nine of the ten sets of stainless-steel lift doors were shut. For safety, to facilitate rescue, they would have been designed in such a way that they could be forced open manually in the event of a loss of power from both the public-utility company and the backup generators.

They had been closed for five years. Smoke had probably corroded and gummed their mechanisms.

I started on the right-hand bank. The first pair of doors were ajar. I wedged my fingers in the one-inch gap and tried to pull the doors apart. The one on the right moved a little; initially, the other resisted, but then slid aside with a raspy noise that wouldn't have traveled far.

Even in the dim gray light, I had to pry the doors apart only four inches to discern that no cab waited beyond. It was at another floor.

Sixteen stories, ten elevators: The mathematics allowed that none of them had come to a stop on the twelfth floor. All nine sets of doors might conceal empty shafts.

Perhaps, when power was lost, the elevators were programmed to descend on backup batteries to the lobby. If that was the case, my hope was that this safety mechanism had failed—just as others in the hotel had failed.

When I let go of the doors, they eased back into the position in which I had found them.

The second set were closed tighter than the first. The leading edges were bullnosed, however, to facilitate prying in an emergency. Shuddering in their tracks, they opened with a creaking that made me nervous.

No cab.

These doors remained apart when I released them. To avoid leaving evidence of my search, I pressed them shut again, eliciting more shudders, more creaking.

I had left clear images of my hands in the grime that filmed the stainless steel. From a pocket I withdrew a Kleenex and brushed lightly to obscure the prints, feather them out of existence, without leaving a too-clean patch that might raise suspicion.

The third pair of doors would not budge.

Behind the fourth set, which opened quietly, I found a waiting cab. I pushed the doors fully apart, hesitated, then stepped into the lift.

The cab didn't plunge into the abyss, as I half expected that it might. It took my weight with a faint protest and did not settle whatsoever from the alcove threshold.

Although the doors slipped shut part of the way on their own, I had to press to complete the closure. More prints, more Kleenex.

I wiped my sooty hands on my jeans. More laundry.

Although I thought I knew what I must do next, it was such a bold move that I stood in the alcove for a minute or two, considering other options. There weren't any.

This was one of those moments when I wished that I had striven harder to overcome my deep-seated aversion to guns.

On the other hand, when you shoot at people who also have guns, they tend to shoot back. This invariably complicates matters.

If you don't shoot first and aim well, maybe it's better not to have firearms. In an ugly situation like this, people who have heavy weaponry tend to feel superior to people who don't; they feel smug, and when they're smug, they underestimate their opponents. An unarmed man, of necessity, will be quicker of wit—more aware, more feral and more ferocious—than the gunman who relies on his weapon to think for him. Therefore, being unarmed can be an advantage.

In retrospect, that line of reasoning is patently absurd. Even at the time, I knew it was stupid, but I pursued it anyway, because I needed to talk myself out of that alcove and into action.

Datura.

The leaf in the moonlit water, sharing its essence with the pool, sinking deep and carried on a lazy current that pulls, pulls, pulls...

I stepped out of the alcove, into the corridor. I turned left, proceeded north.

Some tough, violent phone-sex babe, crazy as a mad cow, gets it in her addled head that she's got to kidnap Danny so she can use him to force me to reveal my closely guarded secrets. But why does Dr. Jessup have to die, and in such a brutal fashion? Just because he was *there*?

This phone-sex babe, this nut case, has three guys—now two—who apparently are willing to commit any crime necessary to help her get what she wants. There's no bank to be robbed, no armored car to be held up, no illegal drugs to be sold. She's not after money; she's after true ghost stories, icy fingers up and down her spine, so there's no loot for the other members of her gang to share. Their reason for putting their lives and freedom on the line for her at first seems puzzling if not mysterious.

Of course even nonhomicidal guys often think with the little head instead of with the big head that has a brain in it. And the annals of crime are replete with cases in which dim-bulb men in the thrall of bad women did the most vicious and idiotic things solely for sex.

If Datura looked as sultry as she sounded on the phone, she would find it easy to manipulate certain men. Her kind of guy would have more testosterone than white blood cells in his veins, would lack a sense of right and wrong, would have a taste for excitement, would savor every cruelty he performed, and would have no capacity to think about tomorrow.

Putting together her entourage, she would not have encountered a shortage of candidates. The news seemed to be full of such cold-blooded men these days.

Dr. Wilbur Jessup had died not just because he was in the way, but also because killing him had been *fun* to these people, a release, a lark. Rebellion in its purest form.

In the elevator alcove, I had found it hard to believe that she could have put such a crew together. While walking a mere hundred feet of hotel corridor, I had come to find them inevitable.

Dealing with these kinds of people, I would need every advantage that my gift could provide.

Door after door, whether open or closed, failed to entice me, until I stopped finally at 1203, which stood ajar.

CHAPTER 31

MOST OF THE FURNITURE HAD BEEN REMOVED from Room 1203. Only a pair of nightstands, a round wood table, and four captain's chairs remained.

Some cleaning had occurred. Although the space was far from immaculate, it looked more accommodating than any place I'd seen previously in the ruined hotel.

The pending storm had dimmed the day, but fat candles in red and amber glass containers provided light. Six were arranged precisely on the floor in each corner of the room. Six more stood on the table.

The pulse and flicker of candlelight might have been cheerful in other circumstances. Here it seemed cheerless. Menacing. Occult.

Scented, the candles produced a fragrance that masked the bitter malodor of long-settled smoke. The air smelled sweet rather than flowery. I had never breathed anything quite like it before.

White sheets had been tucked and pinned to the upholstery of the captain's chairs, to provide clean seating.

The nightstands flanked the big view window. On each stood a large black vase, and in each vase were two or three dozen red roses that either had no scent or could not compete with the candles.

She enjoyed drama and glamour, and she carried her creature comforts with her even into the wilds. Like a European princess visiting Africa in the century of colonialism, having a picnic on a Persian carpet unrolled on the veldt.

Gazing out the window, her back to me as I entered the room, stood a woman in tight black treader pants and a black blouse. Five feet five. Thick, glossy blond hair so pale it looked almost white, cut short but not in a manly style.

I said, "I'm almost three hours ahead of sundown."

She neither twitched with surprise nor turned to me. Continuing to stare at the gathering storm, she said, "So you're not a complete disappointment after all."

In person, her voice was no less bewitching, no less erotic than it had been on the phone.

"Odd Thomas, do you know who was the greatest conjurer in history, who summoned spirits and used them better than anyone ever?"

I took a guess: "You?"

"Moses," she said. "He knew the secret names of God, with which he could conquer Pharaoh and divide the sea."

"Moses the conjurer. That must have been a freaky Sunday school you went to."

"Red candles in red glasses," she said.

"You camp out in style," I acknowledged.

"What do they achieve—red candles in red glasses?"

I said, "Light?"

"Victory," she corrected. "Yellow candles in yellow glasses—what do they achieve?"

"It's got to be the right answer this time. Light?"

"Money."

By keeping her back to me, she meant to draw me to the window by the power of her mystery and will.

Determined not to play her game, I said, "Victory and money. Well, there's my problem. I always burn white candles."

She said, "White candles in clear glasses achieve peace. I never use them."

Although I had no intention of bending to her will and joining her at the window, I did move toward the table, which stood between us. In addition to the candles, several objects lay there, one of which appeared to be a remote control.

“Always, I sleep with salt between my mattress and my sheet,” she said, “and over my bed hangs a spray of five-finger grass.”

“I don’t sleep much these days,” I said, “but then I’ve heard that’s true of everyone when they get old.”

Finally she turned from the window to look at me.

Stunning. In myth, the succubus is a demon in exquisite female form, and has sex with men to steal their souls. Datura had the face and body ideal for such a demon’s purpose.

Her posture and attitude were those of a woman confident that her looks transfixed.

I could admire her as I might admire a perfectly proportioned bronze statue of any subject—woman or wolf, or whidding horse—but a bronze lacking the ineffable quality that fires passions in the heart. In sculpture, that quality is the difference between craft and art. In a woman, it is the difference between mere erotic power and beauty that enchants a man, that humbles him.

Beauty that steals the heart is often imperfect, suggests grace and kindness, and inspires tenderness more than it incites lust.

Her blue stare, by its directness and intensity, was meant to promise ecstasy and utter satiation, but it was too sharp to excite, less like a metaphoric arrow through the heart than like a whittling knife testing the hardness of the material to be carved.

“The candles smell nice,” I said, to prove that I was neither dry-mouthed nor stiffened into speechlessness.

“They’re Cleo-May.”

“Who’s she?”

“Are you really so ignorant of these things, Odd Thomas, or are you so much more than the simple soul you appear to be?”

“Ignorant,” I assured her. “Not just of five-finger grass and Cleo-May. I’m ignorant of lots of things, entire broad areas of human knowledge. I’m not proud of it, but it’s true.”

She was holding a glass of red wine. As she raised it to her full lips and took a slow sip, savored the taste, and swallowed, she stared at me across the table.

“The candles are scented with Cleo-May,” she said. “The scent of Cleo-May compels men to love and obey she who lights the

candles.” She indicated a bottle of wine and another glass on the table. “Will you join me in a drink?”

“That’s hospitable of you. But I better keep a clear head.”

If the *Mona Lisa*’s smile had been the same as Datura’s, no one would ever have heard of that painting. “Yes, I think you better.”

“Is that the remote control to trigger the explosives?”

Only her frozen smile revealed her surprise. “Did you and Danny have a nice reunion?”

“It’s got two buttons. The remote.”

“The black one detonates. The white one disarms the bomb.”

The device lay closer to her than to me. If I rushed to the table, she would seize the remote first.

I’m not the kind of guy who punches women. I might have made an exception in her case.

I was restrained by the suspicion that she would slide a knife in my guts even as I cocked my fist to throw the punch.

Also, I feared that, in a flush of perversity, she would press the black button.

“Did Danny tell you much about me?” she asked.

Deciding to play to her vanity, I said, “How does a woman who has so much going for her wind up selling phone sex?”

“I made some porn films,” she said. “Good money. But they use up women fast in that racket. So I met this guy who owned an on-line porn store and a phone-sex operation that’re like faucets you open and cash pours out. I married him. He died. I own the business now.”

“You married him, he died, you’re rich.”

“Things happen for me. They always have.”

“You own the business, but you still take calls?”

This time her smile seemed more genuine. “They’re such pathetic little boys. It’s fun, turning them inside out with words. They don’t even realize how completely they’re being humiliated—and they pay you to make fools of them.”

Behind her, still without a toothy edge, storm light fluttered like veils of radiance cast off by luminous wings. But the subsequent

thunder cracked hard and rumbled rough, the voice not of angels but of a beast.

“Someone must have killed a blacksnake,” she said, “and hung it in a tree.”

Considering her frequent inscrutable statements, I thought that I had been holding my own pretty well in our conversation, but this defeated me. “Blacksnake? Tree?”

She indicated the darkening sky. “Isn’t the hanging of a dead blacksnake certain to bring the rain?”

“Could be, I guess. I don’t know. It’s news to me.”

“Liar.” She sipped the wine. “Anyway, I’ve had money for a few years. It gives me the freedom to pursue spiritual matters.”

“No offense, but it’s difficult to picture you on a prayer retreat.”

“Psychic magnetism is new to me.”

I shrugged. “It’s just my fancy term for intuition.”

“It’s more than that. Danny told me. And you’ve given me a convincing demonstration. You can conjure spirits.”

“No. Not me. You need Moses for that.”

“You see spirits.”

I decided that playing dumb with her would accomplish nothing except to anger her. “I don’t summon them. They come to me. I’d rather they didn’t.”

“This place must have its ghosts.”

“They’re here,” I admitted.

“I want to see them.”

“You can’t.”

“Then I’ll kill Danny.”

“I swear to you, I can’t conjure.”

“I want to see them,” she repeated in a colder voice.

“I’m not a medium.”

“Liar.”

“They don’t wrap themselves in ectoplasm that other people can see. Only I can see them.”

“You’re so special, huh?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“I want to talk to them.”

“The dead don’t talk.”

She picked up the remote. “I’ll waste the little shit. I really will.”

Taking a calculated risk, I said, “I’m sure you will. Whether I do what you want or not. You won’t risk going to prison for Dr. Jessup’s murder.”

She put down the remote. She leaned against the window sill: one hip cocked, breasts thrust forward, posing. “Do you think I intend to kill you, too?”

“Of course.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To buy some time.”

“I warned you to come alone.”

“There’s no posse on the way,” I assured her.

“Then—buy time for what?”

“For fate to take an unexpected turn. For an advantage I can seize.”

She had the sense of humor of a rock, but this amused her. “You think I’m ever careless?”

“Killing Dr. Jessup wasn’t smart.”

“Don’t be thick. The boys need their sport,” she said, as though there was a logical necessity to the radiologist’s murder that should be obvious to me. “That’s part of the deal.”

As if on cue, the “boys” arrived. Hearing them, I turned.

The first looked like a laboratory-manufactured hybrid, half man and half machine, with a locomotive somewhere in his heritage. Big, solid, the kind of specimen who seemed muscle-bound and slow but who could probably chase you down faster than a runaway train.

Heavy brutish features. A stare as direct as Datura’s, but not as readable as hers.

They were not merely guarded eyes, but deeply enigmatic as none others I had ever seen. I had the weird feeling that behind those eyes lay a mind with a landscape so different from that of the ordinary human mind that it might as well have belonged to an entity born on another world.

Given his physical power, the shotgun seemed superfluous. He carried it to the window and held it in both hands as he stared at

the desert afternoon.

The second man was beefy but not as pumped as the first. Though young, he had a dissolute look, the puffy eyes and ruddy cheeks of a barroom brawler who would be content to spend his life drinking and fighting, both of which he no doubt did well.

He met my eyes, but not boldly as had the human locomotive. His gaze slid away from me, as if I made him uneasy, though that seemed unlikely. A charging bull probably wouldn't make him uneasy.

Although he carried no weapon that I could see, he might have had a handgun holstered under his summer-weight cotton sports coat.

He pulled a chair out from the table, sat, and poured some of the wine that I had declined.

Like the woman, both men dressed in black. I suspected that their outfits matched not by happenstance, that Datura liked black and that they dressed to her instructions.

They must have been guarding the staircases. She had not called them on a phone or sent them a text message, yet somehow they had known that I had gotten past them and was with her.

"This," she told me, indicating the brute at the window, "is Cheval Andre."

He didn't glance at me. He didn't say *Pleased to meet you*.

As the brawler drank a third of a glass of wine in one swallow, Datura said, "This is Cheval Robert."

Robert glowered at the candles on the table.

"Andre and Robert Cheval," I said. "Brothers?"

"Cheval is not their last name," she said, "as you well know. *Cheval* means 'horse.' As you well know."

"Horse Andre and Horse Robert," I said. "Lady, I have to tell you, even considering the strange life I lead, all this is getting too weird for me."

"If you show me spirits, and everything I want to see, I might not have them kill you, after all. Wouldn't you like to be my Cheval Odd?"

“Gee, I suppose it’s an offer most young men might envy, but I don’t know what my duties would be as a horse, what the pay is, if there’s health insurance—”

“Andre and Robert’s duty is to do what I tell them, anything I tell them, as you well know. As compensation, I give them what they need, anytime they need it. And once in a while, as with Dr. Jessup, I give them what they *want*.”

The two men looked at her with a hunger that seemed only in part to be lust. I sensed in them another need that had nothing to do with sex, a need that only she could satisfy, a need so grotesque that I hoped never to learn its nature.

She smiled. “They are such needy boys.”

Lightning with a dragon’s worth of teeth flashed across the black clouds, sharp and bright, and flashed again. Thunder crashed. The sky convulsed and shook off a million silvery scales of rain, and then millions more.

CHAPTER 32

THE HEAVY DOWNPOUR SEEMED TO WASH out of the air some of the light that managed to penetrate the storm clouds, and the afternoon grew both murky and dismal, as if the rain were not only weather but also a moral judgment on the land.

With less light from the window, the glow of the candles swelled. Red and orange chimeras prowled the walls and shook their manes across the ceiling.

Cheval Andre put down his shotgun on the floor and faced the tempest, placing both enormous hands flat against the window glass, as if drawing power from the storm.

Cheval Robert remained at the table, gazing at the candles. An ever-shifting tattoo of victory and money played across his broad face.

When Datura pulled another chair out from the table and told me to sit, I saw no reason to defy her. As I had said, my intention was to buy time and wait for fate to take a turn in my favor. As if I were already a good horse, I sat without objection.

She stalked the room, drank wine, stopped again and again to smell the roses, frequently stretched like a cat, ripe and lithe and acutely aware of how she looked.

Whether moving or standing in place, head tipped back and gazing at the nimbuses of candlelight pulsing on the ceiling, she talked and taunted.

“There’s a woman in San Francisco who levitates when she chants. Only the select are invited to observe her on the solstices or All Saints’ Eve. But I’m sure you’ve been there, and know her name.”

“We’ve never met,” I assured her.

“There’s a fine house in Savannah, inherited by a special young woman, willed to her by an uncle, who also left to her a diary in which he described murdering nineteen children and burying them in his basement. He knew that she would understand and not disclose his crimes to the authorities even though he was dead. You’ve no doubt visited more than once.”

“I don’t travel,” I said.

“I’ve been invited several times. If the planets are properly aligned and the guests are of the right caliber, you can hear the voices of the dead speaking from their graves in the floor and walls. Lost children pleading for their lives, as if they don’t know they’re dead, crying for release. It’s a riveting experience, as you well know.”

Andre stood and Robert sat, eyes on the storm in the first case, on the candles in the second, perhaps mesmerized by Datura’s singular voice. Neither had yet spoken a word. They were unusually silent men, and uncannily still.

She came to my chair, leaned toward me, and extracted a pendant from her ample cleavage: a teardrop stone, red, perhaps a ruby, as large as a peach pit.

“I have captured thirty in this,” she said.

“You told me on the phone. Thirty...thirty something in an amulet.”

“You know what I said. Thirty *ti bon ange*.”

“I imagine that took a while, collecting thirty.”

“You can see them in there,” she said, holding the stone close to my eyes. “Others can’t, but I’m sure you can.”

“They’re cute little things,” I said.

“Your pretense of ignorance would be convincing to most people, but you don’t fool me. With thirty, I am invincible.”

“You said before. I’m sure being invincible is comforting.”

“I need one more *ti bon ange*, and this one must be special. It must be yours.”

“I’m flattered.”

“As you know, there are two ways I can collect it,” she said, tucking the stone between her breasts again. She poured more wine. “I can take it from you through a water ritual. That is the painless method of extraction.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Or Andre and Robert can force you to swallow the stone. Then I can gut you like a fish and take it from your steaming stomach as you die.”

If her two horses had heard what she proposed, they were not surprised by it. They remained as still as coiled snakes.

Picking up the glass of wine, moving toward the roses, she said, “If you show me ghosts, I’ll take your *ti bon ange* the painless way. But if you insist on playing ignorant, this is going to be a very bad day for you. You’re going to know agony of a degree that few men ever experience.”

CHAPTER 33

THE WORLD HAS GONE MAD. YOU MIGHT have argued against that contention twenty years ago, but if you argue it in our time, you only prove that you, too, live in delusion.

In an asylum world, the likes of Datura rise to the top, the *crème de la crème* of the insane. They rise not by merit but by the force of their will.

When social forces press for the rejection of age-old Truth, then those who reject it will seek meaning in their own truth. These truths will rarely be Truth at all; they will be only collections of personal preferences and prejudices.

The less depth a belief system has, the greater the fervency with which its adherents embrace it. The most vociferous, the most fanatical are those whose cobbled faith is founded on the shakiest grounds.

I would humbly suggest that collecting someone's *ti bon ange*—whatever that might be—by forcing him to swallow a gemstone, then eviscerating him and collecting the stone from his stomach, is proof that you are fanatical, mentally unsteady, no longer operating within classic Western philosophy, and not suitable to be a contestant in the Miss America Pageant.

Of course, because it was *my* stomach threatened by the sexy eviscerator, you might feel that I am biased in this analysis. It's always easy to charge prejudice when it's the other guy who's being disemboweled.

Datura had found her truth in a mishmash of occultisms. Her beauty, her fierce will to power, and her ruthlessness drew to her others, like Andre and Robert, whose secondary truth was her weird system of magical thinking and whose primary truth was Datura herself.

As I watched the woman restlessly circle the room, I wondered how many of the employees in her business operations—the on-line porn store, the phone-sex operation—had gradually been replaced with true believers. Other employees, with empty hearts, might have been converted.

I wondered how many men like these two she could call upon to murder in her name. I suspected that although they were strange, they were not unique.

What must the women be like who were their gender's equivalents of Andre and Robert? You wouldn't want to leave your children with them if they ran a daycare center.

If an opportunity arose for me to escape, disarm the package of explosives, get Danny out of this place, and finger Datura for the police, I would be hated by the fanatics devoted to her. If that circle proved to be small, it might quickly fragment. They would find other belief systems or settle back into their natural nihilism, and soon I would mean nothing to them.

If on the other hand her cash-gushing enterprises served as the fountainhead of a cult, I would have to take more precautions than just relocating to a new apartment and changing my name to Odd Smith.

As if energized by the swords of lightning ripping through the sky, Datura pulled a fistful of long-stemmed red roses from one of the vases and gestured with them, lashing the air, as she shared her supernatural experiences.

“In Paris, in the *sous-sol* of a building that occupying Germans used as a police headquarters after the fall of France, a Gestapo officer named Gessel raped many young women in the process of his interrogations, whipped them, too, and killed some for pleasure.”

Crimson petals flew from the roses as she emphasized Gessel's brutality.

“One of his most desperate victims fought back—bit his throat, tore open his carotid artery. Gessel died there in his own abattoir, which he haunts to this day.”

An entire tattered bloom broke from its stem and landed in my lap. Startled, I brushed it to the floor as though it had been a tarantula.

“At the invitation of the current owner of that building,” said Datura, “I’ve visited that *sous-sol*, which is actually a sub-basement two floors below the street. If a woman disrobes there and offers herself...I felt Gessel’s hands all over me—eager, bold, demanding. He entered me. But I couldn’t see him. I had been promised I would see him, a full-blown apparition.”

In sudden anger, she threw down the roses and ground one of the blooms under her heel.

“I wanted to *see* Gessel. I could feel him. Powerful. Demanding. His everlasting rage. But I couldn’t *see* him. That last best proof, *seeing*, eludes me.”

Drawing quick shallow breaths, face flushed, not because the violent gestures taxed her but because her anger excited her, she approached Robert, who sat across the table from me, and held out her right hand to him.

He brought her palm to his mouth. For a moment I thought that he was kissing her hand, a strangely gentle moment for a pair of savages like them.

His subtle sucking sounds belied his tender manner.

At the window, Andre turned from the storm that thus far had entranced him. Dancing candlelight brightened his face but did not soften its hard features.

Like a mountain moving, he came to the table. He stood beside Robert’s chair.

When Datura had gripped the three long-stemmed roses in her fist, thorns had punctured her palm. She revealed no pain when she had lashed the air, but now she bled.

Robert might have contented himself at her wounds until no taste remained. From him issued a murmur of deep satisfaction.

As disturbing as this was, I doubted it was the “need” of which she had spoken. That would be a worse thing than this.

With an expression of perverse noblesse oblige, the would-be goddess denied Robert further favor and offered communion to Andre.

I tried to focus on the window and the spectacle of the storm, but I could not keep my gaze averted from the chilling tableau across the table.

The giant lowered his mouth into the cup of her hand. He lapped like a kitten, not seeking sustenance, surely, but craving something more than blood, something unknown and unholy.

As Cheval Andre accepted his mistress’s grace, Cheval Robert watched intently. Yearning tortured his face.

More than once since I’d entered Room 1203, the scent of Cleo-May had grown so sweet that it became repellent. Now it thickened to such a degree that it began to sicken me.

As I strove to repress my nausea, I had an impression that I don’t mean should be taken literally, that was metaphoric but no less disturbing:

During this blood-sharing ritual, Datura no longer seemed to be a woman, no longer a sexually distinct creature of either gender, but a member of some mono-clinous species that harbored both sexes in the same individual, and almost *insectile*. I expected that if lightning backlighted her, I would see her body as a mimicry of human form within which quivered a many-legged entity.

She withdrew her hand from Andre, and he relinquished it with reluctance. When she turned her back on him, however, he returned obediently to the window, once more placed his hands flat upon the glass, and gazed into the storm.

Robert’s attention focused again on the table candles. His face settled into placidity, but his eyes were lively with reflections of the flames.

Datura redirected her attention to me. For a moment she stared as if she did not remember who I was. Then she smiled.

She picked up her wineglass and came to me.

If I had realized that she intended to sit in my lap, I would have exploded to my feet as she rounded the table. By the time her intention became clear, she had already settled.

Feathering against my face, her warm breath smelled of wine.

“Have you seen an advantage yet that you can seize?”

“Not yet.”

“I want you to drink with me,” she said, holding the wineglass to my lips.

CHAPTER 34

SHE HELD THE WINE IN THE HAND THAT HAD been pricked by thorns, the hand upon which the two men had suckled.

A new wave of nausea washed through me, and I pulled my head back from the coolness of the glass rim against my lips.

“Drink with me,” she repeated, her smoky voice alluring under even these circumstances.

“I don’t want any,” I told her.

“You do want it, baby. You just don’t know you want it. You don’t yet understand yourself.”

She pressed the glass to my lips again, and I turned my head away from it.

“Poor Odd Thomas,” she said, “so fearful of corruption. Do you think I’m a dirty thing?”

Offending her too openly might be bad for Danny. Now that she had lured me here, she had little if any further use for him. She could punish me for any insult by pushing the black button on the remote.

Lamely, I said, “I just catch cold easily, that’s all.”

“But I don’t have a cold.”

“Well, you never know. You might have one but not be showing symptoms yet.”

“I take echinacea. You should, too. You’ll never have a cold again.”

“I’m not much into herbal remedies,” I said.

She slid her left arm around my neck. “You’ve been brainwashed by the big drug companies, baby.”

“You’re right. I probably have been.”

“Big drugs, big oil, big tobacco, big media—they’ve gotten inside everyone’s head. They’re poisoning us. You don’t need man-made chemicals. Nature has a cure for everything.”

“Brugmansia is really effective,” I said. “I could use some brugmansia leaf right now. Or flower. Or root.”

“I’m not familiar with that one.”

Under the bouquet of Cabernet Sauvignon, her breath carried another scent, an astringent odor, almost bitter, that I could not identify.

I remembered reading that the sweat and breath of certifiable psychopaths have a subtle but distinctive chemical odor because of certain physiological conditions accompanying that mental disorder. Maybe her breath smelled of craziness.

“A spoonful of white mustard seed,” she said, “protects against all harm.”

“I wish I had a spoonful.”

“Eating wonder-world root will make you rich.”

“Sounds better than hard work.”

She pressed the glass against my lips again, and when I tried to pull my head back, she resisted my effort with the arm that she had slipped around my neck.

When I turned my head to the side, she took the glass away and surprised me by giggling. “I know you’re a *mundunugu*, but you’re so good at pretending to be a church mouse.”

A sudden shift of wind threw shatters of rain against the windows.

She wriggled her bottom against my lap, smiled, and kissed my forehead.

“It’s stupid not to use herbal remedies, Odd Thomas. You don’t eat meat, do you?”

“I’m a fry cook.”

“I know you cook it,” she said, “but *please* tell me you don’t eat it.”

“Even cheeseburgers with bacon.”

“That’s so self-destructive.”

“And French fries,” I added.

“Suicidal.”

She sucked a mouthful of wine from the glass and spat it in my face. “Now what did resistance get you, baby? Datura always has her way. I can break you.”

Not if my mother couldn’t, I thought as I wiped my face with my left hand.

“Andre and Robert can hold you,” she said, “while I pinch your nose shut. When you open your mouth to breathe, I pour the wine down your throat. Then I bust the glass against your teeth, and you can chew the pieces. Is that what you’d prefer?”

Before she could press the wineglass to my lips again, I said, “Do you want to see the dead?”

No doubt some men saw an exciting blue fire in her eyes, but they mistook appetite for passion; her gaze was that of a cool and ravenous crocodile.

Searching my eyes, she said, “You told me no one but you could see them.”

“I guard my secrets.”

“So you can conjure, after all.”

“Yes,” I lied.

“I knew you could. I knew.”

“The dead are here, just like you thought.”

She looked around. The shimmering candlelight shivered the shadows.

“They aren’t in this room,” I said.

“Then where?”

“Downstairs. I saw several earlier, in the casino.”

She rose from my lap. “Conjure them here.”

“They choose where they haunt.”

“You have the power to summon.”

“It doesn’t work that way. There are exceptions, but for the most part, they cling to the very place where they died...or where they were happiest in life.”

Putting her wineglass on the table, she said, “What trick do you have up your sleeve?”

“I’m wearing a T-shirt.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

Rising from the chair, I said, “Gessel, the Gestapo agent—does he ever manifest anywhere but in the basement of that building in Paris? Anywhere but the very place where he died?”

She thought about that. “All right. We’ll go to the casino.”

CHAPTER 35

TO FACILITATE THE EXPLORATION OF THE abandoned hotel, they had brought Coleman lanterns, which operated on canned fuel. These lamps would press back the darkness more effectively than flashlights.

Andre left the shotgun on the floor near the window of Room 1203, which convinced me that both he and Robert carried pistols under their black jackets.

The remote control remained on the table. If my conjuring act in the casino failed to please Datura, at least she wouldn't be able to waste Danny at once. She would have to return here to retrieve the device that could trigger the blast.

As we were about to leave the room, she realized that she had not eaten a banana since the previous day. This oversight clearly concerned her.

Picnic coolers packed with food and drink were in the adjacent bathroom. She returned from there with one of Chiquita's finest.

As she peeled the fruit, she explained that the banana tree—"as you know, Odd Thomas"—was the tree of forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

"I thought it was an apple tree."

"Play dumb if you want," she said.

Although certain that I was aware of it, she also told me that the Serpent (with a capital S) lives forever because he eats twice daily of the fruit of the banana tree. And every serpent (with a small s)

will live for a thousand years by following this simple dietary requirement.

“But you’re not a serpent,” I said.

“When I was nineteen,” she revealed, “I made a *wanga* to charm the spirit of a snake from its body into mine. As I’m sure you can see, it’s twined among my ribs, where it’ll live forever.”

“Well, for a thousand years, anyway.”

Her patchwork theology—obviously stitched together in part from voodoo, but God alone knew from what else—made the ravings of Jim Jones in Guyana, David Koresh in Waco, and the leader of the comet cult that committed mass suicide near San Diego sound like rational men of faith.

Although I expected Datura to make the eating of the banana an erotic performance, she consumed the fruit with a kind of dogged determination. She chewed without apparent pleasure, and more than once grimaced when she swallowed.

I guessed that she was twenty-five or twenty-six years old. She might have been on this two-bananas-per-day regimen for as long as seven years.

Having by now eaten in excess of five thousand bananas, she might understandably have lost her taste for them—particularly if she had done the math relating to her remaining obligation. With 974 years to live (as a serpent, small *s*), she had approximately 710,000 more bananas in her future.

I find it so much easier being a Catholic. Especially one who doesn’t get to church every week.

So much about Datura was foolish, even pitiable, but her fatuity and ignorance made her no less dangerous. Throughout history, fools and their followers, willfully ignorant but in love with themselves and with power, have murdered millions.

When she had consumed the banana and calmed the spirit of the snake entwined through her ribs, we were ready to visit the casino.

A squirming against my groin startled me, and I thrust my hand into my pocket before realizing that I felt only Terri Stambaugh’s satellite phone.

Having seen, Datura said, “What have you got there?”

I had no choice but to reveal it. “Just my phone. I had it set to vibrate instead of ring. It surprised me.”

“Is it vibrating still?”

“Yes.” I held it in the palm of my hand, and we stared at it for a moment, until the caller hung up. “It stopped.”

“I’d forgotten your phone,” she said. “I don’t think we should leave it with you.”

I had no choice but to give it to her.

She took it into the bathroom and slammed it into a hard countertop. Slammed it again.

When she returned, she smiled and said, “We were at the movies once, and this dork took two phone calls during the film. Later we followed him, and Andre broke both his legs with a baseball bat.”

This proved that even the most evil people could occasionally have a socially responsible impulse.

“Let’s go,” she said.

I had entered Room 1203 with a flashlight. I left with it, too—switched off, clipped to my belt—and no one objected.

Carrying a Coleman lantern, Robert led the way to the nearest stairs and descended at the front of our procession. Andre came last with the second lantern.

Between those big somber men, Datura and I followed the wide stairs, not one behind the other, single file, but side by side at her insistence.

Down the first flight to the landing at the eleventh floor, I heard a steady menacing hiss. I half convinced myself that this must be the voice of the serpent spirit that she claimed to carry within her. Then I realized it was the sound of the burning gas in the saclike wicks of the lamps.

On the second flight, she took my hand. I might have pulled free of her grip in revulsion if I hadn’t thought her capable of ordering Andre to lop my hand off at the wrist as punishment for the insult.

More than fear, however, encouraged me to accept her touch. She did not seize my hand boldly, but took it hesitantly, almost shyly, and then held it firmly as a child might in anticipation of a spooky adventure.

I would not have bet on the proposition that this demented and corrupted woman harbored within her any wisp of the innocent child that she once must have been. Yet the quality of submissive trust with which she inserted her hand in mine and the shiver that passed through her at the prospect of what lay ahead suggested childlike vulnerability.

In the eldritch light, which cast about her an aura that seemed almost supernatural, she looked at me, her eyes adance with wonder. This was not the usual Medusa stare; it lacked her characteristic cold hunger and calculation.

Likewise, her grin was without mockery or menace, but expressed a natural and wholesome delight in conspiratorial feats of daring.

I warned myself against the danger of compassion in this case. How easy it would be to imagine the traumas of childhood that might have deformed her into the moral monster she had become, and then to convince myself that those traumas could be balanced—and their effects reversed—by sufficient acts of kindness.

She might not have been formed by trauma. She might have been born this way, without an empathy gene and other essentials. In that case, she would interpret any kindness as weakness. Among predatory beasts, any display of weakness is an invitation to attack.

Besides, even if trauma shaped her, that didn't excuse what had been done to Dr. Jessup.

I remembered a naturalist who, having come to despise humanity and to despair of it, set out to make a documentary about the moral superiority of animals, particularly of bears. He saw in them not only a harmonious relationship with nature that humankind could not achieve, but also a playfulness beyond human capacity, a dignity, a compassion for other animals, and even a mystical quality that he found moving, humbling. A bear ate him.

Long before I could precipitate a fog of self-delusion equal to that of the devoured naturalist, in fact by the time we had descended only three flights of stairs, Datura herself brought me sharply to my senses by launching into another of her charming anecdotes. She liked the sound of her own voice so much that she could not allow

the good impression, made by her smile and silence, to stand for long.

“In Port-au-Prince, if you are invited under the protection of a respected juju adept, it’s possible to attend a ceremony of one of the forbidden secret societies shunned by most voodooists. In my case, it was the Couchon Gris, the ‘Gray Pigs.’ Everyone on the island lives in terror of them, and in the more rural areas, they rule the night.”

I suspected that the Gray Pigs would prove to have little in common with, say, the Salvation Army.

“From time to time, the Couchon Gris perform a human sacrifice—and sample the flesh. Visitors may only observe. The sacrifice is made on a massive black stone hanging on two thick chains suspended from a great iron bar embedded in the walls near the ceiling.”

Her hand tightened in mine as she recalled this horror.

“The person being sacrificed is killed with a knife through the heart, and in that instant, the chains begin to sing. The *gros bon ange* flies at once from this world, but the *ti bon ange*, restrained by the ceremony, can only travel up and down the chains.”

My hand grew damp and chill.

I knew she must feel the change.

The faint, disturbing scent that I had smelled earlier, when I’d considered climbing these stairs, arose again. Musky, mushroomy, and strangely suggestive of raw meat.

As before, I flashed back to the dead face of the man whom I had hauled out of the water in the storm drain.

“When you listen closely to the singing chains,” Datura continued, “you realize it isn’t just the sound of twisting links grinding against one another. There’s a voice expressing in the chains, a wail of fear and despair, a wordless urgent pleading.”

Wordlessly, urgently, I pleaded with her to shut up.

“This anguished voice continues as long as the Couchon Gris continue to sample the flesh on the altar, usually half an hour. When they’re done, the chains immediately stop singing because the

ti bon ange dissipates, to be absorbed in equal measure by all those who tasted the sacrifice.”

We were three flights from the ground floor, and I wanted to hear no more of this. Yet it seemed to me that if this story was true—and I believed that it was—the victim deserved the dignity of an identity, and should not be spoken of as if he or she were but a fattened calf.

“Who?” I asked, my voice thin.

“Who what?”

“The sacrifice. Who was it that night?”

“A Haitian girl. About eighteen. Not all that pretty. A homely thing. Someone said she had been a seamstress.”

My right hand grew too weak to maintain a grip, and I let go of *Datura* with relief.

She smiled at me, amused, this woman who was physical perfection by almost any standard, whose beauty—icy or not—would turn heads wherever she went.

And I thought of a line from Shakespeare: *O, what may man within him hide, though angel on the outward side!*

Little Ozzie, my literary mentor, who despairs that I am not more well read in the classics, would have been proud to hear that a line from the immortal bard had come to me, in fully accurate quotation and appropriate to the moment.

He would also have lectured me on the stupidity of my continued aversion to firearms in light of the fact that I had chosen to put myself in the company of people whose idea of holiday fun was to book tickets not to a Broadway play but to a human sacrifice.

As we descended the final flight, *Datura* said: “The experience was fascinating. The voice in those chains had the identical tonal qualities of the voice of the little seamstress when she lay not yet dead on that black stone.”

“Did she have a name?”

“Who?”

“The seamstress.”

“Why?”

“Did she have a name?” I repeated.

“I’m sure she did. One of those funny Haitian names. I never heard it. The thing is, her *ti bon ange* didn’t materialize in any way. I want to *see*. But there was nothing to *see*. That part was disappointing. I want to *see*.”

Each time that she said *I want to see*, she sounded like a pouting child.

“You won’t disappoint me, will you, Odd Thomas?”

“No.”

We reached the ground floor, and Robert continued to lead the way, holding his lantern higher than he had on the stairs.

En route to the casino, I remained alert to the topography of the rubble and the burned-out spaces, committing them to memory as best I could.

CHAPTER 36

IN THE WINDOWLESS CASINO, THE PLEASANT-LOOKING man with receding hair sat at one of the two remaining blackjack tables, where I had first seen him, where for five years he had been waiting to be dealt another hand.

He smiled at me and nodded—but regarded Datura and her boys with a frown.

At my request, Andre and Robert put the Coleman lanterns on the floor, about twenty feet apart. I asked for a couple of adjustments—bring that one a foot this way, move the other one six inches to the left—as if the precise placement of the lamps was essential to some ritual that I intended to perform. This was all for Datura’s benefit, to help convince her that there was a *process* about which she needed to be patient.

The farther reaches of the vast chamber remained dark, but the center had enough light for my purpose.

“Sixty-four died in the casino,” Datura told me. “The heat was so intense in some areas that even bones burned.”

The patient blackjack player remained the only spirit in sight. The others would come eventually, as many as lingered this side of death.

“Baby, look at those melted slot machines. Casinos, they’re always advertising they have hot slots, but this time they weren’t bullshitting.”

Of the eight spirits who had been here previously, only one might serve my purpose.

“They found the remains of this old lady. The quake tipped over a bank of slot machines, trapped her under them.”

I didn’t want to hear Datura’s grisly details. By now, I knew there was no way that I could dissuade her from providing them, and vividly.

“Her remains were so twisted up with melted metal and plastic, the coroner couldn’t completely extract them.”

Under the time-mellowed rankness of char and sulfur and myriad toxic residues, I detected the half-fungal, half-fleshy odor from the stairwell. Elusive but not imagined, it swelled and faded breath by breath.

“The coroner thought the old bitch should be cremated, since the job was already half done, and since that was the only way to separate her from the melted machine.”

Out of shadows came the elderly lady with the long face and the vacant eyes. Perhaps she had been the one trapped under the bank of one-armed bandits.

“But her family—they didn’t want cremation, they wanted a traditional burial.”

From the corner of my eye, I detected movement, turned, and discovered the cocktail waitress in the Indian-princess uniform. I was saddened to see her. I had thought—and hoped—that she might have moved on at last.

“So the casket contained part of the slot machine that the hag had been fused with. Is that nuts or what?”

Here came the uniformed guard, walking a little bit like John Wayne, one hand on the gun at his hip.

“Are any of them here?” Datura asked.

“Yeah. Four.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“Right now they’re only manifesting to me.”

“So show me.”

“There should be one more. I have to wait until they’re all gathered.”

“Why?”

“That’s just the way it is.”

“Don’t screw with me,” she warned.

“You’ll get what you want,” I assured her.

Although Datura’s customary self-possession had given way to an evident excitement, to a twitchy anticipation, Andre and Robert exhibited all the enthusiasm of a pair of boulders. Each stood by his lantern, waiting.

Andre stared off into the gloom beyond the lamplight. He did not seem to be looking at anything in this universe. His features were slack. His eyes seldom blinked. The only emotion that he’d exhibited thus far had been when he had suckled at her thorn-pricked hand, and even then he had not revealed an ability to emote any greater than that of the average oak stump.

While Andre seemed perpetually anchored in placid waters, Robert occasionally revealed, by a fleeting expression or a furtive glance, that he rode a marginally more active inner sea. Now his hands had his complete attention as he used the fingernails of his left to clean under the fingernails of his right, slowly, meticulously, as though he would be content to spend hours at the task.

At first I had decided that both were on the stupid side of dumb, but I had begun to rethink that judgment. I couldn’t believe that their interior lives were rich in intellectual pursuit and philosophical contemplation, but I did suspect that they were more formidable, mentally, than they appeared to be.

Perhaps they had been with Datura for enough years and through enough ghost hunts that the prospect of supernatural experiences no longer interested them. Even the most exotic excursions can become tedious through repetition.

And after years of listening to her all but constant chatter, they could be excused for taking refuge in silence, for creating redoubts of inner quietude to which they could retreat, letting her ceaseless crazy talk wash over them.

“All right, you’re waiting for a fifth spirit,” she said, plucking at my T-shirt. “But tell me about those that are here already. Where are they? Who are they?”

To placate her and to avoid worrying that the dead man I most needed to see might not put in an appearance, I described the player at the blackjack table, his kind face, full mouth and dimpled chin.

“So he’s manifesting the way that he was before the fire?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“When you conjure him for me, I want to see him both ways—as he was in life, and what the fire did to him.”

“All right,” I agreed, because she would never be persuaded that I lacked the power to compel such revelations.

“All of them, I want to see what it did to them. Their wounds, their suffering.”

“All right.”

“Who else?” she asked.

One by one, I pointed to where they stood: the elderly woman, the guard, the cocktail waitress.

Datura found only the waitress intriguing. “You said she was a brunette. Is that right—or is her hair black?”

Peering more closely at the apparition, which moved toward me in response to my interest, I said, “Black. Raven hair.”

“Gray eyes?”

“Yes.”

“I know about her. There’s a story about her,” Datura said with an avidness that made me uneasy.

Now focusing on Datura, the young waitress came closer still, to within a few feet of us.

Squinting, trying to see the spirit, but staring to one side of it, Datura asked, “Why does she linger?”

“I don’t know. The dead don’t talk to me. When I command them to be visible to you, maybe you’ll be able to get them to speak.”

I scanned the casino shadows, searching for the lurking form of the tall, broad man with buzz-cut hair. Still no sign of him, and he was my only hope.

Speaking of the cocktail waitress, Datura said, “Ask if her name was...Maryann Morris.”

Surprised, the waitress moved closer and put a hand on Datura's arm, a contact that went unnoticed, for only I can feel the touch of the dead.

"It must be Maryann," I said. "She reacted to the name."

"Where is she?"

"Directly in front of you, within arm's reach."

In the manner of a domesticated creature reverting to a wilder state, Datura's delicate nostrils flared, her eyes shone with feral excitement, and her lips pulled back from her white-white teeth as if in anticipation of blood sport.

"I know why Maryann can't move on," Datura said. "There was a story about her in the news accounts. She had two sisters. Both of them worked here."

"She's nodding," I told Datura, and at once wished that I had not facilitated this encounter.

"I'll bet Maryann doesn't know what happened to her sisters, whether they lived or died. She doesn't want to move on until she knows what happened to them."

The apprehensive expression on the spirit's face, which was not entirely without a fragile hope, revealed that Datura had intuited the reason Maryann lingered. Reluctant to encourage her, I didn't confirm the accuracy of her insight.

She needed no encouragement from me. "One sister was a waitress working the ballroom that night."

The Lady Luck Ballroom. The collapsed ceiling. The crushing, skewering weight of the massive chandelier.

"The other sister worked as a hostess in the main restaurant," Datura said. "Maryann had used her contacts to get jobs for them."

If that was true, the cocktail waitress might feel responsible for her sisters having been in the Panamint when the quake struck. Hearing that they had survived, she would most likely feel free to shake off the chains that bound her to this world, these ruins.

Even if her sisters had died, the sad truth was likely to release her from her self-imposed purgatory. Although her sense of guilt might increase, that would be trumped by her hope of a reunion with her loved ones in the next world.

Seeing not the usual cold calculation in Datura's eyes, nor the childlike wonder that had briefly brightened them as we had descended the stairs from the twelfth floor, seeing instead a bitterness and a meanness that emphasized the new feral quality in her face, I felt no less nauseated than when, with blood-smeared hand, she had pressed the wineglass to my lips.

"The lingering dead are vulnerable," I warned her. "We owe them the truth, only the truth, but we have to be careful to comfort them and encourage them onward by what we say and how we say it."

Listening to myself, I realized the futility of urging Datura to act with compassion.

Directly addressing the spirit whom she could not see, Datura said, "Your sister Bonnie is alive."

Hope brightened the late Maryann Morris's face, and I could see that she readied herself for joy.

Datura continued: "Her spine was snapped when a ton-and-a-half ballroom chandelier fell on her. Crushed the shit out of her. Her eyes were punctured, ruined—"

"What're you doing? Don't do this," I pleaded.

"Now Bonnie's paralyzed from the neck down, and blind. She lives on the government dole in a cheap nursing home where she'll probably die from neglected bedsores."

I wanted to shut her up even if I had to hit her, and maybe half the reason I wanted to shut her up was because it would *give me an excuse* to hit her.

As though attuned to my desire, Andre and Robert stared at me, tense with the expectation of action.

Although the chance to knock her flat would have been worth the beating the thugs would have administered to me, I reminded myself that I had come here for Danny. The cocktail waitress was dead, but my friend with brittle bones had a chance to live. His survival must be my focus.

Addressing the spirit she could not see, Datura said, "Your other sister, Nora, was burned over eighty percent of her body, but she survived. Three fingers on her left hand were burned completely

away. So were her hair and many of her facial features, Maryann. One ear. Her lips. Her nose. Seared away, gone.”

Grief so tortured the cocktail waitress that I could not bear to look at her, because I could do nothing to comfort her in the face of this vicious assault.

Breathing rapidly, shallowly, Datura had allowed the wolf in her bones to rise into her heart. Words were her teeth and cruelty her claws.

“Your Nora has had thirty-six operations with more to come—skin grafts, facial reconstruction, painful and tedious. And still she’s hideous.”

“You’re making this up,” I interrupted.

“Like hell I am. She’s *hideous*. She rarely goes out, and when she does, she wears a hat and ties a scarf across her sickening face to avoid frightening children.”

Such aggressive gleefulness in the administration of emotional pain, such inexplicable bitterness revealed Datura’s perfect face to be not just a contrast to her nature but in fact a mask. The longer she assailed the cocktail waitress, the less opaque the mask became, and you could begin to see the suggestion of an underlying malignancy so ugly that, were the mask to be stripped suddenly away, a face would be revealed that would make Lon Chaney’s Phantom of the Opera look lamb-sweet, lamb-gentle.

“You, Maryann, *you* got away easy by comparison. Your pain is over. You can go on from here any damn time you choose. But because your sisters were where they were, when they were, their suffering is going to continue for years and years, for all the rest of their miserable lives.”

The intensity of misbegotten guilt that Datura strove to foster would keep this tortured spirit chained to these burned-out ruins, to this bleak plot of land, for another decade, or century. And for no purpose but to attempt to agitate the poor soul into a visible manifestation.

“Do I piss you off, Maryann? Do you hate me for revealing the helpless, broken *things* your sisters have become?”

To Datura, I said, “This is disgusting, despicable, and it won’t work. It’s all for nothing.”

“I know what I’m doing, baby. I always know *exactly* what I’m doing.”

“She isn’t like you,” I persisted. “She doesn’t hate, so you can’t enrage her.”

“*Everyone* hates,” she said, and warned me off with a murderous look that dropped the temperature of my blood. “Hate makes the world go ’round. Especially for girls like Maryann. They’re the best of all haters.”

“What would you know about girls like her?” I asked scornfully, angrily. And answered my question: “Nothing. You know nothing about women like her.”

Andre took one step away from his lantern, and Robert glowered at me.

Relentless, Datura said, “I’ve seen your picture in newspapers, Maryann. Oh, yes, I did my research before I came here. I know the faces of so many who died in this place, because if I meet *them*—*when* I meet them through my new boyfriend here, my little odd one—I want the encounters to be *memorable*.”

The tall broad brick of a man with buzz-cut hair and deep-set bile-green eyes had appeared, but I’d been so distracted by Datura’s unconscionable badgering of the cocktail waitress that I had not been aware of this spirit’s belated arrival. I saw him now as he abruptly loomed closer to us.

“I’ve seen your picture, Maryann,” Datura repeated. “You were a pretty girl but not a beauty. Just pretty enough for men to use you, but not pretty enough to be able to use *them* to get what you wanted.”

No more than ten feet from us, the eighth spirit of the casino appeared to be as angry as he had been when I had seen him earlier. Jaws clenched. Hands fisted.

“Just pretty isn’t good enough,” Datura continued. “Prettiness fades quickly. If you had lived, your life would have been nothing but cocktail waitressing and disappointment.”

Buzz-cut came closer, now three feet behind the stricken spirit of Maryann Morris.

“You had high hopes when you came to this job,” Datura said, “but it was a dead end, and soon you knew you were already a failure. Women like you turn to their sisters, to their friends, and make a life that way. But you...*you* even failed your sisters, didn’t you?”

One of the Coleman lanterns brightened markedly, dimmed, and brightened again, causing shadows to fly away, leap close, and fly away once more.

Andre and Robert somberly considered the lamp, looked at each other, and then surveyed the room, puzzled.

CHAPTER 37

“FAILED YOUR SISTERS,” DATURA REPEATED, “your paralyzed, blind, disfigured sisters. And if that isn’t true, if I’m full of crap, then let me *see* you, Maryann. Show yourself, confront me, let me *see* you the way the fire ruined you. Show me, and scare me off.”

Although I would never have been able to conjure these spirits into a sufficiently material state for Datura to have seen them, I had hoped that Buzz-cut, with his high poltergeist potential, would provide a spectacle that would not only entertain my captors but also distract them so completely that I might get away.

The problem had been how to fuel his already simmering anger into the fiery rage needed to power poltergeist phenomena. Now it seemed that Datura would solve that problem for me.

“You weren’t there for your sisters,” she taunted. “Not before the quake, not during, not after, not ever.”

Although the cocktail waitress only buried her face in her hands and endured the poisonous accusations, Buzz-cut glared at Datura, his expression heating from a simmering to a boiling anger.

He and Maryann Morris were bonded by untimely death as well as by their inability to move on, but I can’t know that his mood grew darker because he took offense on behalf of the cocktail waitress. I don’t believe these stranded spirits feel any sense of community. They see one another, but each is fundamentally alone.

More likely, Datura’s viciousness resonated with this man, excited him, and amplified his existing anger.

“The fifth spirit has arrived,” I told her. “Conditions are perfect now.”

“Then *do it*,” she said sharply. “Conjure them right here, right now. Let me *see*.”

God forgive me, to save myself and Danny, I said, “What you’re doing is helpful. It’s...I don’t know...it’s emotionalizing them or something.”

“I told you I always know exactly what I’m doing. Don’t ever doubt me, baby.”

“Just keep hammering at her, and with my help, in a few minutes, you’ll not just see Maryann but all of them.”

She hurled more abuse at the cocktail waitress, in language far more vile than she’d used thus far, and both of the Coleman lanterns pulsed, pulsed, as though in sympathy with the lightning that might at the same moment have been ripping through the sky outside.

Stalking, turning, stalking, circling, as if caged, as though frustrated beyond tolerance by his confinement, Buzz-cut banged his fists together hard enough to fracture knuckle against knuckle if he had been a material presence, but not even making a sound in his spirit form.

He could have swung those fists at me, but they would have had no effect. No spirit can harm a living person by direct touch. This world belongs to us, not to them.

If an earthbound soul is sufficiently debased, however, if the anger and envy and spite and stubborn rebellion that characterized him in life should ripen into blackest spiritual malignancy during the days when he lingers between worlds, he will be able to vent the power of his demonic rage on inanimate objects.

To the cocktail waitress whom she couldn’t see and never would, Datura said with pitiless persistence, “You know what I think, what I’d bet, Maryann? In that shabby nursing home at night, some scummy guy on the staff sneaks in your sister’s room, Bonnie’s room, and rapes her.”

Past rage, approaching fury, Buzz-cut threw back his head and screamed, but the sound was trapped with him in the realm between here and Elsewhere.

“She’s helpless,” Datura said, her voice as venomous as the contents of a rattlesnake’s poison sacs. “Bonnie would be afraid to tell anyone because the rapist never talks, and she doesn’t know his name, and she can’t see, so she’s afraid they won’t believe her.”

Buzz-cut tore at the air with his hands, as though trying to claw his way back through the veil that separated him from the world of the living.

“So Bonnie has to endure anything he does to her, but when she’s enduring, she thinks of you, thinks because of you, she was where she was when the quake destroyed her life, and she thinks about how you, her sister, aren’t there for her now, and never were.”

Listening to herself, her own most appreciative audience, Datura thrived on her viciousness. After each hateful rant, she seemed to thrill to the discovery of a deeper vileness in herself.

The malignant mass beneath the mask of beauty now rose all but fully into view. Her flushed and twisted features were no longer the stuff of adolescent boys’ dreams, but of madhouses and of prisons for the criminally insane.

I tensed, sensing that a forceful demonstration of the spirit’s fury was almost upon us.

Inspired by Datura, energized, Buzz-cut thrashed spastically, as if he were lashed by a hundred whips or tormented by jolt after jolt of electricity. He threw his arms out, palms spread, like an enraptured preacher of an expressive sect, exhorting a congregation to be penitent.

From his big hands pulsed concentric rings of power. They were visible to me, but only by their effects would they be visible to my hostess and her men.

Rattles, clicks, creaks, and pings arose from the piles of ruined slot machines, and the two blackjack-table stools began to dance in place. Here and there across the casino, small funnels of whirling ashes spun up from the floor.

“What’s happening?” Datura asked.

“They’re about to appear,” I told her, though every spirit other than Buzz-cut had disappeared. “All of them. At last, you’ll *see*.”

Poltergeists are as impersonal as hurricanes. They cannot aim themselves or cause precise effects. They are blind, thrashing power, and can harm human beings only by indirection. If furiously flung debris brains you, however, the effect is no less devastating than a well-swung club to the head.

Broken slabs of plaster ceiling ornamentation levitated out of the craps table into which they had fallen during the earthquake, and exploded at us.

I dodged, Datura ducked, and the missiles flew past us, over us, crashing into columns and walls behind us.

Buzz-cut flung bolts of power from his hands, and when he let out another silent scream, concentric circles of energy poured from his open mouth.

More and larger funnels of gray ashes and soot and scraps of charred wood spun up from the floor, while chips and clods of plaster shook down from the ceiling, while lashing down from above as well were loose wires and electrical conduits, while a battered blackjack table tumbled across the room as if blown by a wind that otherwise we could not feel, while a fire-scorched wheel of fortune spun by in a blur of losing numbers, while a pair of metal crutches stilted past as if in search of the dead gambler who had once needed them, and while an eerie screeching came out of the gloom and rapidly swelled both in volume and in pitch.

In this furiously escalating chaos, a chunk of plaster weighing perhaps fifteen pounds struck Robert in the chest, knocking him backward and off his feet.

As the thug went down, the mysterious screaming thing appeared out of the darker reaches of the casino, proving to be a half-melted life-size bronze statue of an Indian chief on a horse, spinning with alarming rotational velocity, the base shrieking against the concrete floor, from which nearly all carpeting had been burned, scouring away debris, striking sprays of white and orange sparks.

With Robert still falling, with Datura and Andre riveted by the approaching, whirling, shrieking bronze, I seized the moment, stepped to the nearest Coleman lantern, snared it, and threw it at the second lamp.

In spite of my lack of practice at bowling, I scored a strike. Lantern met lantern with a crash and a brief bloom of light, and then we were in darkness relieved only by the sparks showering from the spinning horse and rider.

CHAPTER 38

ONCE A POLTERGEIST AS POWERFUL AS BUZZ-CUT has committed itself to a violent release of pent-up fury, it will with rare exception rage out of control until it exhausts itself—much like the usual incoherent-rap-star-going-postal at the annual Vibe Awards. In this case, the storming spirit might give me another minute of cover, as long as two or three.

In the dark, in the rattle-clatter-bang-shriek, I stayed low, scuttling, anxious to avoid being knocked unconscious or decapitated by flying debris. I squinted, too, because enough chips and splinters of this and that were spinning through the air to make me wish that I'd brought an ophthalmologist with me.

As well as I could in such blinding dark, I tried to follow a straight line. My goal: a gallery of demolished shops beyond the casino, through which we had passed on our way here from the north stairs of the hotel.

Encountering piles of rubble, I went around some, over others, keeping on the move. I felt my way with both hands, but cautiously lest I clamber across debris bristling with nails and sharp metal edges.

I spat ashes, spat unidentifiable bits of debris, plucked away fuzzy twirls of fluffy stuff that tickled my ears. I sneezed without worrying that I could be tracked by sound through the poltergeist cacophony.

Too soon, I grew concerned that I had strayed off course, that it was not possible to remain oriented in pitch blackness. I quickly

became convinced that I would bump into a voluptuous form in the dark, and that it would say *Why, if it isn't my new boyfriend, my little odd one.*

That stopped me.

I unclipped the flashlight from my belt. But I hesitated to use it, even just long enough to sweep my surroundings and reorient myself.

Datura and her needy boys probably had not relied solely on the Coleman lanterns. Most likely they would have a flashlight or even three. If not, then Andre would let her set his hair on fire and use him as a walking torch.

When Buzz-cut ran out of steam, when the merry band of three could stop hugging the floor and dared to raise their heads, they would expect to find me in their immediate area. With flashlights, in this gloom, they would need a minute or two, maybe longer, to realize that I was neither dead nor alive in the mess of poltergeist-tossed trash.

If I used my light now, they might see the sweep of it and know that I was already escaping. I didn't want to draw their notice sooner than necessary. I needed every precious minute of lead time that I could get.

A hand touched my face.

I screamed like a little girl but couldn't make a sound, and thus avoided humiliating myself.

Fingers pressed gently to my lips, as if to warn me against the cry that I had tried and failed to make. A delicate hand, that of a woman.

Only three women had been in the casino this time. Two of them were five years dead.

The would-be goddess, even if invincible by virtue of having thirty thingumadoodles in an amulet, even if destined to live one thousand years by virtue of playing host to a banana-loving serpent, could not see in the dark. She had no sixth sense. She could not have found me without a flashlight.

The hand slipped from my lips to my chin, my cheek. Then she touched my left shoulder, traced the line of my arm, and took my

hand.

Perhaps because I want the dead to feel warm, they are that way to me, and this hand in mine also felt indescribably cleaner than had the well-manicured hand of the phone-sex heiress. Clean and honest, strong but gentle. I wanted to believe that this was Maryann Morris, the cocktail waitress.

Giving her my trust, after having paused no longer than ten seconds in the drowning dark, I allowed her to be my pilot fish.

With Buzz-cut noisily working off his frustrations in the gloom behind us, we hurried forward much faster than I had been able to progress on my own, bypassing obstacles instead of clambering over them, never hesitating in fear of falling. The ghost could see as well without light as with.

In less than a minute, following a few turns that felt right, she brought me to a stop. She let go of my left hand and touched my right, in which I held the flashlight.

Switching it on, I saw that we had gone through the gallery of shops and that we were at the end of a hallway, at the door to the north stairs. My guide, indeed, was Maryann, appropriately dressed as an Indian princess.

Seconds were important, but I could not leave her without an attempt to right Datura's wrongs.

"The darkness loose in this world damaged your sisters. The fault isn't yours. Eventually when they leave here, don't you want to be there for them on...the other side?"

She met my gaze. Her gray eyes were lovely.

"Go home, Maryann Morris. There's love waiting for you, if only you'll go to it."

She glanced back the way that we had come, then looked at me worriedly.

"When you get there, ask for my Stormy. You won't be sorry you did. If Stormy's right and the next life is service, there's nobody better to have great adventures with than her."

She backed away from me.

"Go home," I whispered.

She turned and walked away.

“Let go. Go home. Leave life—and live.”

As she faded, she looked over her shoulder, and smiled, and then she was not in the hallway anymore.

This time, I believe, she passed through the veil.

I tore open the staircase door, plunged through, and climbed like a sonofabitch.

CHAPTER 39

CLEO-MAY CANDLES, COMPELLING ME TO love and obey the charming young woman who consorted with Gestapo ghosts, splashed the walls red, splashed them yellow.

Nevertheless, in the storm-swallowed day, Room 1203 swarmed with as much darkness as light. A draft with the disposition of a nervous little dog had gotten in from somewhere, chasing its tail this way and that, so each ripple of radiance spawned an undulant shadow; a dark billow chased each tremulous bright wave.

The shotgun lay on the floor by the window, where Andre had left it. The weapon was heavier than I expected. As soon as I picked it up, I almost put it down.

This was not one of the long shotguns you might use for hunting wild turkeys or wildebeest, or whatever you hunt with long shotguns. This was a short-barreled, pistol-grip model good for home defense or for holding up a liquor store.

Police use weapons like this, as well. Two years ago, Wyatt Porter and I had been in a tight situation involving three operators of an illegal crystal-meth lab and their pet crocodile, during which I might have wound up with one less leg, and possibly no testicles, if the chief hadn't made good use of a pistol-grip 12-gauge pretty much like this one.

Although I had never fired such a gun—in fact had only once previously in my life used any kind of firearm at all—I had seen the chief use one. Of course this is no different from saying that

watching all of Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry movies will make you a master marksman and an expert in ethical police procedure.

If I left the gun here, the needy boys would use it on me. If I was backed into a corner by those behemoths and didn't at least *try* to use the shotgun on them, I would be committing suicide, considering that what they ate for breakfast probably weighed more than I did.

So I burst into the room, ran to the shotgun, snatched it off the floor, grimaced at the lethal feel of it, warned myself that I was too young for adult diapers, and stood by the window, quickly examining it in the twitchy dazzle of a series of lightning bolts. Pump action. Three-round magazine tube. Another round in the breech. Yes, it had a trigger.

I felt I could use it in a crisis, though I must admit much of my confidence came from the fact that I had recently paid my health-insurance premium.

I scanned the floor, the table, the window sill, but didn't see any additional ammunition.

From the table, I grabbed the remote control, careful not to press the black button.

Figuring that the Buzz-cut brouhaha might be winding down about now, I had just a few minutes before Datura and her boys got through the post-poltergeist confusion and back on their game.

I blew precious seconds stepping into the bathroom to see if she had done a thorough job on Terri's satellite phone. I found it dented but not in pieces, so I shoved it in a pocket.

Beside the sink was a box of shotgun ammo. I jammed four shells into my pockets.

Out of the room, into the hall, I glanced in the direction of the north stairs, then sprinted the other way, to Room 1242.

Probably because Datura didn't want Danny to have any victory or money, she hadn't provided him with any candles in red and yellow glass holders. Now that armies of black clouds had stormed the entire sky, his room was a sooty-smelling pit brightened only fitfully by nature's war light, filled with a rapid patter that brought to mind an image of a horde of running rats.

“Odd,” he whispered when I came through the door, “thank God. I was sure you were dead.”

Switching on the flashlight, handing it to him to hold, matching his whisper, I said, “Why didn’t you *tell* me what a lunatic she is.”

“Do you ever listen to me? I told you she was crazier than a syphilitic suicide bomber with mad-cow disease!”

“Yeah. Which is as much of an understatement as saying Hitler was a painter who dabbled in politics.”

The running-rat patter proved to be rain slanting into the room through one of the three window panes that were broken, rattling against a jumble of furniture.

I leaned the shotgun against the wall and showed him the remote control, which he recognized.

“Is she dead?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

“What about Doom and Gloom?”

I didn’t have to ask who they might be. “One of them took a hit, but I don’t think it did him serious damage.”

“So they’ll be coming?”

“As sure as taxes.”

“We gotta split.”

“Splitting,” I assured him, and almost pressed the white button on the remote.

At the penultimate instant, thumb poised, I asked myself who had told me that the black button would detonate the explosives and the white would disarm them.

Datura.

CHAPTER 40

DATURA, WHO HOBNOBBED WITH THE GRAY Pigs of Haiti and observed seamstresses being sacrificed and cannibalized, had told me that the black button detonated, that the white disarmed.

In my experience, she had not proved herself to be a reliable source of dependable fact and unvarnished truth.

More to the point, the ever-helpful madwoman had *volunteered* this information when I had asked if the remote on the table might be the one that controlled the bomb. I couldn't think of any reason why she would have done so.

Wait. Correction. I could after all think of one reason, which was Machiavellian and cruel.

If by some wild chance I ever got my hands on the remote, she wanted to program me to blow up Danny instead of save him.

"What?" he asked.

"Gimme the flashlight."

I went around behind his chair, crouched, and studied the bomb. In the time since I had first seen this device, my subconscious had been able to mull over the tangle of colorful wiring—and had come up with zip.

This does not necessarily reflect badly on my subconscious. At the same time, it had been presented with other important tasks—such as listing all the diseases I might have contracted when Datura spat wine in my face.

As previously, I tried to jump-start my sixth sense by tracing the wires with one fingertip. After 3.75 seconds I admitted this was a desperation tactic with no hope of getting me anything but killed.

“Odd?”

“Still here. Hey, Danny, let’s play a word-association game.”

“Now?”

“We could be dead later, then when would we play it? Humor me. It’ll help me think this through. I’ll say something, and you tell me the first thing that comes into your mind.”

“This is nuts.”

“Here we go: black and white.”

“Piano keys.”

“Try again. Black and white.”

“Night and day.”

“Black and white.”

“Salt and pepper.”

“Black and white.”

“Good and evil.”

I said, “Good.”

“Thank you.”

“No. That’s the next word for association: *good*.”

“Grief.”

“Good,” I repeated.

“Bye.”

“Good.”

“God.”

I said, “Evil.”

“Datura,” he said at once.

“Truth.”

“Good.”

I sprang “Datura” on him again.

At once he said, “Liar.”

“Our intuition brings us to the same conclusion,” I told him.

“What conclusion?”

“White detonates,” I said, putting my thumb lightly on the black button.

Being Odd Thomas is frequently interesting but nowhere near as much fun as being Harry Potter. If I were Harry, with a pinch of this and a smidgin of that and a muttered incantation, I would have tossed together a don't-explode-in-my-face charm, and everything would have turned out just fine.

Instead, I pushed the black button, and everything *seemed* to turn out just fine.

“What happened?” Danny asked.

“Didn't you hear the boom? Listen close—you still might.”

I hooked my fingers through the wires, tightened my hand into a fist, and ripped that colorful mare's-nest out of the device.

The small version of a carpenter's level tipped on its side, and the bubble slipped into the blast zone.

“I'm not dead,” Danny said.

“Me neither.”

I went to the furniture that had been stacked haphazardly by the earthquake and retrieved my backpack from the crevice in which I had tucked it less than an hour ago.

From the backpack, I withdrew the fishing knife and cut the last of the duct tape that bound Danny to the chair.

The kilo of explosives fell to the floor with a thud no louder than would have been produced by a brick of modeling clay. Boom-plastic can be detonated only by an electrical charge.

As Danny got up from the chair, I dropped the knife into the backpack. I switched off the flashlight and clipped it to my belt once more.

Freed of the obligation to puzzle out the meaning of the bomb wires, my subconscious was counting off the elapsing seconds since I had fled the casino, and being a total nag about the situation: *Hurry, hurry, hurry.*

CHAPTER 41

AS THOUGH WAR HAD BROKEN OUT BETWEEN Heaven and Earth, another extended barrage of lightning blasted the desert, making pools of glass in the sand somewhere. Thunder cracked so hard that my teeth vibrated as if I were absorbing chords from the massive speakers at a death-metal concert, and bustling rat battalions of rain blew in through the broken window.

Looking at the tempest, Danny blurted, “Holy crap.”

I said, “Some irresponsible bastard killed a blacksnake and hung it in a tree.”

“Blacksnake?”

After handing my backpack to him and grabbing the shotgun, I stepped onto the threshold of the open door and checked the corridor. The furies had not yet arrived.

Close behind me, Danny said, “My legs are on fire after the walk out from Pico Mundo, and my hip’s like full of knives. I don’t know how long I’ll hold up.”

“We aren’t going far. Once we get across the rope bridge and through the room of a thousand spears, it’s a piece of cake. Just be as fast as you can.”

He couldn’t be fast. His usual rolling gait was emphasized as his right leg repeatedly buckled under him, and though he had never been a complainer, he hissed in pain with nearly every step.

Had I planned to take him directly out of the Panamint, we would not have gotten far before the harpy and the ogres caught up with

us and dragged us down.

I led him north along the hall to the elevator alcove and was relieved when we ducked out of sight into it.

Although I hated to put down the shotgun, though I wished I'd had time to have it biologically attached to my right arm and wired directly into my central nervous system, I leaned it against the wall.

As I began to pry at the lift doors that I had scoped out earlier, Danny whispered, "What—you're going to pitch me down a shaft so it looks like an accident, then my Martian-brain-eating-centipede card will be all yours?"

Doors open, I risked a quick sweep of the flashlight to show him the empty cab. "No light, heat, or running water, but no Datura, either."

"We're going to hide here?"

"You are going to hide here," I said. "I'm going to distract and mislead."

"They'll find me in twelve seconds."

"No, they won't stop to think that the doors could've been pried open. And they won't expect us to try to hide this close to where they were keeping you."

"Because it's stupid."

"That's right."

"And they won't expect us to be stupid."

"Bingo."

"Why don't we both hide in there?"

"Because that *would* be stupid."

"Both eggs in one basket."

I said, "You're getting a feel for this, compadre."

In my backpack were three additional half-liter bottles of water. I kept one and passed the others to him.

Squinting in the dim light, he said, "Evian."

"If you'd like to think so."

I gave both of the coconut-raisin power bars to him. "You could last three or four days if you had to."

"You'll be back before then."

“If I can elude them for a few hours, they’ll think the plan is to buy you time to get away at your pace. They’ll start to sweat that you’re bringing the cops, and they’ll blow this place.”

He accepted from me several foil-wrapped packets. “What are these?”

“Moist towelettes. If I don’t come back, I’m dead. Wait two days to be sure it’s safe. Then pry open the doors and get yourself out to the interstate.”

He entered the elevator, gingerly tested its stability. “What about—how do I pee?”

“In the empty water bottles.”

“You think of everything.”

“Yeah, but then I won’t reuse them. Be dead quiet, Danny. Because if you’re not quiet, you’re dead.”

“You’ve saved my life, Odd.”

“Not yet.”

I gave him one of my two flashlights and advised him not to use it in the elevator. Light might leak out. He needed to save it for the stairwells in the event that he had to leave by himself.

As I pushed shut the doors, closing him in, Danny said, “I’ve decided I don’t wish I were you, after all.”

“I didn’t know identity theft had ever crossed your mind.”

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered through the narrowing gap. “I’m so damn sorry.”

“Friends forever,” I told him, which was a thing we said for a while when we were ten or eleven. “Friends forever.”

CHAPTER 42

PAST ROOM 1242 WITH ITS UNEXPLODED bomb, from the main corridor to the secondary, wearing the backpack, toting the shotgun, I schemed to survive. The desire to ensure that Datura rotted in prison had given me a stronger will to live than I'd had in six months.

I expected that they would split up and return to the twelfth floor by the north *and* south staircases, to cut me off before I could shepherd Danny out. If I could descend just two or three stories, to the tenth or ninth level, and let them pass by me, I might be able to slip back onto the stairs behind them and race all the way down, out, and away—to return in but an hour or two with the police.

When I had first walked into Room 1203 and had spoken to Datura as she'd stood at the window, she had known without having to ask that I must have gotten around the staircases by using an elevator shaft. No other route could have brought me to the twelfth floor.

Consequently, although they would know that I couldn't get Danny down by that route, they would at least listen at the shafts now and then for sounds of movement. I couldn't use that trick again.

Arriving at the entry to the south stairs, I found the door half open. I eased through, onto the landing.

Not a sound rose from lower flights. I crept down step to step—four, five—and paused to listen. The silence held.

The alien smell, musk-mushrooms-meat, eddied no thicker here than it had earlier, perhaps thinner, but no less off-putting.

The flesh on the nape of my neck did the crawly thing that it does so well. Some people say this is God's warning that the devil is near, but I've noticed I also experience it when someone serves me Brussels sprouts.

Whatever the precise source of the odor, it must have arisen from the toxic stew left over from the fire, which was why I'd never encountered it prior to the Panamint. It was a product of a singular event, but it wasn't otherworldly. Any scientist could have analyzed it, tracked down its origin, and provided me with a molecular recipe.

I had never encountered a supernatural entity that signaled its presence with this smell. People smell, not ghosts. Yet the nape of my neck continued to do its thing even in the absence of Brussels sprouts.

Impatiently counseling myself that nothing threatening crouched in the stairwell, I quickly went down another step in the dark, and another, loath to use my flashlight and thereby reveal my presence in case Datura or one of her horses was somewhere below me.

I reached the midfloor landing, descended two more steps—and saw a pale glow blossom on the wall at the eleventh level.

Someone coming up. He could be only a floor or two below me, because light didn't travel well around 180-degree turns.

I considered racing ahead in the hope that I could reach the eleventh floor and spring rabbit-quick out of the stairwell before the climber turned onto a new flight and saw me. But that door might be corroded shut and incapable of being opened. Or might shriek like a banshee on rusted hinges.

The blot of light on the wall brightened, grew larger. He was ascending fast. I heard footsteps.

I had the shotgun. In a confined space like the stairwell, even I couldn't fail to score a solid hit.

Necessity had driven me to take the weapon, but I wasn't keen to use it. The gun would be a last resort, not a first option.

Besides, the moment I pulled the trigger, they would know that I had not left the hotel. Then the hunt would be on with even greater intensity.

As quietly as possible, I backtracked. At the twelfth-floor landing, I kept ascending in the dark, intending to proceed to the thirteenth, but within three steps, I discovered a riser littered with rubble.

Unsure what lay above, afraid of stumbling and making too much noise if treacherous mounds of trash lay underfoot, worried that the way might be blocked altogether, I retreated three steps to the twelfth floor.

The light on the landing wall below swelled bright, the beam directly upon it. He must be only a flight and a half below; and he would see me when he made the turn.

I dodged through the half-open door, returning to the twelfth floor.

In the gray light, I saw that at the first two rooms, to my left and right, the doors were closed. I did not dare waste time trying them, in case they proved to be locked.

The second room on my right stood open. I slipped out of the hallway and took refuge behind the door.

I seemed to be in a suite. To both sides of this room, drowned daylight seeped through open connecting doors.

Directly across from the entrance that I had just used, two sliding glass doors provided access to a balcony. Silvery skeins of rain raveled past the high-rise, and wind softly rattled the doors in their tracks.

Out in the hallway, the climber—Andre or Robert—shoved the stairwell door all the way open as he came through. It banged against the stop.

Standing with my back pressed to the wall, holding my breath, I heard him pass my room. A moment later, the stair door rebounded from the stop and fell shut.

He would be heading for the main corridor and 1242, hoping to nail me there before I pressed the white button to free Danny—and instead blew both of us to bits.

I intended to give him ten seconds, fifteen, long enough to be sure he had left the secondary corridor. Then I would make a break for the stairwell.

Now that he was past me, I no longer needed to fear that anyone might be ascending. I could use the flashlight, plunge down two steps at a time, and be on the ground floor before he could return to the stairwell and hear me.

Two seconds later, from the main corridor, Datura shrieked a curse that would have brought a blush to the whore of Babylon.

She must have come up by the north stairs with her other best fella. Having arrived at Room 1242, she had discovered that Danny Jessup was neither strapped to the bomb nor splattered across the walls.

CHAPTER 43

IN THE CASINO, DURING DATURA'S VERBAL assault on Maryann Morris, she had proved that her silky voice could be twisted into a garrote as cruel as any strangler's cord.

Now, hiding behind the entry door, just inside the three-room suite, I listened to her curse me at alarming volume, sometimes using words that I had never realized could apply to a *guy*, and with each passing second, I felt less confident about my chances of escaping.

Mad-cow crazy she might be, and syphilitic, for all I knew, but Datura was also more than prettily packaged lunacy, more and worse than a homicidal porn merchant whose narcissism exceeded that of Narcissus himself. She seemed to be an elemental force, of no less power than earth, water, wind, and fire.

Into my mind sprang the name *Kali*, the Hindu goddess of death, dark side of the mother goddess, the only of their many gods who had conquered time. Four-armed, violent, insatiable, Kali devours all beings, and in temples where she's worshipped, the usual idols present her with a necklace of human skulls, dancing on a corpse.

This metaphoric mental image, the dark gaunt form of savage Kali embodied in the lush blond Datura, instantly felt so right, so true, that my sense of reality seemed to shift, to deepen. Every detail of the shadowy hotel room, of the wreckage around me, of the strafing storm beyond the balcony doors came into sharper focus, and I felt

that I might momentarily see even deeper than the molecular structure of it all.

Yet simultaneous with this new clarity, in everything within my view, I detected a transcendental mystery that I had never before perceived, a transforming revelation waiting to be accepted. A chill of a character not easily conveyed worked through me, an awe that felt more like reverence than like dread, although dread was a part of it.

You might think that I'm struggling to describe the heightened perception that frequently accompanies mortal jeopardy. I've been in mortal jeopardy often enough to know what *that* feels like, too, but this metaphysical incident was not the same.

Like all mystical experiences, I suppose, when the ineffable seems about to be made clear, the moment passes, no less ephemeral than a dream. But after passing, this one left me electrified, as if I had been zapped by a different kind of Taser, one designed to energize the mind and force it to confront a difficult truth.

The nasty truth before me was that Datura, for all her lunacy and ignorance and laughable eccentricities, was a more formidable adversary than I had acknowledged. When it came to committing extreme violence, she had as many eager hands as Kali, and my two hands were reluctant.

My plan had been either to bolt from the hotel and get help or, failing that, to elude this woman and her two enforcers long enough to convince them that I had in fact escaped and that they themselves ought to flee before I sent back the authorities. This was not a plan of action as much as it was a plan of avoidance.

Listening to Datura rant, apparently somewhere near the junction of the corridors—much too near for comfort—I realized that while rage might be an impediment to clear thinking in most people, for her it sharpened her cunning and her senses. Likewise, hatred.

Her talent for evil, especially for the vicious brand of it that once went by the name *wickedness*, was so great that she seemed to be possessed of uncanny gifts to rival my own. I might be persuaded that Datura could smell the blood of her enemy while it remained in his veins, and follow the scent to spill it.

Upon her arrival, I had put on hold my plan to make a break for the north stairs. Making a move while she lingered in the vicinity seemed suicidal.

Avoidance most likely would not be possible. Yet I wasn't eager to hasten a confrontation.

In the light of my new and more fearsome perception of this disturbed woman, I began to steel myself for what survival might require of me.

I recalled another grim fact about the four-armed Hindu goddess that inspired me not to underestimate Datura. Kali entertained a thirst for horror so unquenchable that she had once decapitated herself in order to be able to drink her own blood as it spouted from her neck.

Being a goddess only in her own mind, Datura would not survive decapitation. But when I recalled her vile stories of the cries of murdered children in a Savannah basement and the sacrifice of a seamstress in Port-au-Prince, which had seemed so delectable to her in the telling, I couldn't pretend that she was any less bloodthirsty than Kali.

And so I remained behind the door, in shadows that were often relieved by storm light, listening to her curse, then rant. Soon her voice softened to the degree that I could make out no words at all, but there was no mistaking the urgency of it, the insistent frenzied cadences of rage and hate and dark desire.

If Andre and Robert spoke—or dared to try—I didn't hear their deeper voices. Only hers. In the degree of their obedience and self-effacement, I read the souls of two true believers, as ready to drink the poisoned Kool-Aid as any cultists had ever been.

When she fell silent, I suppose I should have been relieved, but instead I got that Brussels-sprouts feeling. Intensely.

I had slumped wearily against the wall. I stood straighter.

In my two-hand grip, the shotgun, which had come to seem like nothing more than a tool, suddenly felt alive, slumbering but alive and aware, as guns had always felt to me before. As in the past, I worried that I would not be in control of the weapon when the crisis arrived.

Thank you, Mom.

When Datura ceased talking, I expected to hear movement, perhaps doors opening and closing, indications that they had begun a search. Only quiet followed.

The muffled hiss of rain spending itself against the balcony and the occasional grumble of thunder had been mere background noise. But as I listened intently for activity in the hallway, I resented the storm, as if it were Datura's willing conspirator.

I tried to imagine what I would do in her circumstances, but the only rational answer seemed to be *Get out*. With Danny freed and both of us missing, she should want to strip her bank accounts bare and head at high speed for the border.

An ordinary psychopath bails when the going gets rough—but not Kali, eater of the dead.

They must have parked a vehicle or two at the hotel. After snatching Danny, they had returned here on foot, by a circuitous route, to test my psychic magnetism, but they had no reason to walk out, rather than ride, when the fun was over.

Maybe she had grown worried that if Danny and I reached the ground floor and got out of the Panamint, we would find their car, hot-wire it, and leave them stranded. If so, Andre or Robert—or Datura herself—might have gone down to disable the vehicle or to stand guard over it.

Rain. The ceaseless susurrations of rain.

A faint mewl of wind, pleading at the balcony doors.

No sound alerted me. Instead, the threat revealed itself by that musky, mushroomy, cold-meat smell.

CHAPTER 44

I GRIMACED AT THAT UNIQUE SUBTLE SMELL, which was not conducive to a healthy appetite. Then he must have taken a step or shifted his weight, because I heard the feeble but crisp crunch of a small bit of debris crushed underfoot.

Two-thirds open, the door afforded me a wedge of space in which to stand concealed between it and the wall. If my stalker pushed it wider, the door would rebound from me and reveal my presence.

The construction of many other buildings would have allowed the space between the back edge of the open door and the jamb to provide a narrow view of someone standing on the threshold. This casing was deeper than standard code required and the stop molding so thick that it occluded the gap.

Looking on the bright side, as I desperately needed to do at that point: If I could not see him, he could not see me.

Having encountered this disquieting smell only at various times in the staircases and on the second visit to the casino, I had not associated it with Andre and Robert. Now I realized that I could not have detected it within the candlelit walls of Room 1203, where I had also enjoyed their company, because the cloying fragrance of Cleo-May had effectively masked it.

Framed by the big sliding doors, to the north, an inverted tree of lightning caught fire, its trunk in the heavens and its branches shaking at the earth. A second tree overlaid the first, and a third

overlaid the second: a brief-lived bright forest that burnt out even as it grew.

He stood in the doorway so long that I began to suspect that he knew not only of my presence but also of my exact position, and that he was toying with me.

Second by second, my nerves wound tighter than the rubber band on the propeller of a child's balsa-wood airplane. I warned myself not to fly into rash action.

He might, after all, just go away. The fates are not always in a snotty mood. Sometimes a hurricane roars toward a vulnerable coast, then veers away from land.

No sooner had I been buoyed by that hopeful thought than he stepped off the threshold and ventured into the room, movement that I as much sensed as heard.

A pistol-grip shotgun is not, by definition, one that you fire with the stock butted against your shoulder. You hold it forward, but to the side.

Initially, the door still screened the searcher from me. When he moved farther into the space, I would need my cloak of invisibility, which I did not have with me because, unfortunately, I still wasn't Harry Potter.

When Chief Porter had used a pistol-grip shotgun to save me from the loss of a leg and from emasculation-by-crocodile, the weapon had appeared to have a mean kick. The chief had stood with his feet wide apart, the left somewhat in front of the right, knees slightly bent, to absorb the recoil, and he had been visibly jolted by it.

Moving far enough into the room to reveal himself, Robert was not aware of me. By the time he stepped forward into my line of sight, I was well out of his.

Even if he turned his head to look sideways, his peripheral vision might not pick me up behind him. Should instinct warn him, however, the shadows in which I stood weren't deep enough to blind him to me if he turned around.

The gloom didn't reveal enough of his features to allow me to identify him by looks alone. He was big rather than massive, which ruled out Andre.

In the thrashing garden of the storm, more lightning put out roots, and the jarring crash of thunder was the sound of an entire forest felled.

He continued across the room, looking neither left nor right. I began to think that he had entered here not in search of me, but for some other reason.

Judging by his behavior, even more somnambulant than usual, he had been drawn by the call of the storm. He stopped in front of the balcony doors.

I dared to think that if this current escalation of the storm's pyrotechnics continued for as much as a minute, distracting Robert and covering what sounds I made, I might be able to come out from hiding, slip quickly into the hall without alerting him, avoid this confrontation, and make that break for the stairs, after all.

As I eased forward, intending to peer around the entry door to be sure that Datura and Andre were searching elsewhere and that the hall was safe, an effect of the next barrage of thunderbolts stunned and arrested me. Each flare bounced off Robert and cast his ghostly reflection in the glass of the balcony doors. His face shone as pale as a Kabuki mask, but his eyes were even whiter, bright white with the reflected lightning.

I thought at once of the snaky man, fished from the flood tunnel, his eyes rolled far back in his head.

Three more flares repeatedly revealed a reflection with white eyes, and I stood immobilized by a marrow-freezing chill, even as Robert turned toward me.

CHAPTER 45

DELIBERATELY, NOT WITH THE QUICK REFLEXES of violent intent, Robert turned toward me.

The inscrutable semaphore of the storm no longer brightened his face, but silhouetted him. The sky, one great galleon with a thousand black sails, signaled, signaled, as if to regain his attention, and thunder boomed.

Averted from the lightning, his eyes no longer shone a moonish white. Nevertheless...though his features were deeply shadowed, his gaze still seemed vaguely phosphorescent, as milky as that of a man blinded by cataracts.

Although I could not see him well enough to be certain, I felt that his eyes were turned back in his head, no color revealed. This might have been a shiver of imagination born of the chill that had seized me.

Having assumed the stance that I recalled Chief Porter taking, I brought the shotgun to bear on him, aiming low because the kick might pull the muzzle higher.

Regardless of the condition of Robert's eyes, whether they were as white as hard-boiled eggs or the sullen bloodshot beryl-blue they had been earlier, I felt sure that he was not merely aware of my presence but that he could see me.

Yet his demeanor and his slump-shouldered posture suggested that the sight of me failed to shift him into psycho-killer gear. If not confused, he appeared to be at least distracted, and weary.

I began to think that he had not come in search of me, but had wandered in here either for another purpose or without any purpose. Having found me inadvertently, he stood as if in resentment of the need to resolve the confrontation.

Curiouser and curiouser: He let out a long sigh of exhaustion, with a thin plaintive edge that seemed to express a sense of being harassed.

As far as I could recall, these were the first sounds that I had heard issue from his lips: a sigh, a plaint.

His inexplicable malaise and my disinclination to use the shotgun in the absence of a clear threat to my life had brought us to a bizarre impasse that, just two minutes ago, I could never have imagined.

A sudden sweat greased my brow. The situation was not tenable. Something had to give.

His arms hung at his sides. Lambent storm light licked the shape of a pistol or a revolver in his right hand.

When he first turned from the window, Robert could have whipped toward me, squeezing off shots, dropping and rolling as he fired to avoid the 12-gauge. I had no doubt that he was a practiced killer who knew the right moves. His chances of killing me would have been much better than my odds of wounding him.

The gun hung like an anchor at the end of his arm as he took two steps toward me, not in a threatening manner, but almost as though he wished to beseech me for something. These were heavy draft-horse steps that comported with the title, *cheval*, that Datura had given him.

I worried that Andre would come through the door next, with all the irresistible power of the locomotive of which he had initially reminded me.

Robert might then shake off his indecision—or whatever mood caused his inaction. The two could cut me down in a cross fire.

But I was not capable of blasting away at a man who didn't at this moment seem inclined to shoot me.

Although he'd drawn closer, I could see his dissolute face no more clearly than before. Still I had the unnerving impression that his

eyes were frosted panes.

From him came another sound, which at first I thought must be a mumbled question. But when it came again, it seemed more like a stifled cough.

At last the hand with the gun came up from his side.

My impression was that he raised the weapon not with lethal purpose, but unconsciously, almost as though he had forgotten that he held it. Given what I knew of him—his devotion to Datura, his taste for blood, his evident participation in the brutal murder of Dr. Jessup—I couldn't wait for a clearer indication of his intent.

The recoil rocked me. He took the buckshot like the truck he was, and did not drop his handgun, and I pumped a round into the chamber and fired again, and the glass doors behind him dissolved because I must have pulled high or wide, so I pumped and fired a third time, and he staggered backward through the gap where the sliding doors had been.

Although he had still not dropped his weapon, he had not used it, either, and I doubted that a fourth shot was necessary. At least two of the first three rounds had hit him square and hard.

But I rushed toward him, hot to be done with this, almost as if the gun controlled me and wanted to be fully spent. The fourth round blew him off the balcony.

Only as I stepped to the shattered doors did I see what rain and perspective had previously concealed from me. The outermost third of the balcony must have broken away in the earthquake five years ago, taking with it the railing.

If any life had remained in him after three hits out of four rounds, a twelve-story fall would have taken it.

CHAPTER 46

KILLING ROBERT LEFT ME WEAK IN THE KNEES and light in the head, but it did not nauseate me as I had half expected that it would. He was, after all, Cheval Robert, not a good husband or a kind father, or a pillar of his community.

Furthermore, I had the feeling that he had wanted me to do what I had done. He seemed to have embraced death as if it was a mercy.

As I backed away from the balcony doors and a sudden squall of rain that burst through them, I heard Datura screaming from some distant point of the twelfth floor. Her voice swelled like a siren as she approached at a run.

If I sprinted for the stairs, I would surely be caught in the hall before I reached them. She and Andre would be armed; and it defied reason to suppose that they would be afflicted with Robert's indecision.

I traded the living room of the suite for the bedroom to the right of the entry door. This place was darker than the previous room because the windows were smaller and because the rotting draperies had not fallen off their rods.

I didn't expect to find a hiding place. I just needed to buy time to reload.

Mindful of the shotgun fire that had drawn their attention, they would enter the living room cautiously. Most likely they would first lay down a volley of suppressing fire.

By the time one of them dared to explore this adjoining room, I would be ready for them. Or as ready as I would ever be. I had only four more shells, not an arsenal.

If luck was on my side, they didn't know where Robert's part of the search had led him—if he had been searching. They couldn't pinpoint, by the sound alone, precisely from where the shots had come.

Should they decide to search all the rooms along the secondary hallway, an opportunity might yet arise for me to get off the twelfth floor.

Much closer now, but not from within the suite, perhaps from the intersection of corridors, Datura shouted my name. She wasn't calling me out for a milkshake at the local soda fountain, but she sounded more excited than pissed.

The shotgun barrel, breech, and receiver were warm from the recent firing.

Leaning against a wall, shuddering as I remembered Robert plunging backward off the balcony, I plucked the first of the spare rounds from a pocket of my jeans. I fumbled in the shadows, clumsy at the unfamiliar task, trying to insert the shell into the breech.

“Can you hear me, Odd Thomas?” Datura shouted. “Can you hear me, boyfriend?”

The breech continued to defeat me, would not take the shell, and my hands began to shake, making the task more difficult.

“Was that shit what it seemed to be?” she shouted. “Was that a poltergeist, boyfriend?”

The standoff with Robert had prickled my face with sweat. The sound of Datura's voice turned the sweat to ice.

“That was so *wild*, that really totally *kicked!*” she declared, still out in the hallway somewhere.

Deciding to load the breech last, I tried to insert the shell through what I believed to be the loading gate of the three-round magazine.

My fingers were sweaty, trembling. The shell slipped out of my grasp. I felt it bounce off my right shoe.

“Did you trick me, Odd Thomas?” she asked. “Did you get me to crank up old Maryann until she blew?”

She didn't know about Buzz-cut. There was some justice in letting her think that the spirit of a merely pretty-but-not-pretty-enough cocktail waitress had gotten the best of her.

Squatting in the dark, feeling the floor around me, I feared that the shell had rolled beyond discovery and that I would have to use the flashlight to locate it. I needed all four rounds. When I found it in mere seconds, I almost let out a groan of relief.

"I want a repeat performance!" she shouted.

Remaining in a squat, the shotgun propped across my thighs, I tried again to load the magazine, turning the shell first one way, then the other, but the loading gate, if it *was* the loading gate, wouldn't receive the round.

The task seemed simple, a lot easier than flipping eggs over-easy without breaking the yolks, but evidently it wasn't so simple that someone unfamiliar with the weapon could load it in the dark. I needed light.

"Let's crank up the dumb dead bitch again!"

At the window, I eased aside the rotting drapery.

"But this time, I'm keeping you on a leash, boyfriend."

An hour or two of light remained in the afternoon, but the filter of the storm cast false twilight across the drenched desert. I could still see well enough to examine the gun.

I fished another shell from another pocket. Tried it. No good.

I put it on the window sill, tried a third. In the grip of absolute denial, I tried a fourth.

"You and Danny the Geek aren't getting out of here. You hear me? *There is no way out.*"

The ammunition I had found on the bathroom counter, beside the sink, had evidently been for another weapon.

For all intents and purposes, this couldn't be considered a shotgun anymore. It had become just a fancy club.

I was up the famous creek not only without a paddle but also without a boat.

CHAPTER 47

I USED TO THINK THAT I MIGHT ONE DAY like to work in the retail tire business. I spent some time hanging around Tire World, out near the Green Moon Mall, on Green Moon Road, and everyone there seemed to be relaxed and happy.

In the tire life, at the end of the work day, you don't have to wonder if you've accomplished anything meaningful. You've taken in people with bad rubber, and you've sent them rolling away on fine new wheels.

Americans thrive on mobility and feel shrunken in spirit when they do not have it. Providing tires is not only good commerce but also soothes troubled souls.

Although selling tires does not involve a lot of hard bargaining, as do real-estate transactions and deals brokered with international arms merchants, I am concerned that I might find the sales end of the business too emotionally draining. If the supernatural aspect of my life involved nothing more stressful than daily interaction with Elvis, tire sales would make sense, but as you've seen, the favorite son of Memphis isn't the half of it.

Before I went to the Panamint, I figured that eventually I would return to work for Terri Stambaugh. If the griddle proved too taxing on my nerves, on top of everything else that was perpetually cooking with me, I might succumb to the lure of the tire life, working not sales but installation.

That stormy day in the desert, however, much changed for me. We must have our goals, our dreams, and we must strive for them. We are not gods, however; we do not have the power to shape every aspect of the future. And the road the world makes for us is one that teaches humility if we are willing to learn.

Standing in a moldering room in a ruined hotel, contemplating a useless shotgun, listening to a murderous madwoman assure me that my fate was hers to decide, having given away both my coconut-raisin power bars, I felt humbled, all right. Maybe not as humbled as Wile E. Coyote when he finds himself flattened under the same boulder with which he intended to crush the Road Runner, but pretty humble.

She shouted, “You know why there’s no way out, boyfriend?”

I didn’t inquire, confident that she would tell me.

“Because I know about you. I know all about you. I know that it works both ways.”

This statement made no immediate sense to me, but it was no more mystifying than a hundred other things she’d said, so I didn’t devote much effort to translation.

I wondered when she would stop squawking and come looking. Maybe Andre already had crept into the suite, searching, and her shouting in the corridor was intended to mislead me into thinking the ax was not already on the downswing.

As if she had read my mind, she said, “I don’t have to come searching for you, do I, Odd Thomas?”

After putting the shotgun on the floor, I wiped my face with my hands, blotted my hands on my jeans. I felt six-days dirty, with no hope of a Sunday bath.

I had always expected to die clean. In my dream, when I open that paneled white door and get the pike through the throat, I’m wearing a clean T-shirt, pressed jeans, and fresh underwear.

“No way I have to risk getting my head shot off looking for you,” she shouted.

Considering all the messes I get into, I don’t know *why* I had always expected to die clean. Now that I thought about it, this seemed self-delusional.

Freud would have had a grand time analyzing my have-to-die-clean complex. But then Freud was an ass.

“Psychic magnetism!” she shouted, getting more of my attention than I had recently been giving her. “Psychic magnetism works both ways, boyfriend.”

My spirits had not been high by virtually any measure, but at her words, they fell a little.

When I have a specific target in mind, I can cruise at random, and my psychic magnetism will often lead me to him, but sometimes, when I am thinking a lot about another person yet am not actively seeking him, the same mechanism operates, and he is casually drawn to me, all unaware.

When psychic magnetism works in reverse, without my conscious intent, I am without control...and vulnerable to nasty surprises. Of all the things about me that Danny could have told Datura, this might have been the most dangerous for her to know.

Previously, whenever a bad guy has found himself wandering into my presence by virtue of reverse psychic magnetism, he has been as surprised by this development as I have been. Which at least puts us on equal footing.

Instead of searching urgently room to room, floor to floor, Datura intended to remain alert but calm, to make herself receptive to the pull of my aura, or whatever the hell it is that exerts this paranormal attraction. She and Andre could cover the two staircases, periodically check the elevator shafts for noise, and wait until she found herself at my side—or at my back—drawn to me by virtue of the fact that, as in the Willie Nelson song, she was *always on my mind*.

No matter how clever I was about finding a way out of the hotel, before I got to freedom, I was likely to encounter her. It was a little like destiny.

If you’ve had a beer too many and are in an argumentative mood, you might say *Don’t be an idiot, Odd. All you have to do is not think about her*.

Imagine yourself running barefoot on a summer day, as carefree as a child, and your foot comes down on an old board, and a six-

inch spike spears your metatarsal arch, penetrating all the way through your instep. No need to cancel your plans and seek out a doctor. You'll be fine if you just don't think about that big sharp rusty spike sticking through your foot.

You're playing eighteen holes of golf, and your ball goes into the woods. Retrieving it, you're bitten on the hand by a rattlesnake. Don't bother calling 911 on your cell phone. You can finish the round with aplomb if you simply concentrate on the game and forget all about the annoying snake.

No matter how many beers you have consumed, I trust that you get my point. Datura was a spike through my foot, a snake with fangs sunk into my hand. Trying not to think about that woman, under these circumstances, was like being in a room with an angry naked sumo wrestler and trying not to think about *him*.

At least she had revealed her intentions. Now *I* knew that *she* knew about reverse psychic magnetism. She might fall upon me when I least expected it, but I would no longer be entirely surprised when she decapitated me and drank my blood.

She had stopped shouting.

I waited tensely, unnerved by the silence.

Not thinking about her had been easier when she was yammering than when she shut up.

A rattle and blur of rain on the window. Thunder. A threnody of wind.

Ozzie Boone, mentor and man of letters, would like that word. *Threnody*: a dirge, a lamentation, a song for the dead.

While I played hide-and-seek with a madwoman in a burned-out hotel, Ozzie was probably sitting in his cozy study, sipping thick hot cocoa, nibbling pecan cookies, already writing the first novel in his new series about a detective who is also a pet communicator. Maybe he would title it *Threnody for a Hamster*.

This threnody, of course, would be for Robert: full of lead shot and broken, twelve stories below.

After a while, I checked the luminous face of my wristwatch. I consulted it every few minutes until a quarter of an hour had passed.

I wasn't enthusiastic about returning to the corridor. On the other hand, I didn't have any enthusiasm about staying where I was, either.

In addition to Kleenex, a bottle of water, and a few other items of no value for a man in my fix, my backpack held the fishing knife. The sharpest blade wasn't a match for a shotgun, assuming she had one, but it was better than attacking her with a packet of Kleenex.

I couldn't carve anyone, not even Datura. Using a firearm is daunting, but it allows you to kill at some distance. Any gun is less intimate than a knife. Killing her intimately, up close and personal, her blood pouring back along the handle of the knife: That required a different Odd Thomas from a parallel dimension, one who was crueller than I and less worried about cleanliness.

Armed with only my bare hands and attitude, I finally returned to the living room of the suite.

No Datura.

The corridor—where she had recently prowled, shouting—was deserted.

The shotgun blasts had brought her at a run from the north end of the building. Most likely she had been monitoring those stairs, and had now returned to them.

I glanced at the south stairs, but if Andre waited anywhere, he waited there. I might have attitude, but Andre had gravitas. And for sure, in a fistfight, he would leave me in the condition of a pack of saltines after he had crushed them to put in his soup.

She hadn't known where I was when she had stood here shouting, had not known with certainty that I could hear her. But she had told me the truth about her plan: no search, just patience, counting on a chilling kind of kismet.

CHAPTER 48

WITH THE STAIRS AND ELEVATOR SHAFT OFF-LIMITS, I had only those resources that the twelfth floor offered.

I thought of the kilo of gelignite, or whatever they called it these days. A quantity of explosives that could reduce a large house to matchsticks ought to be of some use to a young fellow as desperate as I was.

Although I'd received no training in the handling of explosives, I had the benefit of paranormal insight. Yes, my gift had gotten me into this mess; but if it didn't get me in deeper, it might get me out.

I also had that can-do American spirit, which should never be underestimated.

According to the history I've learned from movies, Alexander Graham Bell, fiddling around with some cans and wire, invented the telephone, with the help of his assistant Watson, who was also an associate of Sherlock Holmes, and achieved great success after enduring the scorn and naysaying of lesser men for ninety minutes.

Weathering the scorn and naysaying of a remarkably similar set of lesser men, Thomas Edison, another great American, invented the electric lightbulb, the phonograph, the first sound movie camera, and the alkaline battery, among a slew of other things, also in ninety minutes, and looked like Spencer Tracy.

When he was my age, Tom Edison looked like Mickey Rooney, had invented a number of clever devices, and already exhibited the self-confidence to ignore the negativism of the naysayers. Edison,

Mickey Rooney, and I were all Americans, so there was reason to believe that by studying the components of the now dismantled bomb, I might tinker together a useful weapon.

Besides, I didn't see any other prospects.

After slinking along the main corridor and slipping into Room 1242, where Danny had been held captive, I switched on my flashlight and discovered that Datura had taken away the package of explosives. Maybe she didn't want it to fall into my hands or maybe she had a use for it, or perhaps she just wanted it for sentimental reasons.

I didn't see any healthy purpose in dwelling on what use she might have for a bomb, so I switched off my light and moved to the window. By the pallid lamp of the fading day, I examined Terri's phone, which Datura had hammered against the bathroom counter.

When I flipped the phone open, the screen brightened. I would have been heartened if it had presented a logo, a recognizable image, or data of some kind. Instead, there was only a meaningless blue-and-yellow mottle.

I keyed in seven digits, Chief Porter's mobile number, but they did not appear on the screen. I pressed SEND and listened. Nothing.

Had I lived a century earlier, I might have fiddled with scraps of this and that until, in the can-do spirit, I jury-rigged a nifty communications device, but things were more complicated these days. Even Edison could not have, on the spot, tinkered up a new microchip brain board.

Disappointed by Room 1242, I returned to the corridor. Much less daylight penetrated from the rooms with open doors than had been the case even half an hour earlier. The hallways would go dark at least an hour before dusk actually arrived.

Although plagued by the creepy feeling of being watched, though visibility was so poor that I couldn't dismiss these heebie-jeebies as groundless, I avoided using the flashlight while in the corridor. Andre and Datura had guns; the light would make of me an easy target.

Inside each room that I explored, once I closed the door behind me, I felt safe enough to resort to the flashlight. I had searched some

of these spaces previously, when I'd been looking for a hidey-hole in which to stash Danny. I had not found in them what I wanted then; and I didn't find what I needed now.

Deep down, in that coziest corner of the heart, where a belief in miracles abides even in the darkest hours, I expected to stumble upon some long-dead hotel guest's suitcase in which would be packed a loaded pistol. Although a handgun would have been acceptable, I preferred to discover a freight elevator isolated from the bank of public lifts, or a roomy dumbwaiter leading to the kitchen on the ground floor.

Eventually I discovered a service closet about ten feet deep and fourteen wide. Cleaning supplies, bars of guest soap, and spare lightbulbs stocked the shelves. Vacuum sweepers, buckets, and mops were tumbled on the floor.

The sprinkler system that had failed elsewhere appeared to have overperformed here, or perhaps a water line had burst. Part of the ceiling had collapsed; and swags of Sheetrock, obviously once waterlogged, drooped into the room around the edges of the void.

I quickly inventoried the items on the shelves. Bleach, ammonia, and other common household products can be combined in ways that produce explosives, anesthetics, blistering agents, smoke bombs, and poison gases. Unfortunately, I didn't know any of those formulas.

Considering that I frequently find myself in a patch of trouble and that I'm not by nature a walking machine of death, I should be more diligent about educating myself in the arts of destruction and assassination. The Internet provides a wealth of such information for the earnest autodidact. And these days, serious universities offer courses if not entire programs in the philosophy of anarchy and its practical application.

When it comes to this kind of self-improvement, I admit to being a slacker. I'd rather perfect my pancake batter than commit to memory recipes for sixteen varieties of nerve gas. I'd rather read an Ozzie Boone novel than spend hours practicing one-thrust heart punctures with a dagger and a CPR dummy. I never claimed to be perfect.

A trapdoor caught my attention in that portion of the service-room ceiling that had not collapsed from water damage. When I yanked on a dangling rope handle, the heavy-duty spring closure creaked, groaned, but opened, and a segmented ladder unfolded from the back of the door.

When I climbed to the top, the flashlight revealed a four-to-five-foot-high crawlspace between the twelfth and thirteenth floors. Here lay a maze of copper and PVC pipes, electrical conduits, duct work, and equipment related to heating, ventilation, and air conditioning.

I could explore that space or go back down the ladder and drink a bleach-and-ammonia cocktail.

Because I didn't have any slices of fresh lime, I climbed into the crawlspace, pulled up the ladder, and closed the trap behind me.

CHAPTER 49

LEGEND CLAIMS THAT ALL AFRICAN ELEPHANTS, as they realize they are dying, proceed to the same burial ground, still undiscovered by man, deep in a primeval jungle, where lies a mountain of bones and ivory.

Between the twelfth and thirteenth floors of the Panamint Resort and Spa, I discovered a graveyard equivalent to the elephant burial ground—for rats. I didn't encounter one live specimen, but I found at least a hundred that had left this world for eternal cheese.

They had died mostly in clusters of three and four, although I found one pile of perhaps twenty. I suspected they had suffocated in the smoke that had filled this space on the night of the catastrophe. After five years, nothing remained of them but skulls, bones, a few scraps of fur, and an occasional fossilized tail.

Until this discovery, I would never have imagined that I had within me the sensitivity to find something melancholy about piles of rat carcasses. The abrupt termination of their busy scurrying lives, the collapse of all their whisker-twitching dreams of room-service leftovers, the premature end to their cozy mutual grooming sessions and warm nights of frantic copulation were sad considerations. This rat graveyard, no less than an elephant burial ground, spoke to the transitory nature of all things.

I mean, I didn't weep over their fate. I didn't even get a lump in my throat. Having most of my life been a fan of Mr. Mickey Mouse, however, I was understandably affected by this ratty apocalypse.

Smoke residue filmed most surfaces, though I saw little evidence of direct fire damage. Flames had leapfrogged stories, traveling by way of improperly constructed mechanical chases, and had spared this crawlspace as they had spared the twelfth floor.

At four and a half feet, this between-floor realm didn't force me to crawl. I wandered through it in a crouch, at first not certain what I hoped to find, but eventually arriving at the realization that vertical chases, which allowed fire to ascend through the structure, might also allow me to descend.

The quantity of equipment amazed me. Because the thermostat in every hotel room can be set independently of that in every other, each room is heated and cooled by its own fan-coil unit. Each fan-coil is connected to branch lines from the four-pipe system that circulates super-chilled and superheated water throughout the building. These units, served by pumps and humidifiers and drain-overflow basins, created a geometric labyrinth that reminded me of the machinery-encrusted surfaces of one of those massive spaceships in *Star Wars*, through the canyons of which starfighters do battle with one another.

Instead of starfighters, I saw spiders and vast webs as complex as the spiral patterns of galaxies, an occasional empty soda can left behind by repairmen, here and there a fast-food sandwich container licked clean long ago, and more rats, before at last I located one of the chases that might be my way out of the Panamint.

The five-foot-square shaft, lined with metal-skinned fireboard, continued four stories above my position. Below, it dwindled into darkness that my flashlight could not fully probe.

Such a roomy chimney would have been a vertical superhighway, easily accommodating me, if not for all the pipes and conduits that lined three and a half of its walls. Bolted to the one otherwise clear section of wall, a ladder offered not just rungs, but four-inch-wide treads that provided surer footing.

This chute did not lie near the elevator shafts. If Datura or Andre listened at that location, they would not hear me as I made my way down this vertical chase.

Additional handholds and steel rings to receive the snap links of safety tethers bristled from among the pipes and conduits on the other three walls.

Fixed at the top of the building, a half-inch-diameter nylon line, of the type employed by mountain climbers, hung loose down the center of the shaft. Massive knots, spaced at one-foot intervals, could serve as handholds. This appeared to have been replaced after the fire, perhaps by rescue workers.

I deduced, perhaps incorrectly, that if in spite of the generous steps of the ladder and the ubiquitous anchor points for tethers, you took a plunge, the plumb-bobbed rope was a lifeline to be seized in free fall.

Although I had fewer monkey genes than these conditions implied were necessary to transit the service well, I saw no alternative but to make use of it. Otherwise, I could wait for the mothership to beam me up—and one day be discovered here, all bones and jeans, in the rat graveyard.

The beam of my flashlight had dimmed. I replaced the batteries with spares from my backpack.

Using the spelunker's Velcro cuff, I fixed the light to my left forearm.

I put the folded fishing knife in one of my pockets.

I drank half of the bottle of water that I hadn't left with Danny, and I wondered how he was doing. The shotgun fire would have scared him. He probably thought I was dead.

Maybe I was, and I just didn't know it yet.

I considered whether I needed to pee. I didn't.

Unable to find any further reasons to delay, leaving my backpack behind, I went into the vertical chase.

CHAPTER 50

ON A HIGH-NUMBER CABLE CHANNEL THAT I think is called Crap That Nobody Else Will Show TV, I once saw an ancient movie serial about these adventurers who descend to the center of the earth and discover an underground civilization. It's an evil empire, of course.

The emperor resembles Ming the Merciless from those old Flash Gordon festivals of hokum, and he intends to make war on the surface world and take it over as soon as he develops the right death ray. Or when his immense fingernails grow long enough to be appropriate for the ruler of an entire planet, whichever comes first.

This underworld is populated by the usual thugs and knaves, but also by two or three kinds of mutants, women in horned hats, and of course dinosaurs. This film masterwork was made decades before the invention of computer animation, and the dinosaurs were not even stop-motion clay models but iguanas. Rubber appliances were glued to the iguanas to make them appear scarier and more like dinosaurs, but they just looked like embarrassed iguanas.

Descending the vertical chase, careful step by careful step, I reran the plot of that old serial in my mind, striving to focus on the absurd mustache of the emperor, on the particular race of mutants that looked suspiciously like dwarfs outfitted with rubber-snake headgear and leather pantaloons, on remembered bits of the hero's dialogue marked by a wit that crackled like cream cheese, and on those campily amusing iguanasaurs.

My mind kept drifting to Datura, that dependable spike through the foot: to Datura, to reverse psychic magnetism, to how unpleasant it would be when she disemboweled me and fished her amulet out of my stomach. Not good.

The air in the service well proved not to be as savory as the soot-scented, toxin-laced air in the rest of the hotel. Stale, dank, alternately sulfurous and mildewy, it gathered substance as I went down into the hotel, until it seemed thick enough to drink.

From time to time, horizontal chases entered the well, and in some instances, drafts flowed from them. These cool currents smelled different from but no better than the shaft air.

Twice I began to gag. Both times I had to pause to repress the urge to heave.

The stink, the claustrophobic dimensions of this chimney, the trace chemicals and mold spores in the air combined to make me feel lightheaded by the time I had descended only four floors.

Although I knew that my imagination was running away with me, I wondered if a couple of dead bodies—human, not rat—might lie at the bottom of the shaft, undiscovered by the rescue crews and post-fire search teams, reposing in a slime of decomposition.

The deeper I went, the more determined I became *not* to direct the flashlight downward, for fear of what I would see at the bottom: not just the tumbled dead, but a grinning figure standing atop them.

Representations of Kali always show her naked, brazen. In that particular idol called a *jagrata*, she is gaunt and very tall. From her open mouth protrudes a long tongue, and she bares two fangs. She radiates a terrible beauty, perversely appealing.

Every two floors, I passed through another crawlspace. At each of these interruptions, I could have gotten off the ladder, then on it once more; instead, I found myself switching to the rope, using the knots as grips, swinging back to the ladder when it reappeared.

Given my lightheadedness and incipient nausea, using the rope struck me as reckless. I used it anyway.

In her temple representations, Kali holds a noose in one hand, a staff topped by a skull in another. In her third, she holds a sword; in her fourth, a severed head.

I thought I heard movement below me. I paused, but then told myself that the noise had been only the echo of my breathing, and I continued down.

Painted numbers on the wall identified each floor as I went by it, even when no passable opening existed at that level. As I reached the second floor, my right foot dipped into something wet and cold.

When I dared to direct my light below, I found that the bottom of the shaft was filled with stagnant black water and debris. I could go no farther by this route.

I climbed to the crawlspace between the second and third floors and exited the vertical chase.

If rats had perished at this level, they died not by suffocation but by hungry mouths of fire that spat out not even charred bones. The flames had been so intense, they left behind an absolute black soot that absorbed the beam of the flashlight and gave back no reflection.

Twisted, buckled, melted, mercurial metal shapes, which had once been heating-and-cooling equipment, formed a bewildering landscape that no mere drinking binge or jalapeno pizza could have inspired in a nightmare. The soot that coated everything—here a film, there an inch deep—was not powdery, not dry, but greasy.

Weaving around and climbing over these amorphous and slippery obstacles proved treacherous. In places, the floor felt as if it had bowed, suggesting that the heat at the height of the blaze had been so terrible that rebar embedded inside the concrete had begun to melt and had almost failed.

The air here was more foul than in the shaft, bitter, almost rancid, yet seemed thin, as if I were at some great altitude. The singular texture of the soot gave me intolerable ideas about the source of it, and I tried to think instead about the iguanasaurs, but saw *Datura* in my mind's eye, *Datura* with a necklace of human skulls.

I crawled on hands and knees, slithered on my belly, squeezed through a heat-smoothed sphincter of metal in a blast-blown bulkhead of rubble, and thought of Orpheus in Hell.

In the Greek myth, Orpheus goes to Hell to seek Eurydice, his wife, who has gone there upon her death. He charms Hades and

wins permission to take her out of the realm of damnation.

I could not be Orpheus, however, because Stormy Llewellyn, my Eurydice, had not gone to Hell, but to a far better place, which she so well deserved. If this was Hell and if I had come here on a rescue mission, the soul that I struggled to save must be my own.

As I began to conclude that the trapdoor between this crawlspace and the second level of the hotel must have been plated over with twisted and melted metal, I almost fell through a hole in the floor. Beyond that hole, my light played across the skeletal walls of what might have once been a supply room.

The trapdoor and ladder were gone, reduced to ashes. Relieved, I dropped into the space below, landed on my feet, stumbled, but kept my balance.

I stepped between the twisted steel studs of a missing wall, into the main corridor. Only one floor above ground level, I should be able to escape the hotel without resorting to the guarded stairs.

The first thing my flashlight fell upon were tracks that looked like those I had seen when I first entered the Panamint. They had made me think *sabertooth*.

The second thing the light revealed were human footprints, which led within a few steps to Datura, who switched on her flashlight the moment that mine found her.

CHAPTER 51

WHAT A BITCH. AND I MEAN THAT IN EVERY sense of the phrase.

“Hey, boyfriend,” Datura said.

In addition to a flashlight, she held a pistol.

She said, “I was at the bottom of the north stairs, having some wine, staying loose, waiting to feel the power, you know, your power, drawing me, the way Danny the Geek said it could.”

“Don’t talk,” I pleaded. “Just shoot me.”

Ignoring my interruption, she continued: “I got bored. I get bored easy. Earlier, I noticed these big cat prints in the ashes at the foot of the stairs. They’re on the stairs, too. So I decided to follow them.”

The fire had raged with special ferocity in this part of the hotel. Most of the inner walls had burned away, leaving a vast and gloomy space, the ceiling supported by red-steel columns encased in concrete. Over the years, ashes and dust had continued to settle, laying a smooth, lush carpet, over which my saber-toothed tiger had recently been wandering this way and that.

“The beast has been all over this place,” she said. “I got so interested in the way it went in circles and meandered back on itself, I completely forgot about you. Completely forgot. And that’s *just when* I heard you coming and switched off my flashlight. Mondo cool, boyfriend. I thought I was following the cat, but I was being drawn to you when I least expected. You are one strange dude, you know that?”

“I know that,” I admitted.

“Is there really a cat, or were the prints made by a phantom you conjured up to lead me here?”

“There’s really a cat,” I assured her.

I was very tired. And dirty. I wanted to be done with this, go home, and take a bath.

Approximately twelve feet separated us. If we had been a few feet closer, I might have tried to rush her, duck in under her arm and take the gun away from her.

If I could keep her talking, an opportunity to turn the tables might arise. Fortunately, keeping her talking would require no more effort on my part than would breathing.

“I knew this prince from Nigeria,” Datura said, “he claimed to be an *isangoma*, said he could change into a panther after midnight.”

“Why not at ten o’clock?”

“I don’t think he really could. I think he was lying because he wanted to screw me.”

“You don’t have to worry about that with me,” I said.

“This must be a phantom cat, some sort of eidolon. Why would a real cat be prowling around in this smelly dump?”

I said, “Close to the western summit of Kilimanjaro, around nineteen thousand feet, there’s the dried, frozen carcass of a leopard.”

“The mountain in Africa?”

I quoted, “No one has explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude.”

She frowned. “I don’t get it. What’s the mystery? He’s a mean damn leopard, he can go anywhere he wants.”

“It’s a line from ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro.’”

Gesturing with the gun, she expressed her impatience.

I explained: “That’s a short story by Ernest Hemingway.”

“The guy with the line of furniture? What’s Hemingway got to do with this?”

I shrugged. “I have a friend who’s always thrilled when I make a literary allusion. He thinks I could be a writer.”

“Are the two of you gay or something?” she asked.

“No. He’s hugely fat, and I’m supernaturally gifted, that’s all.”

“Boyfriend, sometimes you don’t make a lot of sense. Did you kill Robert?”

Except for our two swords of light, shining past each other, the second floor receded into unrelieved darkness. While I had been in the crawlspaces and the vertical chase, the last light had washed out of the winter day.

I didn’t mind dying, but this cavernous fire-blackened pit was an ugly place to do it.

“Did you kill Robert?” she repeated.

“He fell off a balcony.”

“Yeah, after you shot him.” She didn’t sound upset. In fact she regarded me with the calculation of a black widow spider deciding whether to take a mate. “You play clueless pretty well, but you’re for sure a *mundunugu*.”

“Something was wrong with Robert.”

She frowned. “I don’t know what it is. My needy boys don’t always stay with me as long as I’d like.”

“They don’t?”

“Except Andre. He’s a real bull, Andre is.”

“I thought he was a horse. Cheval Andre.”

“A total stallion,” she said. “Where’s Danny the Geek? I want him back. He’s a funny little monkey.”

“I cut his throat and pitched him down a shaft.”

My claim electrified her. Her nostrils flared, and a hard pulse appeared in her slender throat.

“If he didn’t die in the fall,” I told her, “he’s bled to death by now. Or drowned. The shaft’s got twenty or thirty feet of water at the bottom.”

“Why would you have done that?”

“He betrayed me. He told you my secrets.”

Datura licked her lips as though she had just finished eating a tasty dessert. “You’ve got as many layers as an onion, boyfriend.”

I had decided to play the we’re-two-of-a-kind-why-don’t-we-join-forces game, but another opportunity arose.

She said, “The Nigerian prince was full of shit, but I might believe *you* can become a panther after midnight.”

“It’s not a panther,” I said.

“Yeah? So what is it you become?”

“It’s not a saber-toothed tiger, either.”

“Do you become a leopard, like on Kilimanjaro?” she asked.

“It’s a mountain lion.”

The California mountain lion, one of the world’s most formidable predators, prefers to live in rugged mountains and forests, but it adapts well to rolling hills and low scrub.

Mountain lions thrive in the dense, almost lush scrub in the hills and canyons around Pico Mundo, and often they venture into adjoining territory that would be classified as true desert. A male mountain lion will claim as much as a hundred square miles as his hunting range, and he likes to roam.

In the mountains, he’ll feed on mule deer and bighorn sheep. In territory as barren as the Mojave, he will chase down coyotes, foxes, raccoons, rabbits, and rodents, and he will enjoy the variety.

“Males of the species average between one hundred thirty and one hundred fifty pounds,” I told her. “They prefer the cover of night for hunting.”

That look of wide-eyed girlish wonder—which I had first seen on our way to the casino with Doom and Gloom, and which was the only appealing and guileless expression that she possessed—overcame her again. “Are you gonna show me?”

I said, “Even in the daytime, if a mountain lion is on the move instead of resting, people rarely see it because it’s so quiet. It passes without detection.”

As excited as ever she had been at a human sacrifice, she said, “These paw prints—they’re *yours*, aren’t they?”

“Mountain lions are solitary and secretive.”

“Solitary and secretive, but you’re going to show *me*.” She had demanded miracles, fabulous impossible things, icy fingers up and down her spine. Now she thought that I would at last deliver. “You didn’t conjure these tracks to lead me here. You *transformed*...and made these tracks yourself.”

If Datura's and my positions had been reversed, I would have been standing with my back to the mountain lion, oblivious as it stalked me.

As *wrong* as nature is—with its poisonous plants, predatory animals, earthquakes, and floods—sometimes it gets things right.

CHAPTER 52

IMMENSE, THE PAWS, WITH WELL-DEFINED toes...Lowered so slowly, planted so gently that the carpet of ashes, as powdery as talcum, did not plume under them...

Beautiful coloration. Tawny, deepening to dark brown at the tip of the long tail. Also dark brown on the backs of the ears and on the sides of the nose.

If our positions had been reversed, Datura would have watched the approach of the mountain lion with cold-eyed amusement, darkly delighted by my cluelessness.

Although I tried to remain focused on the woman, my attention kept drifting to the cat, and I was not amused, but grimly fascinated and overcome by a growing sense of horror.

My life was hers to take or spare, and the only future I could count on was but a fraction of a second long, whatever time a bullet would take to travel from the muzzle of the pistol to me. Yet at the same time, her life lay in my hands, and it seemed that my silence in the matter of the stalking lion could not be entirely justified by the fact that I was literally under the gun.

If we rely upon the tao with which we're born, we always know what is the right thing to do in any situation, the good thing not for our bank accounts or for ourselves, but for our souls. We are tempted from the tao by self-interest, by base emotions and passions.

I believe that I can honestly say I did not hate Datura, though I had reason to, but certainly I *detested* her. I found her repugnant in part because she emblemized the willful ignorance and narcissism that characterize our troubled times.

She deserved to be imprisoned. In my opinion, she had earned execution; and in extreme jeopardy, to save myself or Danny, I had the right—the obligation—to kill her.

Perhaps no one, however, deserves as hideous a death as being mauled and eaten alive by a wild beast.

Regardless of the circumstances, perhaps it is indefensible to allow such a fate to unfold to the point of inevitability when the potential victim, armed with a gun, could save herself if warned.

Every day we make our way through a moral forest, along pathways ever branching. Often we get lost.

When the array of paths before us is so perplexing that we can't make a choice, or won't, we can hope that we will be given a sign to guide us. A reliance on signs, however, can lead to the evasion of all moral obligations, and thus earn a terrible judgment.

If a leopard in the highest snows of Kilimanjaro, where nature would never have taken it, is understood by everyone as a *sign*, then the timely appearance of a hungry mountain lion in a burned-out casino-hotel should be as easy to understand as would be a holy voice from a burning bush.

This world is mysterious. Sometimes we perceive the mystery, and retreat in doubt, in fear. Sometimes we go with it.

I went with it.

Waiting for me to transform from my human state, an instant before discovering she was not after all invincible, Datura realized that something at her back enthralled me. She looked to see what it might be.

By turning, she invited the pounce, the jaws that bite, the claws that catch.

She screamed, and the ferocious impact of the lion knocked the pistol from her hand before she was able to aim or to squeeze the trigger.

In the spirit of mystery that defined the moment, the gun arced high toward me, and reaching up, I received it from the air with a casual grace.

Perhaps she was mortally torn already, beyond rescue, but the unavoidable truth is that I held the gun, equivalent to a vorpal blade, yet did not slay the Jabberwock, and cannot claim to be a beamish boy. Ashes plumed around my feet as I sprinted toward the north end of the building, and the stairs.

Although I never saw her blood drawn nor the lion at its feast, I'll never be able to purge her screams from my memory.

Perhaps the seamstress, under the knife of the Gray Pigs, had sounded like this, or the walled-up children in the basement of that house in Savannah.

Another voice roared—not that of the lion—half in anguish and half in rage.

Glancing back, I saw Datura's flashlight, knocked this way and that by thrashing cat and prey.

Farther away, from the south end of the building, beyond black columns that might have marked the peri-style of Hell, another light approached, in the possession of a hulking shadowy shape. Andre.

Datura's screaming stopped.

Andre's flashlight swept across her and found the timely lion. If he had a gun, he didn't use it.

Respectfully cutting a wide berth around the cat and its kill, Andre kept coming. I suspected he would never stop coming. Runaway locomotives have gravity on their side.

My trembling light drew the giant more certainly than psychic magnetism could have done, but if I switched it off, I would be all but blinded.

Although he was still at some distance and though I was not the master marksman of my age, I squeezed off a shot, then another and a third.

He had a gun. He returned my fire.

As would have been anyone's, his aim was better than mine. One slug ricocheted off a column to my left, and another round whistled

past my head so close that I could hear it cutting the air separate from the boom and echo of the shot itself.

Trading fire, I would get my candle snuffed, so I ran, crouching and weaving.

The stairwell door was missing. I plunged through, raced down.

Past the landing, on the second flight, I realized that he would expect me to exit at the ground floor and that in those hallways and spaces, all familiar to him, he would catch me, for he was strong and fast and not as stupid as he looked.

Hearing him enter the stairwell, realizing that he had closed the gap between us even faster than I had feared he might, I kicked open the door at the ground floor but didn't go through it. Instead, I swept the light across the next set of down-bound stairs to be sure they weren't obstructed, then switched it off and descended in the dark.

Having been kicked open, the ground-floor door rebounded shut with a crash. As I reached the lower landing, sliding my hand along the railing for guidance, and continued blindly into territory that I had not scouted, I heard Andre slam out of the stairwell, into the ground floor.

I kept moving. I'd bought some time, but he wouldn't be fooled for long.

CHAPTER 53

RISKING LIGHT WHEN I REACHED THE BASEMENT level, I found more stairs but hesitated to follow them. A *sub*-basement would be likely to present me with a dead end.

Shuddering, I remembered her story of the lingering spirit of the Gestapo torturer haunting that *sous-sol* in Paris. Datura's silken voice: *I felt Gessel's hands all over me—eager, bold, demanding. He entered me.*

Choosing the basement, I expected to find a parking garage or loading docks at which deliveries had been made. In either case, there would be exits.

I'd had enough of the Panamint. I preferred to take my chances in the open, in the storm.

Doors lined both sides of a long concrete-walled corridor with a vinyl-tile floor. Neither fire nor smoke had touched this area.

Because the doors were white but not paneled, I checked out a few of the rooms as I passed them. They were empty. Either offices or storerooms, they had been cleaned out after the disaster because what they contained evidently had not been damaged either by fire or water.

The acrid stink of the fire's aftermath had not penetrated here. I had been breathing that miasma for so many hours that clean air felt astringent in my nostrils, in my lungs, almost abrasive in its comparative purity.

An intersection of corridors presented me with three choices. After the briefest hesitation, I hurried to the right, hoping that the door at the farther end would lead to the elusive parking garage.

Just as I reached the termination of this passage, I heard Andre crash through the steel door from the north stairs, back in the first hallway.

At once, I doused my flashlight. I opened the door in front of me, stepped across the threshold, and closed myself into this unknown space.

My light revealed a set of metal service stairs with rubberized treads. They led only down.

The door had no lock.

Andre might conduct a thorough search of this area. Instead he might follow his instinct elsewhere.

I could wait to see what he did, hope to shoot him before he shot me if he yanked open this door. Or I could follow the stairs.

Glad that I had snared the pistol from midair, but not daring to take it as a sign that my destiny was survival, I hurried down into the sub-basement, which such a short time ago I had tried to avoid.

Two landings and three quick flights brought me 360 degrees around to a vestibule and a formidable-looking door. Emblazoned on that barrier were several warnings; the most prominent promised HIGH VOLTAGE in big red letters. A stern admonition restricted access to authorized personnel.

I authorized myself to enter, opened the door, and from the threshold explored with my flashlight. Eight concrete steps led down five feet, into a sunken electrical vault, a thick-walled concrete bunker approximately fifteen by twenty feet.

On a raised pad in the center, as on an island, stood a tower of equipment. Perhaps some of these things were transformers, perhaps a time machine for all I knew.

At the far end of the chamber, a three-foot-diameter tunnel, at floor level, bored away into darkness. Evidently, the vault needed to be a subterranean bunker in the event that equipment exploded, as transformers sometimes did. But in case of a plumbing break or

other sudden flood, the drain would be able to carry away a high volume of water.

Having avoided the main stairs into the sub-basement, I had taken these, which served only the vault. Now I had come to the dead end that I had feared.

From the instant the lion attacked, I'd weighed options at each turn in my flight, calculating probabilities. In my panic, I had not listened to the still, small voice that is my sixth sense.

Nothing is more dangerous for me than to forget that I am a man both of reason *and* supernatural perception. When I function in only one mode or the other, I am denying half myself, half my potential.

To a lesser extent with other people than with me, this is true of everyone.

Dead end.

Nevertheless, I went through the vault door and eased it shut. I checked for a lock, doubting there would be one, and had my doubt confirmed.

I hurried down the concrete stairs, all the way into the pit, and around the tower of equipment.

Probing with the flashlight, I saw that the tunnel sloped and gradually curved away to the left, out of sight. The walls were dry and clean enough. I wouldn't leave a trail.

If Andre entered this chamber, he would surely peer into the drain. But if I managed to get out of sight, beyond the curve, he would not press the search that far. He would think that I had given him the slip farther back.

Three feet of diameter did not allow me to proceed in a stoop. I had to crawl into the drain.

I tucked Datura's pistol under my belt, in the small of my back, and got moving.

The shielding curve lay about twenty feet from the entrance. With no need for the flashlight, I switched it off, inserted it in the spelunker's cuff, and crawled on my hands and knees into the darkness.

Half a minute later, near the bend in the tunnel, I stretched out full length and turned on my side. I directed the flashlight back the

way that I had come, studying the floor.

A few smudges of soot on the concrete marked my progress, but from such spoor alone no one would be able to deduce that I had passed this way. Those traces could have been there for years. Water stains patterned the concrete, too, and they helped to camouflage the soot.

In the dark again, returning to my hands and knees, I finished rounding the gradual turn. When I should have been out of sight of the vault, I continued another ten feet, fifteen, just to be sure before stopping.

I sat crosswise to the tunnel, my back against the curve, and waited.

After a minute, I remembered that old movie serial about the secret civilization under the surface of the earth. Maybe somewhere along this route lay a subterranean city with women in horned hats, an evil emperor, and mutants. Fine. None of that could be as bad as what I'd left behind in the Panamint.

Suddenly creeping through my memory of the movie came Kali, who didn't belong in that scenario; Kali, lips painted with blood, tongue lolling. She wasn't carrying the noose, the skull-topped staff, the sword, or the severed head. Her hands were empty, the better to touch me, to fondle me, to pull my face forcefully toward her for a kiss.

Alone, without either a campfire or marshmallows, I was telling ghost stories to myself. You might think that my life inoculates me against being scared by mere ghost stories, but you would be wrong.

Living every day with proof that the afterlife is real, I can't take refuge in unleavened reason, can't say *But ghosts don't really exist*. Not knowing the full nature of what comes after this world, but knowing for certain that *something* does, my imagination spins into vortexes darker than any yours has ever visited.

Don't get me wrong. I'm sure you've got a fabulously dark, twisted, and perhaps even deeply sick imagination. I'm not trying to devalue the dementedness of your imagination and do not mean to diminish your pride in it.

Sitting in that tunnel, spooking myself, I banished Kali not only from the role that she had given herself in that movie serial, but banished her entirely from my mind. I concentrated on the iguanas tricked up to pass for dinosaurs and on the dwarfs in leather chaps or whatever they had been wearing.

Instead of Kali, within seconds Datura crept into my thoughts, torn by the lion but nonetheless amorous. She was crawling toward me along the tunnel *right now*.

I couldn't hear her breathing, of course, because the dead do not breathe.

She wanted to sit in my lap and wriggle her bottom and share her blood with me.

The dead don't talk. But it was easy to believe that Datura might be the sole exception to the rule. Surely even death could not silence that garrulous goddess. She would heave herself upon me, sit on my lap, wriggle her bottom, press her dripping hand to my lips, and say *Want to taste me, boyfriend?*

Very little of *that* mind movie was enough to make me want to switch on the flashlight.

If Andre had intended to check out the electrical vault, he would have done so by this time. He had gone elsewhere. With both his mistress and Robert dead, the giant would blow this place in the car that they had stashed on the property.

In a few hours, I could dare to venture back into the hotel and from there to the interstate.

As I touched my thumb to the flashlight switch, before I pressed it, light bloomed beyond the curve that I had recently transited, and I heard Andre at the mouth of the tunnel.

CHAPTER 54

ONE GOOD THING ABOUT REVERSE PSYCHIC magnetism is that I can never be lost. Drop me into the middle of a jungle, without a map or a compass, and I'll draw my searchers to me. You'll never find my face on a milk carton: *Have you seen this boy?* If I live long enough to develop Alzheimer's and wander away from my care facility, pretty soon all the nurses and patients will be wandering after me, compelled in my wake.

Watching the light play around the first length of the tunnel, past the curve, I warned myself that I was indulging in another ghost story, spooking myself for no good reason. I should not assume that Andre sensed where I had gone.

If I sat tight, he would decide there were more likely places that I might have taken refuge, and he would go away to search them. He hadn't entered the drain. He was a big man; he would make a lot of noise, crawling in that cramped tunnel.

He surprised me by firing a shot.

In that confined space, the concussion seemed bad enough to make my ears bleed. The report—a loud bang but also like the hard toll of an immense bell—rang with such vibrato, I swore that I could feel sympathetic tremors racing through the haversian canals of my bones. The bang and the toll chased each other through the drain, and the echoes that followed were higher pitched, like the terrifying shrieks of incoming rockets.

The noise so disoriented me that the tiny chips of concrete, peppering my left cheek and neck, mystified me for a moment. Then I understood: *ricochet*.

I rolled flat, facedown, minimizing my exposure, and frantically wriggled deeper into the tunnel, scissoring my legs like a lizard and pulling myself forward with my arms, because if I rose onto my hands and knees, I would for sure take a round in the buttocks or the back of the head.

I could live with one butt cheek—just sit at a slant for the rest of my life, not worry about how baggy the seat of my blue jeans looked, get used to the nickname *Halfass*—but I couldn't live with my brains blown out. Ozzie would say that I often made such poor use of the brain I had that, if worse came to worst, I might in fact be able to get along without it, but I didn't want to try.

Andre fired another shot.

My head was still ringing from the first blast, so this one didn't seem as loud, though my ears ached as if sound of this volume had substance and, passing through them, strained their dimensions.

In the instant required for the initial crash of the shot to be followed by the shrieking echo, the slug would have ricocheted past me. As scary as the noise might be, it signified that my luck held. If a bullet found me, the shock of impact would effectively deafen me to the gunfire.

Skittering like a salamander, away from his light, I knew that darkness offered no protection. He couldn't see his target, anyway, and relied on luck to wound me. In these circumstances, with curved concrete walls conducive to multiple ricochets of the same slug, his odds of nailing me were better than his chances would have been at any game in the casino.

He squeezed off a third shot. What pity I'd once had for him—and I think there might have been a little—was *so over*.

I couldn't guess how often a bullet would have to glance off a wall until its wounding power had been sapped. Salamandering proved exhausting, and I had no confidence that I would be able to reach a safe distance before my luck changed.

A draft suddenly sucked at me from the darkness to my left, and I instinctively scrambled toward it. Another storm drain. This one, a feeder line to the first, also about three feet in diameter, sloped slightly upward.

A fourth shot slammed through the tunnel I had departed. All but certainly beyond the reach of ricochet, I returned to my hands and knees and crawled forward.

Soon the angle of incline increased, then increased again, and ascent became more difficult minute by minute. I grew frustrated that my pace should slow so much with the rising grade, but finally I accepted the cruel fact of my diminished capacity and counseled myself not to push my body to collapse. I wasn't twenty anymore.

Numerous shots rang out, but I did not keep count of them after my buttocks were no longer at risk. In time I realized that he had ceased firing.

At the top of its slope, the branch I traveled opened into a twelve-foot-square chamber that I explored with my flashlight. It appeared to be a catch basin.

Water poured in from three smaller pipes at the top of the room. Any driftwood or trash carried by these streams sank to the bottom of the space, to be cleaned out by maintenance crews from time to time.

Three exit drains, including the one by which I had arrived, were set at different levels in different walls, none near the floor where the flotsam would be allowed to accumulate. Water already was flowing out of the catch basin through the lowest of these.

With the storm raging, the level within the chamber would rise inexorably toward my observation post, which was in the middle of the three outflow lines. I needed to transfer to the highest of the exit drains and continue my journey by that route.

A series of ledges encircling the chamber would make it possible for me to stay out of the debris in the catch basin and get across to the farther side. I would just need to take my time and be careful.

The tunnels I had thus far traveled had been claustrophobic for a man my size. Given his bulk, Andre would find them intolerable. He

would rely on a ricochet having wounded or killed me. He would not follow.

I squirmed out of the drain, into the catch basin, onto a ledge. When I looked down the slope I had just mastered, I saw a light in the distance. He grunted as he doggedly ascended.

CHAPTER 55

I LIKED THE IDEA OF WITHDRAWING DATURA'S pistol from under my belt and firing down on Andre as he crawled toward me in the tunnel. Payback.

The only thing better would have been a shotgun, or maybe a flamethrower, like the one with which Sigourney Weaver torched the bugs in *Aliens*. A vat of boiling oil, bigger than the one Charles Laughton, as the hunchback, poured down on the Parisian rabble from the heights of Notre Dame would have been cool, too.

Datura and her acolytes had left me less willing than usual to turn the other cheek. They had lowered my threshold of anger and raised my tolerance for violence.

Here was a perfect illustration of why you must always choose carefully the people with whom you hang out.

Poised on a six-inch ledge, my back to the murky pool, holding with one hand to the lip of the drain, I could not have a taste of revenge without putting myself at too much risk. If I tried to fire Datura's pistol at Andre, the recoil would surely upset my precarious balance, and I would fall backward into the catch basin.

I did not know how deep the water might be, but more to the point, I didn't know what junk lay just below the surface. The way my luck had been waxing and waning lately, mostly waning, I would fall onto the broken hardwood handle of a shovel, splintered and sharp enough to put an end to Dracula, or the rusted tines of a

pitchfork, or a couple of spear-point iron fence staves, or maybe a collection of Japanese samurai swords.

Unharmd by the single shot that I had gotten off, Andre would reach the top of the drain and see me impaled in the catch basin. I would discover that, brutish as he appeared to be, he possessed a jolly laugh. As I died, he would speak his first word, in Datura's voice: *Loser*.

So I left the gun at the small of my back and made my way around the ledge to the farther side of the room, where the highest of the exit drains lay an inch or two above my head, four feet higher than the one from which I had just extracted myself.

The dirty water cascading out of the high inflow pipes kicked up spray when it met the pool, splashing my jeans to mid thigh. But I couldn't get any filthier or hardly any more miserable.

As soon as that thought crossed my mind, I tried to reel it back because it seemed like a challenge to the universe. No doubt inside of ten minutes, I would be *astonishingly* filthier and *immensely* more miserable than I was at that moment.

I reached overhead, got a two-hand grip on the lip of the new drain, toed the wall, muscled myself up and in.

Ensnconced in this new warren, I considered waiting until Andre appeared at the mouth of the tunnel that I had left, and shooting him from my elevated position. For a guy who had been so reluctant even to handle firearms earlier this same day, I had developed an unseemly eagerness to pump my enemies full of lead.

The flaw in my plan immediately became clear to me. Andre had a gun of his own. He would be cautious about leaving that lower tunnel, and when I fired at him, he would fire back.

All of these concrete walls, more ricochets, more earsplitting noise...

I didn't have sufficient ammunition to keep him pinned down until the water rose into his drain and forced him to retreat. The best thing I could do was keep moving.

The tunnel into which I had climbed would be the last of the three outflow drains to take water. In an ordinary storm, it would

probably remain dry, but not in this deluge. The level of the pool below rose visibly, minute by minute.

Happily, this new tunnel was of greater diameter than the previous one, perhaps four feet. I would not have to crawl. I could proceed at a stoop and make good time.

I didn't know where that progress would take me, but I was game for a change of scenery.

As I gathered myself off the floor and into the aforementioned stoop, a shrill twittering arose in the chamber behind me. Andre didn't strike me as a guy who would twitter, and at once I knew the source of the cries: bats.

CHAPTER 56

HAIL IN THE DESERT IS A RARITY, BUT ONCE in a while, a Mojave storm can deliver an icy pelting to the land.

If hail had fallen outside, then as soon as I felt boils forming on my neck and face, I could be certain that God had chosen to amuse Himself by restaging the ten plagues of Egypt upon my beleaguered person.

I don't think that bats were one of the Biblical plagues, though they should have been. If memory serves me, instead of bats, frogs terrorized Egypt.

Large numbers of angry frogs won't get your blood pumping half as fast as will a horde of incensed flying rodents. This truth calls into question the deity's skill as a dramatist.

When the frogs died, they bred lice, which was the third plague. This from the same Creator who painted the sky blood-red over Sodom and Gomorrah, rained fire and brimstone on the cities, overthrew every habitation in which their people tried to hide, and broke every building stone as though it were an egg.

Circling the catch basin on the ledge and levering myself into the highest tunnel, I had not pointed the light directly overhead. Evidently a multitude of leathery-winged sleepers had depended from the ceiling, quietly dreaming.

I don't know what I did to disturb them, if anything. Night had fallen not long ago. Perhaps this was the usual time at which they

woke, stretched their wings, and flew off to snare themselves in little girls' hair.

As one, they raised their shrill voices. In that instant, even as I finished rising into a stoop, I dropped flat, and folded my arms over my head.

They departed their man-made cave by the highest of the out-flow drains. This route would never entirely fill with water and would always offer at least a partially unobstructed exit.

If I'd been asked to estimate the size of their community as they passed over me, I would have said "thousands." To the same question an hour later, I would have replied "hundreds." In truth, they numbered fewer than one hundred, perhaps only fifty or sixty.

Reflected off the curved concrete walls, the rustle of their wings sounded like crackling cellophane, the way movie sound-effects specialists used to rumple the stuff to imitate all-devouring fire. They didn't stir up much of a breeze, hardly an eddy, but brought an ammonial odor, which they carried away with them.

A few fluttered against my arms, with which I protected my head and face, brushed like feathers across the backs of my hands, which should have made it easy to imagine that they were only birds, but which instead brought to mind swarming insects—cockroaches, centipedes, locusts—so I had bats for real and bugs in the mind. Locusts had been the eighth of Egypt's ten plagues.

Rabies.

Having read somewhere that a quarter of any colony of bats is infected with the virus, I waited to be bitten viciously, repeatedly. I didn't sustain a single nip.

Although none of them bit me, a couple crapped on me in passing, sort of like a casual insult. The universe had heard and accepted my challenge: I was now filthier and more miserable than I had been ten minutes previously.

I rose into a stoop again and followed the descending drain away from the catch basin. Somewhere ahead, and not too far, I would find a manhole or another kind of exit from the system. Two hundred yards, I assured myself, three hundred at most.

Between here and there, of course, would be the Minotaur. The Minotaur fed on human flesh. “Yeah,” I muttered aloud, “but only the flesh of virgins.” Then I remembered that I was a virgin.

The flashlight revealed a Y in the tunnel, immediately ahead. The branch to the left continued to descend. The passage to the right fed the one I’d been following from the catch basin, and because it rose, I figured it would lead me closer to the surface and to a way out.

I had gone only twenty or thirty yards when, of course, I heard the bats returning. They had soared out into the night, discovered a tempest raging, and had fled at once back to their cozy subterranean haven.

Because I doubted that I would escape a second confrontation unbiten, I reversed directions with an agility born of panic and ran, hunched like a troll. Returning to the down-bound tunnel, I went to the right, away from the catch basin, and hoped the bats would remember their address.

When their frenzied flapping crescendoed and then diminished behind me, I came to a halt and, gasping, leaned against the wall.

Maybe Andre would be on the ledge, crossing from the lowest drain to the highest, when the bats returned. Maybe they would frighten him, and he would fall into the catch basin, skewering himself on those samurai swords.

That fantasy brought a brief glow to my heart, but only brief because I couldn’t believe that Andre would be afraid of bats. Or afraid of anything.

An ominous sound arose that I had not heard before, a rough rumbling, as if an enormous slab of granite was being dragged across another slab. It seemed to be coming from between me and the catch basin.

Usually this meant that a secret door in a solid-stone wall would roll open, allowing the evil emperor to make a grand entrance in knee-high boots and a cape.

Hesitantly, I moved back toward the Y, cocking my head one way, then the other, trying to determine the source of the sound.

The rumble grew louder. Now I perceived it as less like stone sliding over stone than like friction between iron and rock.

When I pressed a hand to the wall of the tunnel, I could feel vibrations passing through the concrete.

I ruled out an earthquake, which would have produced jolts and lurches instead of this prolonged grinding sound and consistent level of shaking.

The rumbling stopped.

Under my hand, vibrations were no longer coursing through the concrete.

A rushing sound. A sudden draft as something pushed air out of the nearby ascending branch, stirring my hair.

Somewhere a sluice gate had opened.

The air had been displaced by a surge of water. A torrent exploded out of the ascending branch, knocked me off my feet, and swept me down into the dark bowels of the flood-control system.

CHAPTER 57

TOSSED, TURNED, TUMBLED, SPUN, I SPIRALED along the tunnel like a bullet along a rifle barrel.

At first the flashlight, strapped to my left arm, revealed the undulant gray tide, lent glitter to the spray, brightened the dirty foam. But the spelunker's cuff failed, peeled away from my arm, and took the light with it.

Down through the blackness, bulleting, I wrapped my arms around myself, tried to keep my legs together. With limbs flailing, I'd be more likely to break a wrist, an ankle, an elbow, by knocking against the wall.

I tried to stay on my back, face up, rocketing along with the fatalism of an Olympic bobsledder whistling down a luge chute, but the torrent repeatedly, insistently rolled me, pushing my face under the flow. I fought for breath, jackknifing my body to reorient it, gasping when I got my head above the flux.

I swallowed water, broke through the surface, gagged and coughed and desperately inhaled the wet air. Considering my helplessness in its embrace, this modest flow might as well have been Niagara sweeping me toward its killing cataracts.

How long the aquatic torture continued, I can't say, but having been physically taxed before entering this flume ride, I grew tired. Very tired. My limbs became heavy, and my neck stiffened from the strain of the constant struggle to keep my head above water. My back ached, I seemed to have wrenched my left shoulder, and with

each effort to find air, my reserves of strength diminished until I was perilously close to complete exhaustion.

Light.

The surging sluice spat me out of the four-foot drain into one of the immense flood-control tunnels that I had speculated might double, in the Last War, as an underground highway for the transport of intercontinental ballistic missiles out of Fort Kraken to farther points of the Maravilla Valley.

I wondered if the tunnel had remained lighted ever since I'd thrown the switch after coming down from the service shed near the Blue Moon Cafe. I felt as if weeks had passed since then, not mere hours.

Here, the velocity of the flood was not as breakneck as it had been in the smaller and far more steeply sloped drain. I could tread the moving water and stay afloat as I was flushed into the middle of the passage and borne along.

A little experimentation quickly proved, however, that I could not swim crosswise to the swift current. I wouldn't be able to reach the elevated walkway that I had followed eastward in pursuit of Danny and his captors.

Then I realized that the walkway had vanished below the water when the previous stream had swelled into this mighty Mississippi. Were I able to reach the side of the tunnel by heroic effort and the grace of a miracle, I would not be able to escape the river.

If ultimately the flood-control system delivered the storm run-off to a vast subterranean lake, I would be washed onto those shores. Robinson Crusoe without sunshine and coconuts.

Such a lake might lack shores. It might be embraced instead by sheer stone walls so smoothed by eons of trickling condensation that they could not be climbed.

And if a shore existed, it would not be hospitable. With no possible source of light, I would be a blind man in a barren Hades, spared death by starvation only if I died instead by stumbling into an abyss and breaking my neck in the fall.

At that bleak moment, I thought I would die underground. And within the hour, I did.

Treading water, keeping my head above even this less turbulent flow, was a cruel test of my stamina. I wasn't certain that I would last the miles that lay ahead before the lake. Drowning would spare me from starvation.

Meager hope unexpectedly came in the form of a depth marker situated in the center of the watercourse. I was swept straight toward the six-inch-square white post, which rose nearly to the twelve-foot-high ceiling.

As in the power of the current I began to slide past this slender refuge, I hooked one arm around the post. I snared it with one leg, as well. If I stayed on the upstream side, with the post between my legs, the insistent current at my back would help to keep me in place.

Earlier in the day, when I had towed the snaky man's corpse away from this post or another like it, to the elevated walkway, the depth of the flow had been inches shy of two feet. Now it lapped north of the five-foot mark.

Thus safely anchored, I leaned my forehead against the post for a while, catching my breath. I listened to my heart and marveled that I was alive.

After several minutes, when I closed my eyes, that mental turning, that slow dizzy sweep signifying a pending swoon into sleep, alarmed me, and my lids snapped open. If I fell asleep, I would lose my grip and be swept away once more.

I would be in this fix for a while. With the service walkway underwater, no maintenance crew would venture here. No one would see me clinging to the pole and mount a rescue.

If I held fast, however, the water level would fall when the storm passed. Eventually the service walkway would reappear out of the tide. The stream would become shallow enough to ford, as it had been before.

Perseverance.

To keep my mind occupied, I maintained a mental inventory of the flotsam that bobbed past. A palm frond. A blue tennis ball. A bicycle tire.

For a little while I thought about working at Tire World, about being part of the tire life, working around the fine smell of rubber, and that made me happy.

A yellow lawn-chair cushion. The green lid of a picnic cooler. A length of two-by-six with a rusty spike bristling from it. A dead rattlesnake.

The dead snake alerted me to the possibility of a live snake in the flood. For that matter, if a sizable chunk of lumber, like that two-by-six, propelled by the brisk current, knocked hard against my spine, it might do some damage.

I began glancing over my shoulder from time to time, surveying the oncoming debris. Maybe the snake had been a warning sign. Because of it, I spotted Andre upstream, before he was on top of me.

CHAPTER 58

EVIL NEVER DIES. IT JUST CHANGES FACES.

Of this face, I'd seen enough, too much, and when I spotted the giant, I thought for an instant—and fondly hoped—that only a corpse pursued me.

But he was alive, all right, and friskier than I. Too impatient for the swift current to bring him to the depth marker, he flailed, splashed, determined to swim toward me.

I had nowhere to go but up.

My muscles ached. My back throbbed. My wet hands on the wet post seemed certain to fail me.

Fortunately, the inch and foot lines that measured the depth were not merely indicated with black paint on the white background, but were also notched into the wood. These features served as grip points, toe-holds, shallow but better than nothing.

I clamped the post with my knees and pushed myself with my thigh muscles even as I clawed upward, hand over hand. I slipped back, dug my toes in, clamped my knees, tried again, moved up an inch, another inch, two more, desperate for every one of them.

When Andre collided with the post, I felt the impact and glanced down. His features were as broad and blunt as a club. His eyes were edge weapons, sharp with homicidal fury.

With one hand, he reached for me. He had long arms. His fingers brushed the bottom of my right shoe.

I pulled my legs up. Afraid of slipping back and into his hands, measuring progress by the numbered notches, I inchwormed until my head bumped the ceiling.

When I glanced down again, I saw that even with my legs drawn up as far as they would go, so that I clamped the post fiercely with my thighs, I was only about ten inches beyond his reach.

He hooked his thick blunt fingers into the notched marks with some difficulty. He struggled to pull himself out of the water.

The top of the depth marker had a finial, like that on a newel post at the head of a staircase. With my left hand, I gripped that knob and held on as poor King Kong had held on to the dirigible-mooring mast at the top of the Empire State Building.

The analogy didn't quite work because Kong was below me on the post. Maybe that made me Fay Wray. The big ape did seem to have an unnatural passion for me.

My legs had slipped. I felt Andre paw at my shoe. Furiously, I kicked his hand, kicked, and drew my legs up again.

Remembering Datura's pistol under my belt, at the small of my back, I reached for it with my right hand. I had lost it along the way.

While I fumbled for the missing handgun, the brute surged up the post and seized my left ankle.

I kicked and thrashed, but he held tight. In fact, he took a risk, let go of the post, and gripped my ankle with both hands.

His great weight dragged on me so pitilessly that my hip should have dislocated. I heard a shout of pain and rage, then again, but did not realize until the second time that the shout came from me.

The finial at the top of the depth marker had not been carved from the end of the post. The ornament had been made separately and applied.

It broke loose in my hand.

Together, Andre and I fell into the flood tide.

CHAPTER 59

AS WE FELL, I SLIPPED OUT OF HIS GRASP.

I hit the water with sufficient force to go under, touch bottom. The powerful current rolled me, spun me, and I burst to the surface, coughing and sputtering.

Cheval Andre, the bull, the stallion, floated directly ahead of me, fifteen feet away, facing me. Pitted against the punishing surge, he was not able to swim to the rendezvous with death that he clearly desired.

His burning fury, his seething hatred, his lust for violence were so consuming that he would exhaust himself beyond recovery to have vengeance, and did not care that he would drown, too, after drowning me.

Aside from Datura's cheap physical appeal, I could not account for any quality in her that should elicit the absolute commitment of body, mind, and heart from any man, let alone from one who seemed to have no slightest capacity for sentimentality. Could this hard brute love beauty so much that he would die for it, even when it truly was skin deep and corrupted, even when she who possessed it had been mad, narcissistic, and manipulative?

We were pawns of the flood, which spun us, lifted us, dropped us, dunked us, and bore us along at maybe thirty miles an hour, maybe faster. Sometimes we closed to within six feet of each other. Never were we farther apart than twenty.

We passed the place at which I had entered these tunnels earlier in the day, and raced onward.

I began to worry that we would sweep out of the lighted length of the tunnel, into darkness, and I feared plunging blindly into the subterranean lake less than I feared not being able to keep Andre in sight. If I was destined to drown, let the flood itself claim me. I didn't want to die at his hands.

Ahead, flush to the circumference of the great tunnel, a pair of steel gates together formed a circle. They resembled a portcullis in that they featured both horizontal and vertical bars.

Between the crossed members of this grating, the openings were four inches square. The gate served as a final filter of the flood-borne debris.

A marked quickening of the water suggested that a falls lay not far ahead, and the lake no doubt waited below those cascades. Beyond the gates, impenetrable blackness promised an abyss.

The river brought Andre to the gate first, and I slammed against it a couple of seconds later, six feet to his right.

Upon impact, he clawed over the clog of trash at the base of the gate, and pulled himself onto it.

Stunned, I wanted only to cling there, rest, but because I knew that he would come for me, I clambered over the trash, too, and onto the gate. We hung motionless for but a moment, like a spider and its prey upon a web.

He crabbed sideways along the steel grid. He didn't appear to be breathing half as hard as I was.

I would have preferred to retreat, but I could move only two or three feet away from him before I encountered the wall.

Both feet on a vertical bar, gripping the gate with one hand, I extracted the fishing knife from my jeans. On the third try, when he had drawn within arm's length of me, I flicked the blade out of the handle.

The grievous hour had come round at last. It was him or me. Fish or cut bait.

Fearless of the knife, he crabbed closer and reached for me.

I slashed his hand.

Instead of crying out or flinching, he clutched the blade in his bleeding fist.

At some cost to him, I ripped the knife away from him.

With his wounded hand, he seized a fistful of my hair and tried to yank me off the gate.

As dirty as it was, and intimate, as terrible as it was, and necessary, I drove the knife deep into his gut and without hesitation slashed down.

Relinquishing the twist of my hair, he seized the wrist of the hand that held the knife. He let go of the gate, fell into the flood, and pulled me with him.

We rolled across the gate-held trash and plunged underwater, broke the surface, face to face, my hand in his, the knife contested, thrashing, his free hand a club battering my shoulder, battering the side of my head, then pulling me down with him, submerged, blind in the murky water, blind and suffocating, then up and into the air once more, coughing, spitting, vision blurred, and somehow he had gotten possession of the knife, the point of which felt not sharp but hot in a diagonal slash across my chest.

I have no memory from that slash until a short but inestimable time later, when I realized that I was lying across the accumulation of debris at the base of the gate, holding to a horizontal bar with both hands, afraid that I was going to slip down into the water and not be able to get my head above the surface again.

Exhausted, all power drained, strength consumed, I realized that I had lost consciousness, that I would pass out again, momentarily. I managed, barely, to pull myself up farther on the gate, to hook both arms around verticals, so if my hands relaxed and slipped loose, the crooks of my elbows might still hold me above the flood.

At my left side, he floated, snagged on the trash, faceup, dead. His eyes were rolled back in his head, as smooth and white as eggs, as white and blind as bone, as blind and terrible as Nature in her indifference.

I went away.

CHAPTER 60

THE RATAPLAN OF NIGHT RAIN AGAINST THE windows...
Wafting in from the kitchen, the delicious aroma of a pot roast
taking its time in the oven...

In his living room, Little Ozzie fills his huge armchair to
overflowing.

The warm light of the Tiffany lamps, the jewel tones of the
Persian carpet, the art and artifacts reflect his good taste.

On the table beside his chair is a bottle of fine Cabernet, a plate of
cheeses, a cup of fried walnuts, which serve as a testament to his
genteel quest for self-destruction.

I sit on the sofa and watch him enjoy the book for a while before I
say *You're always reading Saul Bellow and Hemingway and Joseph
Conrad.*

He does not permit himself to be interrupted in the middle of a
paragraph.

*I bet you'd like to write something more ambitious than stories about a
bulimic detective.*

Ozzie sighs and samples the cheese, eyes fixed on the page.

*You're so talented, I'm sure you could write whatever you want. I
wonder if you've ever tried.*

He sets the book aside and picks up his wine.

Oh, I say, surprised. I see how it is.

Ozzie savors the wine and, still holding the glass, stares into the
middle distance, not at anything in this room.

Sir, I wish you could hear me say this. You were a dear friend to me. I'm so glad you made me write the story of me and Stormy and what happened to her.

After another taste of wine, he opens the book and returns to his reading.

I might have gone mad if you hadn't made me write it. And if I hadn't written it, for sure I would never have had any peace.

Terrible Chester, as glorious as ever, enters from the kitchen and stands staring at me.

If things had worked out, I'd have written about all this with Danny, too, and given you a second manuscript. You would have liked it less than the first, but maybe a little.

Chester visits with me as never he has before, sits at my feet.

Sir, when they come to tell you about me, please don't eat a whole ham in one night, don't deep-fry a block of cheese.

I reach down to stroke Terrible Chester, and he seems to like my touch.

What you could do for me, sir, is just once write a story of the kind you'd most enjoy writing. If you'll do that for me, I'll have given back the gift that you gave me, and that would make me happy.

I rise from the sofa.

Sir, you're a dear, fat, wise, fat, generous, honorable, caring, wonderfully fat man, and I wouldn't have you any other way.

TERRI STAMBAUGH SITS in her apartment kitchen above the Pico Mundo Grille, drinking strong coffee and paging slowly through an album of photographs.

Looking over her shoulder, I see snapshots of her with Kelsey, the husband she lost to cancer.

On her music system, Elvis sings "I Forgot to Remember to Forget."

I put my hands on her shoulders. She does not react, of course.

She gave me so much—encouragement, a job at sixteen, the skills of a first-rate fry cook, counsel—and all I gave her in return was my friendship, which doesn't seem enough.

I wish I could spook her with a supernatural moment. Make the hands spin on the Elvis wall clock. Send that ceramic Elvis dancing across the kitchen counter.

Later, when they came to tell her, she would know it had been me, fooling with her, saying good-bye. Then she would know I was all right, and knowing I was all right, she would be all right, too.

But I don't have the anger to be a poltergeist. Not even enough to make the face of Elvis appear in the condensation on her kitchen window.

CHIEF WYATT PORTER and his wife, Karla, are having dinner in their kitchen.

She is a good cook, and he is a good eater. He claims this is what holds their marriage together.

She says what holds their marriage together is that she feels too damn sorry for him to ask for a divorce.

What really holds their marriage together are mutual respect of an awesome depth, a shared sense of humor, faith that they were brought together by a force greater than themselves, and a love so unwavering and pure that it is sacred.

This is how I like to believe Stormy and I would have been if we could have gotten married and lived together as long as the chief and Karla: so perfect for each other that spaghetti and a salad in the kitchen on a rainy night, just the two of them, is more satisfying and more gladdening to the heart than dinner at the finest restaurant in Paris.

I sit at the table with them, uninvited. I am embarrassed to be eavesdropping on their simple yet enrapturing conversation, but this will be the only time that it ever happens. I will not linger. I will move on.

After a while, his cell phone rings.

"I hope that's Odd," he says.

She puts down her fork, wipes her hands on a napkin as she says, "If something's wrong with Oddie, I want to come."

"Hello," says the chief. "Bill Burton?"

Bill owns the Blue Moon Cafe.

The chief frowns. “Yes, Bill. Of course. Odd Thomas? What about him?”

As if with a presentiment, Karla pushes her chair away from the table and gets to her feet.

The chief says, “We’ll be right there.”

Rising from the table as he does, I say, *Sir, the dead do talk, after all. But the living don’t listen.*

CHAPTER 61

HERE IS THE CENTRAL MYSTERY: HOW I GOT from the portcullis-style gate in the flood tunnel to the kitchen door of the Blue Moon Cafe, a journey of which I have no slightest recollection.

I do believe that I died. The visits I paid to Ozzie, to Terri, and to the Porters in their kitchen were not figments of a dream.

Later, when I shared my story with them, my description of what each of them was doing when I visited comports perfectly with their separate recollections of their evenings.

Bill Burton says I arrived battered and bedraggled at the back door of his restaurant, asking him to call Chief Porter. By then the rain had stopped, and I was so filthy that he set a chair outside for me and fetched a bottle of beer, which in his opinion, I needed.

I don't recall that part. The first thing that I remember is being in the chair, drinking Heineken, while Bill examined the wound in my chest.

"Shallow," he said. "Hardly more than a scratch. The bleeding's stopped on its own."

"He was dying when he took that swipe at me," I said. "There wasn't any force behind it."

Maybe that was true. Or maybe it was the explanation that I needed to tell myself.

Soon a Pico Mundo Police Department cruiser came along the alley, without siren or flashing lights, and parked behind the cafe.

Chief Porter and Karla got out of the car and came to me.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to finish the spaghetti,” I said.

They exchanged a puzzled look.

“Oddie,” said Karla, “your ear’s torn up. What’s all the blood on your T-shirt? Wyatt, he needs an ambulance.”

“I’m all right,” I assured her. “I was dead, but someone didn’t want me to be, so I’m back.”

To Bill Burton, Wyatt said, “How many beers has he had?”

“That’s the first one here,” Bill said.

“Wyatt,” Karla declared, “*he needs an ambulance.*”

“I don’t really,” I said. “But Danny’s in bad shape, and we might need a couple paramedics to carry him down all those stairs.”

While Karla brought another chair out of the restaurant, put it next to mine, sat down, and fussed over me, Wyatt used the police-band radio to order an ambulance.

When he returned, I said, “Sir, you know what’s wrong with humanity?”

“Plenty,” he said.

“The greatest gift we were given is our free will, and we keep misusing it.”

“Don’t worry yourself about that now,” Karla advised me.

“You know what’s wrong with nature,” I asked her, “with all its poison plants, predatory animals, earthquakes, and floods?”

“You’re upsetting yourself, sweetie.”

“When we envied, when we killed for what we envied, we fell. And when we fell, we broke the whole shebang, nature, too.”

A kitchen worker whom I knew, who had worked part time at the Grille, Manuel Nuñez, arrived with a fresh beer.

“I don’t think he should have that,” Karla worried.

Taking the beer from him, I said, “Manuel, how’re you doing?”

“Looks like better than you.”

“I was just dead for a while, that’s all. Manuel, do you know what’s wrong with cosmic time, as we know it, which steals everything from us?”

“Isn’t it ‘spring forward, fall back’?” Manuel asked, thinking that we were talking about Daylight Savings Time.

“When we fell and broke,” I said, “we broke nature, too, and when we broke nature, we broke time.”

“Is that from *Star Trek*?” Manuel asked.

“Probably. But it’s true.”

“I liked that show. It helped me learn English.”

“You speak it well,” I told him.

“I had a brogue for a while because I got so into Scotty’s character,” Manuel said.

“Once, there were no predators, no prey. Only harmony. There were no quakes, no storms, everything in balance. In the beginning, time was all at once and forever—no past, present, and future, no death. We broke it all.”

Chief Porter tried to take the fresh Heineken from me.

I held on to it. “Sir, do you know what sucks the worst about the human condition?”

Bill Burton said, “Taxes.”

“It’s even worse than that,” I told him.

Manuel said, “Gasoline costs too much, and low mortgage rates are *gone*.”

“What sucks the worst is...this world was a gift to us, and we broke it, and part of the deal is that if we want things right, we have to fix it ourselves. But we can’t. We try, but we can’t.”

I started to cry. The tears surprised me. I thought I was done with tears for the duration.

Manuel put a hand on my shoulder and said, “Maybe we can fix it, Odd. You know? Maybe.”

I shook my head. “No. We’re broken. A broken thing can’t fix itself.”

“Maybe it can,” Karla said, putting a hand on my other shoulder.

I sat there, just a faucet. All snot and tears. Embarrassed but not enough to get my act together.

“Son,” said Chief Porter, “it’s not your job alone, you know.”

“I know.”

“So the broken world’s not all on your shoulders.”

“Lucky for the world.”

The chief crouched beside me. “I wouldn’t say that. I wouldn’t say that at all.”

“Or me,” Karla agreed.

“I’m a mess,” I apologized.

Karla said, “Me too.”

“I could use a beer,” Manuel said.

“You’re working,” Bill Burton reminded him. Then he said, “Get me one, too.”

To the chief, I said, “There’re two dead at the Panamint and two more in the flood-control tunnel.”

“You just tell me what,” he said, “and we’ll handle it.”

“What had to be done...it was so bad. Real bad. But the hard thing is...”

Karla gave me a wad of tissues.

The chief said, “What’s the hard thing, son?”

“The hard thing is, I was dead, too, but somebody didn’t want me to be, so I’m back.”

“Yes. You said before.”

My chest swelled. My throat thickened. I could hardly breathe. “Chief, I was *this* close to Stormy, *this* close to service.”

He cupped my wet face in his hands and made me look at him. “Nothing before its time, son. Everything in its own time, to its own schedule.”

“I guess so.”

“You know that’s true.”

“This was a very hard day, sir. I had to do...terrible things. Things no one should have to live with.”

Karla whispered, “Oh, God, Oddie. Oh, sweetie, don’t.” To her husband, she said plaintively, “Wyatt?”

“Son, you can’t fix a broken thing by breaking another part of it. You understand me?”

I nodded. I did understand. But understanding doesn’t always help.

“Giving up—that would be breaking another part of yourself.”

“Perseverance,” I said.

“That’s right.”

At the end of the block, with flashing emergency beacons but without a siren, the ambulance turned into the alley.

“I think Danny had some broken bones but was trying not to let me know,” I told the chief.

“We’ll get him. We’ll handle him like glass, son.”

“He doesn’t know about his dad.”

“All right.”

“That’s going to be so hard, sir. Telling him. Very hard.”

“I’ll tell him, son. Leave that to me.”

“No, sir. I’d be grateful if you’re there with me, but I have to tell him. He’s going to think it’s all his fault. He’s going to be devastated. He’s going to need to lean, sir.”

“He can lean on you.”

“I hope so, sir.”

“He can lean hard on you, son. Who could he lean on any harder?”

And so we went to the Panamint, where Death had gone to gamble and had, as always, won.

CHAPTER 62

WITH FOUR POLICE CRUISERS, ONE AMBULANCE, a county-morgue wagon, three crime-scene specialists, two paramedics, six cops, one chief, and one Karla, I returned to the Panamint.

I felt whipped, but not exhausted to the point of collapse, as I had felt earlier. Being dead for a while had refreshed me.

When we pried open the elevator doors on the twelfth floor, Danny was glad to see us. He had eaten neither of the coconut-raisin power bars, and he insisted on returning them to me.

He had drunk the water I left with him, but not because he had been thirsty. “After all the shotgun fire,” he said, “I really needed the bottles to pee in.”

Karla went with Danny in the ambulance to the hospital. Later, in a room at County General, she, instead of the chief, stayed with me when I told Danny about his dad. The wives of Spartans are the secret pillars of the world.

In the dark and ashy vastness of the burned-out second floor, we found Datura’s remains. The mountain lion had gone.

As I expected, her malignant spirit had not lingered. Her will was no longer hers to wield, her freedom surrendered to a demanding collector.

In the living room of the twelfth-floor suite, blood spray and buckshot proved that I’d wounded Robert. On the balcony lay a loosely tied shoe, which apparently had been pulled off his foot

when he had stumbled backward across the metal track of the sliding doors.

Immediately below that balcony, in the parking lot, we found his pistol and his other shoe, as if he no longer needed the former and had taken off the latter to be able to travel with an even step.

Such a long fall onto a hard surface would have left him lying in a lake of blood. But the storm had washed the pavement clean.

The consensus was that Datura and Andre had moved the body to a dry place.

I did not share that opinion. Datura and Andre had been guarding the stairs. They would have had neither the time nor the inclination to treat their dead with dignity.

I looked up from the shoe and surveyed the Mojave night beyond the grounds of the hotel, wondering what need—or hope—and what power had compelled him.

Perhaps one day a hiker will find mummified remains dressed in black but shoeless, in the fetal position, inside a den from which foxes had been evicted to provide a refuge to a man who wished to rest in peace beyond the reach of his demanding goddess.

The disappearance of Robert prepared me for the failure of the authorities to recover the bodies of Andre and the snaky man.

Near the end of the flood-control system, the portcullis-style gates, twisted and sagging, were found open. Beyond, a falls cascaded into a cavern, the first of many caverns that formed an archipelago of subterranean seas bound all around by land, a realm that was largely unexplored and too treacherous to justify a search for bodies.

The consensus held that the water, possessed of fearsome power and prevented by a choking mass of debris from flowing easily through the gates, had torqued the steel, had bent the huge hinges, had broken the lock.

Although that scenario did not satisfy me, I had no desire to pursue an independent investigation.

In the interest of self-education, however, which Ozzie Boone is always pleased to see me undertake, I researched the meaning of some words previously unknown to me.

Mundunugu appears in similar forms in different languages of East Africa. A *mundunugu* is a witch doctor.

Voodooists believe that the human spirit has two parts.

The first is the *gros bon ange*, the “big good angel,” the life force that all beings share, that animates them. The *gros bon ange* enters the body at conception and, upon the death of the body, returns at once to God, from whom it originated.

The second is the *ti bon ange*, the “little good angel.” This is the essence of the person, the portrait of the individual, the sum of his life’s choices, actions, and beliefs.

At death, because sometimes it wanders and delays in its journey to its eternal home, the *ti bon ange* is vulnerable to a *bokor*, which is a voodoo priest who deals in black rather than in white magic. He can capture the *ti bon ange*, bottle it, and keep it for many uses.

They say that a skilled *bokor*, with well-cast spells, can even steal the *ti bon ange* from a living person.

To steal the *ti bon ange* of another *bokor* or of a *mundunugu* would be considered a singular accomplishment among the mad-cow set.

Cheval is French for “horse.”

To a voodooist, a *cheval* is a corpse, taken always when fresh from a morgue or acquired by whatever means, into which he installs a *ti bon ange*.

The former corpse, alive again, is animated by the *ti bon ange*, which perhaps yearns for Heaven—or even for Hell—but is under the iron control of the *bokor*.

I draw no conclusions from the meaning of these exotic words. I define them here only for *your* education.

As I said earlier, I’m a man of reason, yet I have supernatural perceptions. Daily I walk a high wire. I survive by finding the sweet spot between reason and unreason, between the rational and the irrational.

The unthinking embrace of irrationality is literally madness. But embracing rationality while denying the existence of *any* mystery to life and its meaning—that is no less a form of madness than is eager devotion to unreason.

One appeal of both the life of a fry cook and that of a tire-installation technician is that during a busy work day, you have no time to dwell on these things.

CHAPTER 63

STORMY'S UNCLE, SEAN LLEWELLYN, IS A priest and the rector of St. Bartholomew's, in Pico Mundo.

Following the deaths of her mother and father, when Stormy was seven and a half, she had been adopted by a couple in Beverly Hills. Her adoptive father had molested her.

Lonely, confused, ashamed, she had eventually found the courage to inform a social worker.

Thereafter, choosing dignity over victimhood, courage over despair, she had lived in St. Bart's Orphanage until she graduated from high school.

Father Llewellyn is a gentle man with a gruff exterior, strong in his convictions. He looks like Thomas Edison as played by Spencer Tracy, but with brush-cut hair. Without his Roman collar, he might be mistaken for a career Marine.

Two months after the events at the Panamint, Chief Porter came with me to a consultation with Father Llewellyn. We met in the study in St. Bart's rectory.

In a spirit of confession, requiring the priest's confidence, we told him about my gift. The chief confirmed that with my help he had solved certain crimes, and he vouched for my sanity, my truthfulness.

My primary question for Father Llewellyn was whether he knew of a monastic order that would provide room and board for a young

man who would work hard in return for these provisions, but who did not think that he himself would ever wish to become a monk.

“You want to be a lay resident in a religious community,” said Father Llewellyn, and by the way he put it, I knew this might be an unusual but not an unheard-of arrangement.

“Yes, sir. That’s the thing.”

With the rough bearish charm of a concerned Marine sergeant counseling a troubled soldier, the priest said, “Odd, you’ve taken some bad blows this past year. Your loss...my loss, too...has been an extraordinarily difficult thing to cope with because she was...such a good soul.”

“Yes, sir. She was. She is.”

“Grief is a healthy emotion, and it’s healthy to embrace it. By accepting loss, we clarify our values and the meaning of our lives.”

“I wouldn’t be running away from grief, sir,” I assured him.

“Or giving yourself too much to it?”

“Not that, either.”

“That’s what I worry about,” Chief Porter told Father Llewellyn. “That’s why I don’t approve.”

“This isn’t the rest of my life,” I said. “A year maybe, and then we’ll see. I just need things simpler for a while.”

“Have you gone back to the Grille?” the priest asked.

“No. The Grille is a busy place, Father, and Tire World’s not much better. I need useful work to keep my mind occupied, but I’d like to find work where it’s...quieter.”

“Even as a lay resident, taking no instruction, you’d still have to be in harmony with the spiritual life of whatever order might have a place for you.”

“I would be, sir. I would be in harmony.”

“What sort of work would you expect to do?”

“Gardening. Painting. Minor repairs. Scrubbing floors, washing windows, general cleaning. I could cook for them, if they wanted.”

“How long have you been thinking about this, Odd?”

“Two months.”

To Chief Porter, Father Llewellyn said, “Has he talked with you about it for that long?”

“Just about,” the chief acknowledged.

“Then it’s not an impetuous decision.”

The chief shook his head. “Odd isn’t impetuous.”

“I don’t believe he’s running from his grief, either,” said Father Llewellyn. “Or to it.”

I said, “I just need to simplify. To simplify and find the quiet to think.”

To the chief, Father Llewellyn said, “As his friend who knows him better than I do, and as a man he obviously looks up to, do you have any other reason you don’t think Odd should try this?”

Chief Porter was quiet a moment. Then he said, “I don’t know what we’ll do without him.”

“No matter how much help Odd gives you, Chief, there will always be more crime.”

“That’s not what I mean,” said Wyatt Porter. “I mean...I just don’t know what we’ll do without you, son.”

SINCE STORMY’S DEATH, I had lived in her apartment. Those rooms meant less to me than her furnishings, small decorative objects, and personal items. I did not want to get rid of her things.

With Terri’s and Karla’s help, I packed Stormy’s belongings, and Ozzie offered to keep everything in a spare room at his house.

On my next-to-last night in that apartment, I sat with Elvis in the lovely light of an old lamp with a beaded shade, listening to his music from the first years of his storied career.

He loved his mother more than anything in life. In death, he wants more than anything to see her.

Months before she died—you can read this in many biographies of him—she worried that fame was going to his head, that he was losing his way.

Then she died young, before he reached the peak of his success, and after that he changed. Pierced by grief for years, he nonetheless forgot his mother’s advice, and year by year his life went further off the rails, the promise of his talent less than half fulfilled.

By the time he was forty—which biographies also report—Elvis had been tormented by the belief that he had not served his mother’s memory well and that she would have been ashamed of his drug use and his self-indulgence.

After his death at forty-two, he lingers because he fears the very thing that he most desperately desires: to see Gladys Presley. Love of this world, which was so good to him, is not what holds him here, as I once thought. He knows his mother loves him, and will take him in her arms without a word of criticism, but he burns with shame that he became the world’s biggest star—but not the man she might have hoped he would be.

In the world to come, she will be delighted to receive him, but he feels he is not worthy of her company, because he believes that she resides now in the company of saints.

I told him this theory on my next-to-last night in Stormy’s apartment.

When I had finished, his eyes blurred with tears, and he closed them for a long time. When at last he looked at me again, he reached out and took one of my hands in both of his.

Indeed, that is why he lingers. My analysis, however, is not enough to convince him that his fear of a mother-and-child reunion is without merit. Sometimes he can be a stubborn old rockabilly.

My decision to leave Pico Mundo, at least for a while, has led to the solution of another mystery related to Elvis. He haunts this town not because it has any meaning for him, but because I am here. He believes that eventually I *will* be the bridge that takes him home, and to his mother.

Consequently, he wants to come with me on the next phase of my journey. I doubt that I could prevent him from accompanying me, and I’ve no reason to reject him.

I am amused at the thought of the King of Rock ’n’ Roll haunting a monastery. The monks might be good for him, and I’m sure that he’ll be good for me.

This night, as I write, will be my last night in Pico Mundo. I will spend it in a gathering of friends.

This town, in which I have slept every night of my life, will be difficult to leave. I will miss its streets, its sounds and scents, and I will remember always the quality of desert light and shadow that lend it mystery.

Far more difficult will be leaving the company of my friends. I've nothing else in life but them. And hope.

I don't know what lies ahead for me in this world. But I know Stormy waits for me in the next, and that knowledge makes this world less dark than otherwise it would be.

In spite of everything, I've chosen life. Now, on with it.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Panamint Indians of the Shoshoni–Comanche family do not operate a casino in California. If they had owned the Panamint Resort and Spa, no catastrophe would have befallen it, and I would not have had a story.

—DK

DEAN
KOONTZ

Brother
Odd

B a n t a m B o o k s

Brother
Odd



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Note

To some folks I've known a long time and admire
because they do good work and are good people:
Peter Styles, Richard Boukes, Bill Anderson (Hello, Danielle),
Dave Gaulke, and Tom Fenner (Hello, Gabriella, Katia, and Troy).
We'll have a fine party on the Other Side,
but let's not be in a hurry.



Teach us...

To give and not to count the cost;

To fight and not to heed the wounds;

To toil and not to seek for rest...

—*St. Ignatius Loyola*

CHAPTER 1

EMBRACED BY STONE, STEEPED IN SILENCE, I SAT at the high window as the third day of the week surrendered to the fourth. The river of night rolled on, indifferent to the calendar.

I hoped to witness that magical moment when the snow began to fall in earnest. Earlier the sky had shed a few flakes, then nothing more. The pending storm would not be rushed.

The room was illuminated only by a fat candle in an amber glass on the corner desk. Each time a draft found the flame, melting light buttered the limestone walls and waves of fluid shadows oiled the corners.

Most nights, I find lamplight too bright. And when I'm writing, the only glow is the computer screen, dialed down to gray text on a navy-blue field.

Without a silvering of light, the window did not reflect my face. I had a clear view of the night beyond the panes.

Living in a monastery, even as a guest rather than as a monk, you have more opportunities than you might have elsewhere to see the world as it is, instead of through the shadow that you cast upon it.

St. Bartholomew's Abbey was surrounded by the vastness of the Sierra Nevada, on the California side of the border. The primeval forests that clothed the rising slopes were themselves cloaked in darkness.

From this third-floor window, I could see only part of the deep front yard and the blacktop lane that cleaved it. Four low lampposts

with bell-shaped caps focused light in round pale pools.

The guesthouse is in the northwest wing of the abbey. The ground floor features parlors. Private rooms occupy the higher and the highest floors.

As I watched in anticipation of the storm, a whiteness that was not snow drifted across the yard, out of darkness, into lamplight.

The abbey has one dog, a 110-pound German-shepherd mix, perhaps part Labrador retriever. He is entirely white and moves with the grace of fog. His name is Boo.

My name is Odd Thomas. My dysfunctional parents claim a mistake was made on the birth certificate, that Todd was the wanted name. Yet they have never called me Todd.

In twenty-one years, I have not considered changing to Todd. The bizarre course of my life suggests that Odd is more suited to me, whether it was conferred by my parents with intention or by fate.

Below, Boo stopped in the middle of the pavement and gazed along the lane as it dwindled and descended into darkness.

Mountains are not entirely slopes. Sometimes the rising land takes a rest. The abbey stands on a high meadow, facing north.

Judging by his pricked ears and lifted head, Boo perceived a visitor approaching. He held his tail low.

I could not discern the state of his hackles, but his tense posture suggested that they were raised.

From dusk the driveway lamps burn until dawn ascends. The monks of St. Bart's believe that night visitors, no matter how seldom they come, must be welcomed with light.

The dog stood motionless for a while, then shifted his attention toward the lawn to the right of the blacktop. His head lowered. His ears flattened against his skull.

For a moment, I could not see the cause of Boo's alarm. Then... into view came a shape as elusive as a night shadow floating across black water. The figure passed near enough to one of the lampposts to be briefly revealed.

Even in daylight, this was a visitor of whom only the dog and I could have been aware.

I see dead people, spirits of the departed who, each for his own reason, will not move on from this world. Some are drawn to me for justice, if they were murdered, or for comfort, or for companionship; others seek me out for motives that I cannot always understand.

This complicates my life.

I am not asking for your sympathy. We all have our problems, and yours seem as important to you as mine seem to me.

Perhaps you have a ninety-minute commute every morning, on freeways clogged with traffic, your progress hampered by impatient and incompetent motorists, some of them angry specimens with middle fingers muscular from frequent use. Imagine, however, how much more stressful your morning might be if in the passenger seat was a young man with a ghastly ax wound in his head and if in the backseat an elderly woman, strangled by her husband, sat pop-eyed and purple-faced.

The dead don't talk. I don't know why. And an ax-chopped spirit will not bleed on your upholstery.

Nevertheless, an entourage of the recently dead is disconcerting and generally not conducive to an upbeat mood.

The visitor on the lawn was not an ordinary ghost, maybe not a ghost at all. In addition to the lingering spirits of the dead, I see one other kind of supernatural entity. I call them *bodachs*.

They are ink-black, fluid in shape, with no more substance than shadows. Soundless, as big as an average man, they frequently slink like cats, low to the ground.

The one on the abbey lawn moved upright: black and featureless, yet suggestive of something half man, half wolf. Sleek, sinuous, and sinister.

The grass was not disturbed by its passage. Had it been crossing water, it would not have left a single ripple in its wake.

In the folklore of the British Isles, a bodach is a vile beast that slithers down chimneys at night and carries off children who misbehave. Rather like Inland Revenue agents.

What I see are neither bodachs nor tax collectors. They carry away neither misbehaving children nor adult miscreants. But I have seen them enter houses by chimneys—by keyholes, chinks in

window frames, as protean as smoke—and I have no better name for them.

Their infrequent appearance is always reason for alarm. These creatures seem to be spiritual vampires with knowledge of the future. They are drawn to places where violence or fiery catastrophe is destined to erupt, as if they feed on human suffering.

Although he was a brave dog, with good reason to be brave, Boo shrank from the passing apparition. His black lips peeled back from his white fangs.

The phantom paused as if to taunt the dog. Bodachs seem to know that some animals can see them.

I don't think they know that I can see them, too. If they did know, I believe that they would show me less mercy than mad mullahs show their victims when in a mood to behead and dismember.

At the sight of this one, my first impulse was to shrink from the window and seek communion with the dust bunnies under my bed. My second impulse was to pee.

Resisting both cowardice and the call of the bladder, I raced from my quarters into the hallway. The third floor of the guesthouse offers two small suites. The other currently had no occupant.

On the second floor, the glowering Russian was no doubt scowling in his sleep. The solid construction of the abbey would not translate my footfalls into his dreams.

The guesthouse has an enclosed spiral staircase, stone walls encircling granite steps. The treads alternate between black and white, making me think of harlequins and piano keys, and of a treacly old song by Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder.

Although stone stairs are unforgiving and the black-and-white pattern can be disorienting, I plunged toward the ground floor, risking damage to the granite if I fell and struck it with my head.

Sixteen months ago, I lost what was most precious to me and found my world in ruins; nevertheless, I am not usually reckless. I have less to live for than I once did, but my life still has purpose, and I struggle to find meaning in the days.

Leaving the stairs in the condition that I found them, I hurried across the main parlor, where only a night lamp with a beaded

shade relieved the gloom. I pushed through a heavy oak door with a stained-glass window, and saw my breath plume before me in the winter night.

The guesthouse cloister surrounds a courtyard with a reflecting pool and a white marble statue of St. Bartholomew. He is arguably the least known of the twelve apostles.

Here depicted, a solemn St. Bartholomew stands with his right hand over his heart, left arm extended. In his upturned palm is what appears to be a pumpkin but might be a related variety of squash.

The symbolic meaning of the squash eludes me.

At this time of year, the pool was drained, and no scent of wet limestone rose from it, as in warmer days. I detected, instead, the faintest smell of ozone, as after lightning in a spring rain, and wondered about it, but kept moving.

I followed the colonnade to the door of the guesthouse receiving room, went inside, crossed that shadowy chamber, and returned to the December night through the front door of the abbey.

Our white shepherd mix, Boo, standing on the driveway, as I had last seen him from my third-floor window, turned his head to look at me as I descended the broad front steps. His stare was clear and blue, with none of the eerie eyeshine common to animals at night.

Without benefit of stars or moon, most of the expansive yard receded into murk. If a bodach lurked out there, I could not see it.

“Boo, where’s it gone?” I whispered.

He didn’t answer. My life is strange but not so strange that it includes talking canines.

With wary purpose, however, the dog moved off the driveway, onto the yard. He headed east, past the formidable abbey, which appears almost to have been carved from a single great mass of rock, so tight are the mortar joints between its stones.

No wind ruffled the night, and darkness hung with folded wings.

Seared brown by winter, the trampled grass crunched underfoot. Boo moved with far greater stealth than I could manage.

Feeling watched, I looked up at the windows, but I didn’t see anyone, no light other than the faint flicker of the candle in my quarters, no pale face peering through a dark pane.

I had rushed out of the guest wing wearing blue jeans and a T-shirt. December stropped its teeth on my bare arms.

We proceeded eastward alongside the church, which is part of the abbey, not a separate building.

A sanctuary lamp glows perpetually, but it isn't sufficient to fire the colorful stained glass. Through window after window, that dim light seemed to watch us as though it were the single sullen eye of something in a bloody mood.

Having led me to the northeast corner of the building, Boo turned south, past the back of the church. We continued to the wing of the abbey that, on the first floor, contains the novitiate.

Not yet having taken their vows, the novices slept here. Of the five who were currently taking instruction, I liked and trusted four.

Suddenly Boo abandoned his cautious pace. He ran due east, away from the abbey, and I pursued him.

As the yard relented to the untamed meadow, grass lashed my knees. Soon the first heavy snow would compact these tall dry blades.

For a few hundred feet, the land sloped gently before leveling off, whereupon the knee-high grass became a mown lawn again. Before us in the gloom rose St. Bartholomew's School.

In part the word *school* is a euphemism. These students are unwanted elsewhere, and the school is also their home, perhaps the only one that some of them will ever have.

This is the original abbey, internally remodeled but still an impressive pile of stone. The structure also houses the convent in which reside the nuns who teach the students and care for them.

Behind the former abbey, the forest bristled against the storm-ready sky, black boughs sheltering blind pathways that led far into the lonely dark.

Evidently tracking the bodach, the dog went up the broad steps to the front door of the school, and through.

Few doors in the abbey are ever locked. But for the protection of the students, the school is routinely secured.

Only the abbot, the mother superior, and I possess a universal key that allows admittance everywhere. No guest before me has been

entrusted with such access.

I take no pride in their trust. It is a burden. In my pocket, the simple key sometimes feels like an iron fate drawn to a lodestone deep in the earth.

The key allows me quickly to seek Brother Constantine, the dead monk, when he manifests with a ringing of bells in one of the towers or with some other kind of cacophony elsewhere.

In Pico Mundo, the desert town in which I had lived for most of my time on earth, the spirits of many men and women linger. But here we have just Brother Constantine, who is no less disturbing than all of Pico Mundo's dead combined, one ghost but one too many.

With a bodach on the prowl, Brother Constantine was the least of my worries.

Shivering, I used my key, and hinges squeaked, and I followed the dog into the school.

Two night-lights staved off total gloom in the reception lounge. Multiple arrangements of sofas and armchairs suggested a hotel lobby.

I hurried past the unmanned information desk and went through a swinging door into a corridor lighted by an emergency lamp and red EXIT signs.

On this ground floor were the classrooms, the rehabilitation clinic, the infirmary, the kitchen, and the communal dining room. Those sisters with a culinary gift were not yet preparing breakfast. Silence ruled these spaces, as it would for hours yet.

I climbed the south stairs and found Boo waiting for me on the second-floor landing. He remained in a solemn mood. His tail did not wag, and he did not grin in greeting.

Two long and two short hallways formed a rectangle, serving the student quarters. The residents roomed in pairs.

At the southeast and northwest junctions of the corridors were nurses' stations, both of which I could see when I came out of the stairs in the southwest corner of the building.

At the northwest station, a nun sat at the counter, reading. From this distance, I could not identify her.

Besides, her face was half concealed by a wimple. These are not modern nuns who dress like meter maids. These sisters wear old-style habits that can make them seem as formidable as warriors in armor.

The southeast station was deserted. The nun on duty must have been making her rounds or tending to one of her charges.

When Boo padded away to the right, heading southeast, I followed without calling to the reading nun. By the time that I had taken three steps, she was out of my line of sight.

Many of the sisters have nursing degrees, but they strive to make the second floor feel more like a cozy dormitory than like a hospital. With Christmas twenty days away, the halls were hung with garlands of fake evergreen boughs and festooned with genuine tinsel.

In respect of the sleeping students, the lights had been dimmed. The tinsel glimmered only here and there, and mostly darkled into tremulous shadows.

The doors of some student rooms were closed, others ajar. They featured not just numbers but also names.

Halfway between the stairwell and the nurses' station, Boo paused at Room 32, where the door was not fully closed. On block-lettered plaques were the names ANNAMARIE and JUSTINE.

This time I was close enough to Boo to see that indeed his hackles were raised.

The dog passed inside, but propriety made me hesitate. I ought to have asked a nun to accompany me into these students' quarters.

But I wanted to avoid having to explain bodachs to her. More important, I didn't want to risk being overheard by one of those malevolent spirits as I was talking about them.

Officially, only one person at the abbey and one at the convent know about my gift—if in fact it is a gift rather than a curse. Sister Angela, the mother superior, shares my secret, as does Father Bernard, the abbot.

Courtesy had required that they fully understand the troubled young man whom they would be welcoming as a long-term guest.

To assure Sister Angela and Abbot Bernard that I was neither a fraud nor a fool, Wyatt Porter, the chief of police in Pico Mundo, my hometown, shared with them the details of some murder cases with which I had assisted him.

Likewise, Father Sean Llewellyn vouched for me. He is the Catholic priest in Pico Mundo.

Father Llewellyn is also the uncle of Stormy Llewellyn, whom I had loved and lost. Whom I will forever cherish.

During the seven months I had lived in this mountain retreat, I'd shared the truth of my life with one other, Brother Knuckles, a monk. His real name is Salvatore, but we call him Knuckles more often than not.

Brother Knuckles would not have hesitated on the threshold of Room 32. He is a monk of action. In an instant he would have decided that the threat posed by the bodach trumped propriety. He would have rushed through the door as boldly as did the dog, although with less grace and with a lot more noise.

I pushed the door open wider, and went inside.

In the two hospital beds lay Annamarie, closest to the door, and Justine. Both were asleep.

On the wall behind each girl hung a lamp controlled by a switch at the end of a cord looped around the bed rail. It could provide various intensities of light.

Annamarie, who was ten years old but small for her age, had set her lamp low, as a night-light. She feared the dark.

Her wheelchair stood beside the bed. From one of the hand grips at the back of the chair hung a quilted, insulated jacket. From the other hand grip hung a woolen cap. On winter nights, she insisted that these garments be close at hand.

The girl slept with the top sheet clenched in her frail hands, as if ready to throw off the bedclothes. Her face was taut with an expression of concerned anticipation, less than anxiety, more than mere disquiet.

Although she slept soundly, she appeared to be prepared to flee at the slightest provocation.

One day each week, of her own accord, with eyes closed tight, Annamarie practiced piloting her battery-powered wheelchair to each of two elevators. One lay in the east wing, the other in the west.

In spite of her limitations and her suffering, she was a happy child. These preparations for flight were out of character.

Although she would not talk about it, she seemed to sense that a night of terror was coming, a hostile darkness through which she would need to find her way. She might be prescient.

The bodach, first glimpsed from my high window, had come here, but not alone. Three of them, silent wolflike shadows, were gathered around the second bed, in which Justine slept.

A single bodach signals impending violence that may be either near and probable or remote and less certain. If they appear in twos and threes, the danger is more immediate.

In my experience, when they appear in packs, the pending danger has become imminent peril, and the deaths of many people are days or hours away. Although the sight of three of them chilled me, I was grateful that they didn't number thirty.

Trembling with evident excitement, the bodachs bent over Justine while she slept, as if studying her intently. As if feeding on her.

CHAPTER 2

THE LAMP ABOVE THE SECOND BED HAD BEEN turned low, but Justine had not adjusted it herself. A nun had selected the dimmest setting, hoping that it might please the girl.

Justine did little for herself and asked for nothing. She was partially paralyzed and could not speak.

When Justine had been four years old, her father had strangled her mother to death. They say that after she had died, he put a rose between her teeth—but with the long thorny stem down her throat.

He drowned little Justine in the bathtub, or thought he did. He left her for dead, but she survived with brain damage from prolonged lack of oxygen.

For weeks, she lingered in a coma, though that was years ago. These days she slept and woke, but when awake, her capacity for engagement with her caregivers fluctuated.

Photographs of Justine at four reveal a child of exceptional beauty. In those snapshots, she looks impish and full of delight.

Eight years after the tub, at twelve, she was more beautiful than ever. Brain damage had not resulted in facial paralysis or distorted expressions. Curiously, a life spent largely indoors had not left her pale and drawn. Her face had color, and not a blemish.

Her beauty was chaste, like that of a Botticelli madonna, and ethereal. For everyone who knew Justine, her beauty stirred neither envy nor desire, but inspired a surprising reverence and, inexplicably, something like hope.

I suspect that the three menacing figures, hunched over her with keen interest, were not drawn by her beauty. Her enduring innocence attracted them, as did their expectation—their certain knowledge?—that she would soon be dead by violence and, at last, ugly.

These purposeful shadows, as black as scraps of starless night sky, have no eyes, yet I could sense them leering; no mouths, though I could almost hear the greedy sounds of them feasting on the promise of this girl's death.

I once saw them gathered at a nursing home in the hours before an earthquake leveled it. At a service station prior to an explosion and tragic fire. Following a teenager named Gary Tolliver in the days before he tortured and murdered his entire family.

A single death does not draw them, or two deaths, or even three. They prefer operatic violence, and for them the performance is not over when the fat lady sings, but only when she is torn to pieces.

They seem incapable of affecting our world, as though they are not fully present in this place and this time, but are in some way *virtual* presences. They are travelers, observers, aficionados of our pain.

Yet I fear them, and not solely because their presence signals oncoming horror. While they seem unable to affect this world in any significant way, I suspect that I am an exception to the rules that limit them, that I am vulnerable to them, as vulnerable as an ant in the shadow of a descending shoe.

Seeming whiter than usual in the company of inky bodachs, Boo did not growl, but watched these spirits with suspicion and disgust.

I pretended to have come here to assure myself that the thermostat had been properly set, to raise the pleated shades and confirm that the window had been firmly closed against all drafts, to dredge some wax from my right ear and to pry a shred of lettuce from between two teeth, though not with the same finger.

The bodachs ignored me—or pretended to ignore me.

Sleeping Justine had their complete attention. Their hands or paws hovered a few inches over the girl, and their fingers or talons described circles in the air above her, as if they were novelty-act

musicians playing an instrument composed of drinking glasses, rubbing eerie music from the wet crystal rims.

Perhaps, like an insistent rhythm, her innocence excited them. Perhaps her humble circumstances, her lamblike grace, her complete vulnerability were the movements of a symphony to them.

I can only theorize about bodachs. I know nothing for certain about their nature or about their origins.

This is true not only of bodachs. The file labeled THINGS ABOUT WHICH ODD THOMAS KNOWS NOTHING is no less immense than the universe.

The only thing I know for sure is how much I do not know. Maybe there is wisdom in that recognition. Unfortunately, I have found no comfort in it.

Having been bent over Justine, the three bodachs abruptly stood upright and, as one, turned their wolfish heads toward the door, as if in response to a summoning trumpet that I could not hear.

Evidently Boo could not hear it, either, for his ears did not prick up. His attention remained on the dark spirits.

Like shadows chased by sudden light, the bodachs whirled from the bed, swooped to the door, and vanished into the hallway.

Inclined to follow them, I hesitated when I discovered Justine staring at me. Her blue eyes were limpid pools: so clear, seemingly without mystery, yet bottomless.

Sometimes you can be sure she sees you. Other times, like this, you sense that, to her, you are as transparent as glass, that she can look *through* everything in this world.

I said to her, "Don't be afraid," which was twice presumptuous. First, I didn't know that she was frightened or that she was even capable of fear. Second, my words implied a guarantee of protection that, in the coming crisis, I might not be able to fulfill.

Too wise and humble to play the hero, Boo had left the room.

As I headed toward the door, Annamarie, in the first bed, murmured, "Odd."

Her eyes remained closed. Knots of bedsheet were still clutched in her hands. She breathed shallowly, rhythmically.

As I paused at the foot of her bed, the girl spoke again, more clearly than before: "Odd."

Annamarie had been born with myelocoele spina bifida. Her hips were dislocated, her legs deformed. Her head on the pillow seemed almost as large as the shrunken body under the blanket.

She appeared to be asleep, but I whispered, "What is it, sweetie?"
"Odd one," she said.

Her mental retardation was not severe and did not reveal itself in her voice, which wasn't thick or slurred, but was high and sweet and charming.

"Odd one."

A chill prickled through me equal to the sharpest bite of the winter night outside.

Something like intuition drew my attention to Justine in the second bed. Her head had turned to follow me. For the first time, her eyes fixed on mine.

Justine's mouth moved, but she did not produce even one of the wordless sounds of which, in her deeper retardation, she was capable.

While Justine strove unsuccessfully to speak, Annamarie spoke again: "Odd one."

The pleated shades hung slack over the windows. The plush-toy kittens on the shelves near Justine's bed sat immobile, without one wink of eye or twitch of whisker.

On Annamarie's side of the room, the children's books on her shelves were neatly ordered. A china rabbit with flexible furry ears, dressed in Edwardian clothes, stood sentinel on her nightstand.

All was still, yet I sensed an energy barely contained. I would not have been surprised if every inanimate object in the room had come to life: levitating, spinning, ricocheting wall to wall.

Stillness reigned, however, and Justine tried to speak again, and Annamarie said, "Loop," in her sweet piping voice.

Leaving the sleeping girl, I moved to the foot of Justine's bed.

For fear that my voice would shatter the spell, I did not speak.

Wondering if the brain-damaged girl had made room for a visitor, I wished the bottomless blue eyes would polarize into a particular

pair of Egyptian-black eyes with which I was familiar.

Some days I feel as if I have always been twenty-one, but the truth is that I was once young.

In those days, when death was a thing that happened to other people, my girl, Bronwen Llewellyn, who preferred to be called Stormy, would sometimes say, *Loop me in, odd one*. She meant that she wanted me to share the events of my day with her, or my thoughts, or my fears and worries.

During the sixteen months since Stormy had gone to ashes in this world and to service in another, no one had spoken those words to me.

Justine moved her mouth without producing sound, and in the adjacent bed, Annamarie said in her sleep, "Loop me in."

Room 32 seemed airless. Following those three words, I stood in a silence as profound as that in a vacuum. I could not breathe.

Only a moment ago, I had wished these blue eyes would polarize into the black of Stormy's eyes, that the suspicion of a visitation would be confirmed. Now the prospect terrified me.

When we hope, we usually hope for the wrong thing.

We yearn for tomorrow and the progress that it represents. But yesterday was once tomorrow, and where was the progress in it?

Or we yearn for yesterday, for what was or what might have been. But as we are yearning, the present is becoming the past, so the past is nothing but our yearning for second chances.

"Loop me in," Annamarie repeated.

As long as I remain subject to the river of time, which will be as long as I may live, there is no way back to Stormy, to anything. The only way back is forward, downstream. The way up is the way down, and the way back is the way forward.

"Loop me in, odd one."

My hope here, in Room 32, should not be to speak with Stormy now, but only at the end of my journey, when time had no more power over me, when an eternal present robbed the past of all appeal.

Before I might see in those blue vacancies the Egyptian black for which I hoped, I looked away, stared at my hands, which clutched

the footboard of the bed.

Stormy's spirit does not linger in this world, as some do. She moved on, as she should have done.

The intense undying love of the living can be a magnet to the dead. Enticing her back would be an unspeakable disservice to her. And although renewed contact might at first relieve my loneliness, ultimately there is only misery in hoping for the wrong thing.

I stared at my hands.

Annamarie fell silent in her sleep.

The plush-toy kittens and the china rabbit remained inanimate, thus avoiding either a demonic or a Disney moment.

In a while, my heart beat at a normal rate once more.

Justine's eyes were closed. Her lashes glistened, and her cheeks were damp. From the line of her jaw were suspended two tears, which quivered and then fell onto the sheet.

In search of Boo and bodachs, I left the room.

CHAPTER 3

INTO THE OLD ABBEY, WHICH WAS NOW ST. Bartholomew's School, had been transplanted modern mechanical systems that could be monitored from a computer station in the basement.

The spartan computer room had a desk, two chairs, and an unused file cabinet. Actually, the bottom drawer of the cabinet was packed with over a thousand empty Kit Kat wrappers.

Brother Timothy, who was responsible for the mechanical systems of both the abbey and the school, had a Kit Kat jones. Evidently, he felt that his candy craving was uncomfortably close to the sin of gluttony, because he seemed to be hiding the evidence.

Only Brother Timothy and visiting service personnel had reason to be in this room frequently. He felt his secret was safe here.

All the monks knew about it. Many of them, with a wink and a grin, had urged me to look in the bottom drawer of the file cabinet.

No one could have known whether Brother Timothy had confessed gluttony to the prior, Father Reinhart. But the existence of his collection of wrappers suggested that he wanted to be caught.

His brothers would be happy to discover the evidence, although not until the trove of wrappers grew even larger, and not until the right moment, the moment that would ensure the greatest embarrassment for Timothy.

Although Brother Timothy was loved by everyone, unfortunately for him, he was also known for his bright blush, which made a lantern of his face.

Brother Roland had suggested that God would have given a man such a glorious physiological response to embarrassment only if He wanted it to be displayed often and to be widely enjoyed.

Posted on a wall of this basement room, referred to by the brothers as the Kit Kat Katacombs, hung a framed needlepoint sampler: THE DEVIL IS IN THE DIGITAL DATA.

Using this computer, I could review the historical performance record as well as the current status of the heating-and-cooling system, the lighting system, the fire-control system, and the emergency-power generators.

On the second floor, the three bodachs still roamed from room to room, previewing victims to enhance the pleasure they would get from carnage when it came. I could learn no more from watching them.

Fear of fire had driven me to the basement. On the screen, I studied display after display relating to the fire-control system.

Every room featured at least one sprinkler head embedded in the ceiling. Every hallway had numerous sprinklers, spaced fifteen feet on center.

According to the monitoring program, all the sprinklers were in order and all the water lines were maintaining the required pressure. The smoke detectors and alarm boxes were functional and periodically self-testing.

I backed out of the fire-control system and called up the schema of the heating-and-cooling systems. I was particularly interested in the boilers, of which the school had two.

Because no natural-gas service extended to the remote Sierra, both boilers were fired by propane. A large pressurized storage tank lay buried at a distance from both the school and the abbey.

According to the monitors, the propane tank contained 84 percent of maximum capacity. The flow rate appeared to be normal. All of the valves were functioning. The ratio of BTUs produced to propane consumed indicated no leaks in the system. Both of the independent emergency-shutdown switches were operative.

Throughout the schema, every point of potential mechanical failure was signified by a small green light. Not a single red

indicator marred the screen.

Whatever disaster might be coming, fire would probably not be a part of it.

I looked at the needlepoint sampler framed on the wall above the computer: THE DEVIL IS IN THE DIGITAL DATA.

Once, when I was fifteen, some seriously bad guys in porkpie hats handcuffed me, chained my ankles together, locked me in the trunk of an old Buick, picked up the Buick with a crane, dropped the car into a hydraulic compressing machine of the kind that turns any once-proud vehicle into a three-foot cube of bad modern art, and punched the CRUSH ODD THOMAS button.

Relax. It's not my intention to bore you with an old war story. I raise the issue of the Buick only to illustrate the fact that my supernatural gifts do not include reliable foresight.

Those bad guys had the polished-ice eyes of gleeful socio-paths, facial scars that suggested they were at the very least adventurous, and a way of walking that indicated either painful testicular tumors or multiple concealed weapons. Yet I did not recognize that they were a threat until they knocked me flat to the ground with a ten-pound bratwurst and began to kick the crap out of me.

I had been distracted by two other guys who were wearing black boots, black pants, black shirts, black capes, and peculiar black hats. Later, I learned they were two schoolteachers who had each independently decided to attend a costume party dressed as Zorro.

In retrospect, by the time I was locked in the trunk of the Buick with the two dead rhesus monkeys and the bratwurst, I realized that I should have recognized the real troublemakers the minute I had seen the porkpie hats. How could anyone in his right mind attribute good intentions to three guys in identical porkpie hats?

In my defense, consider that I was just fifteen at the time, not a fraction as experienced as I am these days, and that I have never claimed to be clairvoyant.

Maybe my fear of fire was, in this case, like my suspicion of the Zorro impersonators: misguided.

Although a survey of selected mechanical systems had given me no reason to believe that impending flames had drawn the bodachs

to St. Bart's School, I remained concerned that fire was a danger. No other threat seemed to pose such a challenge to a large community of the mentally and physically disabled.

Earthquakes were not as common or as powerful in the mountains of California as in the valleys and the flatlands. Besides, the new abbey had been built to the standards of a fortress, and the old one had been reconstructed with such diligence that it should be able to ride out violent and extended temblors.

This high in the Sierra, bedrock lay close underfoot; in some places, great granite bones breached the surface. Our two buildings were anchored in bedrock.

Here we have no tornadoes, no hurricanes, no active volcanoes, no killer bees.

We *do* have something more dangerous than all those things. We have people.

The monks in the abbey and the nuns in the convent seemed to be unlikely villains. Evil can disguise itself in piety and charity, but I had difficulty picturing any of the brothers or sisters running amok with a chain saw or a machine gun.

Even Brother Timothy, on a dangerous sugar high and crazed by Kit Kat guilt, didn't scare me.

The glowering Russian staying on the second floor of the guesthouse was a more deserving object of suspicion. He did not wear a porkpie hat, but he had a dour demeanor and secretive ways.

My months of peace and contemplation were at an end.

The demands of my gift, the silent but insistent pleas of the lingering dead, the terrible losses that I had not always been able to prevent: These things had driven me to the seclusion of St. Bartholomew's Abbey. I needed to simplify my life.

I had not come to this high redoubt forever. I had only asked God for a time-out, which had been granted, but now the clock was ticking again.

When I backed out of the heating-and-cooling-system schema, the computer monitor went to black with a simple white menu. In that more reflective screen, I saw movement behind me.

For seven months, the abbey had been a still point in the river, where I turned in a lazy gyre, always in sight of the same familiar shore, but now the true rhythm of the river asserted itself. Sullen, untamed, and intractable, it washed away my sense of peace and washed me toward my destiny once more.

Expecting a hard blow or the thrust of something sharp, I spun the office chair around, toward the source of the reflection in the computer screen.

CHAPTER 4

MY SPINE HAD GONE TO ICE AND MY MOUTH to dust in fear of a nun.

Batman would have sneered at me, and Odysseus would have cut me no slack, but I would have told them that I had never claimed to be a hero. At heart, I am only a fry cook, currently unemployed.

In my defense, I must note that the worthy who had entered the computer room was not just any nun, but Sister Angela, whom the others call Mother Superior. She has the sweet face of a beloved grandmother, yes, but the steely determination of the Terminator.

Of course I mean the *good* Terminator from the second movie in the series.

Although Benedictine sisters usually wear gray habits or black, these nuns wear white because they are a twice-reformed order of a previously reformed order of post-reform Benedictines, although they would not want to be thought of as being aligned with either Trappist or Cistercian principles.

You don't need to know what that means. God Himself is still trying to figure it out.

The essence of all this reformation is that these sisters are more orthodox than those modern nuns who seem to consider themselves social workers who don't date. They pray in Latin, never eat meat on Friday, and with a withering stare would silence the voice and guitar of any folksinger who dared to offer a socially relevant tune during Mass.

Sister Angela says she and her sisters hark back to a time in the first third of the previous century when the Church was confident of its timelessness and when “the bishops weren’t crazy.” Although she wasn’t born until 1945 and never knew the era she admires, she says that she would prefer to live in the ’30s than in the age of the Internet and shock jocks broadcasting via satellite.

I have some sympathy for her position. In those days, there were no nuclear weapons, either, no organized terrorists eager to blow up women and children, and you could buy Black Jack chewing gum anywhere, and for no more than a nickel a pack.

This bit of gum trivia comes from a novel. I have learned a great deal from novels. Some of it is even true.

Settling into the second chair, Sister Angela said, “Another restless night, Odd Thomas?”

From previous conversations, she knew that I don’t sleep as well these days as I once did. Sleep is a kind of peace, and I have not yet earned peace.

“I couldn’t go to bed until the snow began to fall,” I told her. “I wanted to see the world turn white.”

“The blizzard still hasn’t broken. But a basement room is a most peculiar place to stand watch for it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She has a certain lovely smile that she can sustain for a long time in patient expectancy. If she held a sword over your head, it would not be as effective an instrument of interrogation as that forbearing smile.

After a silence that was a test of wills, I said, “Ma’am, you look as though you think I’m hiding something.”

“Are you hiding something, Oddie?”

“No, ma’am.” I indicated the computer. “I was just checking on the school’s mechanical systems.”

“I see. Then you’re covering for Brother Timothy? Has he been committed to a clinic for Kit Kat addiction?”

“I just like to learn new things around here...to make myself useful,” I said.

“Your breakfast pancakes every weekend are a greater grace than any guest of the abbey has ever brought to us.”

“Nobody’s cakes are fluffier than mine.”

Her eyes are the same merry blue as the periwinkles on the Royal Doulton china that my mother owned, pieces of which Mom, from time to time, threw at the walls or at me. “You must have had quite a loyal following at the diner where you worked.”

“I was a star with a spatula.”

She smiled at me. Smiled and waited.

“I’ll make hash browns this Sunday. You’ve never tasted my hash browns.”

Smiling, she fingered the beaded chain on her pectoral cross.

I said, “The thing is, I had a bad dream about an exploding boiler.”

“An exploding-boiler dream?”

“That’s right.”

“A real nightmare, was it?”

“It left me very anxious.”

“Was it one of *our* boilers exploding?”

“It might have been. In the dream, the place wasn’t clear. You know how dreams are.”

A twinkle brightened her periwinkle eyes. “In this dream, did you see nuns on fire, screaming through a snowy night?”

“No, ma’am. Good heavens, no. Just the boiler exploding.”

“Did you see disabled children flinging themselves from windows full of flame?”

I tried silence and a smile of my own.

She said, “Are your nightmares always so thinly plotted, Oddie?”

“Not always, ma’am.”

She said, “Now and then I dream of Frankenstein because of a movie I saw when I was a little girl. In *my* dream, there’s an ancient windmill hung with ragged rotting sails creaking ’round in a storm. A ferocity of rain, sky-splitting bolts of lightning, leaping shadows, stairwells of cold stone, hidden doors in bookcases, candlelit secret passageways, bizarre machines with gold-plated gyroscopes, crackling arcs of electricity, a demented hunchback with lantern

eyes, always the lumbering monster close behind me, and a scientist in a white lab coat carrying his own severed head.”

Finished, she smiled at me.

“Just an exploding boiler,” I said.

“God has many reasons to love you, Oddie, but for certain He loves you because you’re such an inexperienced and incompetent liar.”

“I’ve told some whoppers in my time,” I assured her.

“The claim that you have told whoppers is the biggest whopper you have told.”

“At nun school, you must’ve been president of the debating team.”

“Fess up, young man. You didn’t dream about an exploding boiler. Something else has you worried.”

I shrugged.

“You were checking on the children in their rooms.”

She knew that I saw the lingering dead. But I had not told her or Abbot Bernard about bodachs.

Because these bloodthirsty spirits are drawn by events with high body counts, I hadn’t expected to encounter them in a place as remote as this. Towns and cities are their natural hunting grounds.

Besides, those who accept my assertion that I see the lingering dead are less likely to believe me if too soon in our acquaintance I begin to talk, as well, about sinuous shadowy demons that delight in scenes of death and destruction.

A man who has one pet monkey might be viewed as charmingly eccentric. But a man who has made his home into a monkey house, with scores of chattering chimpanzees capering through the rooms, will have lost credibility with the mental-health authorities.

I decided to unburden myself, however, because Sister Angela is a good listener and has a reliable ear for insincerity. Two reliable ears. Perhaps the wimple around her face serves as a sound-focusing device that brings to her greater nuances in other people’s speech than those of us without wimples are able to hear.

I’m not saying that nuns have the technical expertise of Q, the genius inventor who supplies James Bond with way-cool gadgets in

the movies. It's a theory I won't dismiss out of hand, but I can't prove anything.

Trusting in her goodwill and in the crap-detecting capability made possible by her wimple, I told her about the bodachs.

She listened intently, her face impassive, giving no indication whether or not she thought I was psychotic.

With the power of her personality, Sister Angela can compel you to meet her eyes. Perhaps a few strong-willed people are able to look away from her stare after she has locked on to their eyes, but I'm not one of them. By the time I told her all about bodachs, I felt pickled in periwinkle.

When I finished, she studied me in silence, her expression unreadable, and just when I thought she had decided to pray for my sanity, she accepted the truth of everything I'd told her by saying simply, "What must be done?"

"I don't know."

"That's a most unsatisfactory answer."

"Most," I agreed. "The thing is, the bodachs showed up only half an hour ago. I haven't observed them long enough to be able to guess what's drawn them here."

Cowled by voluminous sleeves, her hands closed into pink, white-knuckled fists. "Something's going to happen to the children."

"Not necessarily all the children. Maybe some of them. And maybe not just to the children."

"How much time do we have until...whatever?"

"Usually they show up a day or two ahead of the event. To savor the sight of those who are..." I was reluctant to say more.

Sister Angela finished my sentence: "...soon to die."

"If there's a killer involved, a human agent instead of, say, an exploding propane-fired boiler, they're sometimes as fascinated with him as with the potential victims."

"We have no murderers here," said Sister Angela.

"What do we really know about Rodion Romanovich?"

"The Russian gentleman in the abbey guesthouse?"

"He glowers," I said.

"At times, so do I."

“Yes, ma’am, but it’s a concerned sort of glower, and you’re a nun.”

“And he’s a spiritual pilgrim.”

“We have proof you’re a nun, but we only have his word about what he is.”

“Have you seen bodachs following him around?”

“Not yet.”

Sister Angela frowned, short of a glower, and said, “He’s been kind to us here at the school.”

“I’m not accusing Mr. Romanovich of anything. I’m just curious about him.”

“After Lauds, I’ll speak to Abbot Bernard about the need for vigilance in general.”

Lauds is morning prayer, the second of seven periods in the daily Divine Office that the monks observe.

At St. Bartholomew’s Abbey, Lauds immediately follows Matins—the singing of psalms and readings from the saints—which begins at 5:45 in the morning. It concludes no later than 6:30.

I switched off the computer and got to my feet. “I’m going to look around some more.”

In a billow of white habit, Sister Angela rose from her chair. “If tomorrow is to be a day of crisis, I’d better get some sleep. But in an emergency, don’t hesitate to call me on my cell number at any hour.”

I smiled and shook my head.

“What is it?” she asked.

“The world turns and the world changes. Nuns with cell phones.”

“An easy thing to get your mind around,” she said. “Easier than factoring into your philosophy a fry cook who sees dead people.”

“True. I guess the equivalent of me would actually be like in that old TV show—a flying nun.”

“I don’t allow flying nuns in my convent,” she said. “They tend to be frivolous, and during night flight, they’re prone to crashing through windows.”

CHAPTER 5

WHEN I RETURNED FROM THE BASEMENT computer room, no bodachs swarmed the corridors of the second floor. Perhaps they were gathered over the beds of other children, but I didn't think so. The place felt clean of them.

They might have been on the third floor, where nuns slept unaware. The sisters, too, might be destined to die in an explosion.

I couldn't go uninvited onto the third floor, except in an emergency. Instead I went out of the school and into the night once more.

The meadow and the surrounding trees and the abbey upslope still waited to be white.

The bellied sky, the storm unborn, could not be seen, for the mountain was nearly as dark as the heavens and reflected nothing on the undersides of the clouds.

Boo had abandoned me. Although he likes my company, I am not his master. He has no master here. He is an independent agent and pursues his own agenda.

Not sure how to proceed or where to seek another clue of what had drawn the bodachs, I crossed the front yard of the school, moving toward the abbey.

The temperature of blood and bone had fallen with the arrival of the bodachs; but malevolent spirits and December air, together, could not explain the cold that curled through me.

The true source of the chill might have been an understanding that our only choice is pyre or pyre, that we live and breathe to be consumed by fire or fire, not just now and at St. Bartholomew's, but always and anywhere. Consumed or purified by fire.

The earth rumbled, and the ground shivered underfoot, and the tall grass trembled though no breeze had yet arisen.

Although this was a subtle sound, a gentle movement, that most likely had not awakened even one monk, instinct said *earthquake*. I suspected, however, that Brother John might be responsible for the shuddering earth.

From the meadow rose the scent of ozone. I had detected the same scent earlier, in the guesthouse cloister, passing the statue of St. Bartholomew offering a pumpkin.

When after half a minute the earth stopped rumbling, I realized that the primary potential for fire and cataclysm might not be the propane tank and the boilers that heated our buildings. Brother John, at work in his subterranean retreat, exploring the very structure of reality, required serious consideration.

I hurried to the abbey, past the quarters of the novitiates, and south past the abbot's office. Abbot Bernard's personal quarters were above the office, on the second floor.

On the third floor, his small chapel provided him with a place for private prayer. Faint lambent light shivered along the beveled edges of those cold windows.

At 12:35 in the morning, the abbot was more likely to be snoring than praying. The trembling paleness that traced the cut lines in the glass must have issued from a devotional lamp, a single flickering candle.

I rounded the southeast corner of the abbey and headed west, past the last rooms of the novitiate, past the chapter room and the kitchen. Before the refectory, I came to a set of stone stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, a single bulb revealed a bronze door. A cast bronze panel above this entrance bore the Latin words LIBERA NOS A MALO.

Deliver us from evil.

My universal key unlocked the heavy bolt. Pivoting silently on ball-bearing hinges, the door swung inward, a half-ton weight so perfectly balanced that I could move it with one finger.

Beyond lay a stone corridor bathed in blue light.

The slab of bronze swung shut and locked behind me as I walked to a second door of brushed stainless steel. In this grained surface were embedded polished letters that spelled three Latin words: LUMIN DE LUMINE.

Light from light.

A wide steel architrave surrounded this formidable barrier. Inlaid in the architrave was a twelve-inch plasma screen.

Upon being touched, the screen brightened. I pressed my hand flat against it.

I could not see or feel the scanner reading my fingerprints, but I was nonetheless identified and approved. With a pneumatic hiss, the door slid open.

Brother John says the hiss is not an inevitable consequence of the operation of the door. It could have been made to open silently.

He incorporated the hiss to remind himself that in every human enterprise, no matter with what virtuous intentions it is undertaken, a serpent lurks.

Beyond the steel door waited an eight-foot-square chamber that appeared to be a seamless, wax-yellow, porcelain vessel. I entered and stood there like a lone seed inside a hollow, polished gourd.

When a second heedful hiss caused me to turn and look back, no trace of the door could be seen.

The buttery light radiated from the walls, and as on previous visits to this realm, I felt as though I had stepped into a dream. Simultaneously, I experienced a detachment from the world *and* a heightened reality.

The light in the walls faded. Darkness closed upon me.

Although the chamber was surely an elevator that carried me down a floor or two, I detected no movement. The machinery made no sound.

In the darkness, a rectangle of red light appeared as another portal hissed open in front of me.

A vestibule offered three brushed-steel doors. The one to my right and the one to my left were plain. Neither door had a visible lock; and I had never been invited through them.

On the third, directly before me, were embedded more polished letters: PER OMNIA SAECULA SAECULORUM.

For ever and ever.

In the red light, the brushed steel glowed softly, like embers. The polished letters blazed.

Without a hiss, *For ever and ever* slid aside, as though inviting me to eternity.

I stepped into a round chamber thirty feet in diameter, barren but for a cozy arrangement of four wingback chairs at the center. A floor lamp served each chair, though currently only two shed light.

Here sat Brother John in tunic and scapular, but with his hood pushed back, off his head. In the days before he'd become a monk, he had been the famous John Heineman.

Time magazine had called him “the most brilliant physicist of this half-century, but increasingly a tortured soul,” and presented, as a sidebar to their main article, an analysis of Heineman’s “life decisions” written by a pop psychologist with a hit TV show on which he resolved the problems of such troubled people as kleptomaniac mothers with bulimic biker daughters.

The New York Times had referred to John Heineman as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” Two days later, in a brief correction, the newspaper noted that it should have attributed that memorable description not to actress Cameron Diaz after she had met Heineman, but to Winston Churchill, who first used those words to describe Russia in 1939.

In an article titled “The Dumbest Celebrities of the Year,” *Entertainment Weekly* called him a “born-again moron” and “a hopeless schlub who wouldn’t know Eminem from Oprah.”

The *National Enquirer* had promised to produce evidence that he and morning-show anchor Katie Couric were an item, while the *Weekly World News* had reported that he was dating Princess Di, who was not—they insisted—as dead as everyone thought.

In the corrupted spirit of much contemporary science, various learned journals, with a bias to defend, questioned his research, his theories, his right to publish his research and theories, his right even to conduct such research and to *have* such theories, his motives, his sanity, and the unseemly size of his fortune.

Had the many patents derived from his research not made him a billionaire four times over, most of those publications would have had no interest in him. Wealth is power, and power is the only thing about which contemporary culture cares.

If he hadn't quietly given away that entire fortune without issuing a press release and without granting interviews, they wouldn't have been so annoyed with him. Just as pop stars and film critics live for their power, so do reporters.

If he'd given his money to an approved university, they would not have hated him. Most universities are no longer temples of knowledge, but of power, and true moderns worship there.

At some time during the years since all that had happened, if he had been caught with an underage hooker or had checked into a clinic for cocaine addiction so chronic that his nose cartilage had entirely rotted away, all would have been forgiven; the press would have adored him. In our age, self-indulgence and self-destruction, rather than self-sacrifice, are the foundations for new heroic myths.

Instead, John Heineman had passed years in monastic seclusion and in fact had spent months at a time in hermitage, first elsewhere and then here in his deep retreat, speaking not a word to anyone. His meditations were of a different character from those of other monks, though not necessarily less reverent.

I crossed the shadowy strand surrounding the ordered furniture. The floor was stone. Under the chairs lay a wine-colored carpet.

The tinted bulbs and the umber-fabric lampshades produced light the color of caramelized honey.

Brother John was a tall, rangy, broad-shouldered man. His hands—at that moment resting on the arms of the chair—were large, with thick-boned wrists.

Although a long countenance would have been more in harmony with his lanky physique, his face was round. The lamplight directed

the crisp and pointed shadow of his strong nose toward his left ear, as if his face were a sundial, his nose the gnomon, and his ear the mark for nine o'clock.

Assuming that the second lighted lamp was meant to direct me, I sat in the chair opposite him.

His eyes were violet and hooded, and his gaze was as steady as the aim of a battle-hardened sharpshooter.

Considering that he might be engaged in meditation and averse to interruption, I said nothing.

The monks of St. Bartholomew's are encouraged to cultivate silence at all times, except during scheduled social periods.

The silence during the day is called the Lesser Silence, which begins after breakfast and lasts until the evening recreation period following dinner. During Lesser Silence, the brothers will speak to one another only as the work of the monastery requires.

The silence after Compline—the night prayer—is called the Greater Silence. At St. Bartholomew's, it lasts through breakfast.

I did not want to encourage Brother John to speak with me. He knew that I would not have visited at this hour without good reason; but it would be his decision to break silence or not.

While I waited, I surveyed the room.

Because the light here was always low and restricted to the center of the chamber, I'd never had a clear look at the continuous wall that wrapped this round space. A dark luster implied a polished surface, and I suspected that it might be glass beyond which pooled a mysterious blackness.

As we were underground, no mountain landscape waited to be revealed. Contiguous panels of thick curved glass, nine feet high, suggested instead an aquarium.

If we were surrounded by an aquarium, however, whatever lived in it had never revealed itself in my presence. No pale shape ever glided past. No gape-mouthed denizen with a blinkless stare had swum close to the farther side of the aquarium wall to peer at me from its airless world.

An imposing figure in any circumstances, Brother John made me think now of Captain Nemo on the bridge of the *Nautilus*, which was

an unfortunate comparison. Nemo was a powerful man and a genius, but he didn't have both oars in the water.

Brother John is as sane as I am. Make of that what you wish.

After another minute of silence, he apparently came to the end of the line of thought that he had been reluctant to interrupt. His violet eyes refocused from some far landscape to me, and in a deep rough voice, he said, "Have a cookie."

CHAPTER 6

IN THE ROUND ROOM, IN THE CARAMEL LIGHT, beside each armchair stood a small table. On the table beside my chair, a red plate held three chocolate-chip cookies.

Brother John bakes them himself. They're wonderful.

I picked up a cookie. It was warm.

From the time I had unlocked the bronze door with my universal key until I entered this room, not even two minutes had passed.

I doubted that Brother John had fetched the cookies himself. He had been genuinely lost in thought.

We were alone in the room. I hadn't heard retreating footsteps when I entered.

"Delicious," I said, after swallowing a bite of the cookie.

"As a boy, I wanted to be a baker," he said.

"The world needs good bakers, sir."

"I couldn't stop thinking long enough to become a baker."

"Stop thinking about what?"

"The universe. The fabric of reality. Structure."

"I see," I said, though I didn't.

"I understood subatomic structure when I was six."

"At six, I made a pretty cool fort out of Lego blocks. Towers and turrets and battlements and everything."

His face brightened. "When I was a kid, I used forty-seven sets of Legos to build a crude model of quantum foam."

"Sorry, sir. I have no idea what quantum foam is."

“To grasp it, you have to be able to envision a very small landscape, one ten-billionth of a millionth of a meter—and only as it exists within a speck of time that is one-millionth of a billionth of a billionth of a second.”

“I’d need to get a better wristwatch.”

“This landscape I’m talking about is twenty powers of ten below the level of the proton, where there is no left or right, no up or down, no before or after.”

“Forty-seven sets of Legos would’ve cost a bunch.”

“My parents were supportive.”

“Mine weren’t,” I said. “I had to leave home at sixteen and get work as a fry cook to support myself.”

“You make exceptional pancakes, Odd Thomas. Unlike quantum foam, everybody knows what pancakes are.”

After creating a four-billion-dollar charitable trust to be owned and administered by the Church, John Heineman had disappeared. The media had hunted him assiduously for years, without success. They were told he had gone into seclusion with the intention of becoming a monk, which was true.

Some monks become priests, but others do not. Although they are all brothers, some are called Father. The priests can say Mass and perform sacred rites that the unordained brothers cannot, though otherwise they regard one another as equals. Brother John is a monk but not a priest.

Be patient. The organization of monastic life is harder to understand than pancakes, but it’s not a brain buster like quantum foam.

These monks take vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability. Some of them surrender humble assets, while others leave behind prosperous careers. I think it’s safe to say that only Brother John has turned his back on four billion dollars.

As John Heineman wished, the Church used a portion of that money to remake the former abbey as a school and a home for those who were both physically and mentally disabled and who had been abandoned by their families. They were children who would otherwise rot in mostly loveless public institutions or would be

quietly euthanized by self-appointed “death angels” in the medical system.

On this December night, I was warmed by being in the company of a man like Brother John, whose compassion matched his genius. To be honest, the cookie contributed significantly to my improved mood.

A new abbey had been built, as well. Included were a series of subterranean rooms constructed and equipped to meet Brother John’s specifications.

No one called this underground complex a laboratory. As far as I could discern, it wasn’t in fact a lab, but something unique of which only his genius could have conceived, its full purpose a mystery.

The brothers, few of whom ever came here, called these quarters John’s Mew. *Mew*, in this case, is a medieval word meaning a place of concealment. A hideout.

Also, a mew is a cage in which hunting hawks are kept while they are molting. *Mew* also means “to molt.”

I once heard a monk refer to Brother John “down there growing all new feathers in the mew.”

Another had called these basement quarters a cocoon and wondered when the revelation of the butterfly would occur.

Such comments suggested that Brother John might become someone other than who he is, someone greater.

Because I was a guest and not a monk, I could not tease more out of the brothers. They were protective of him and of his privacy.

I was aware of Brother John’s true identity only because he revealed it to me. He did not swear me to secrecy. He had said instead, “I know you won’t sell me out, Odd Thomas. Your discretion and your loyalty are figured in the drift of stars.”

Although I had no idea what he meant by that, I didn’t press him for an explanation. He said many things I didn’t fully understand, and I didn’t want our relationship to become a verbal sonata to which a rhythmic *Huh? Huh? Huh?* was my only contribution.

I had not told him my secret. I don’t know why. Maybe I would just prefer that certain people I admire do not have any reason to think of me as a freak.

The brothers regarded him with respect bordering on awe. I also sensed in them a trace of fear. I might have been mistaken.

I didn't regard him as fearsome. I sensed no threat in him. Sometimes, however, I saw that he himself was afraid of something.

Abbot Bernard does not call this place John's Mew, as do the other monks. He refers to it as the *adytum*.

Adytum is another medieval word that means "the most sacred part of a place of worship, forbidden to the public, the innermost shrine of shrines."

The abbot is a good-humored man, but he never speaks the word *adytum* with a smile. The three syllables cross his lips always in a murmur or a whisper, solemnly, and in his eyes are yearning and wonder and perhaps dread.

As to why Brother John traded success and the secular world for poverty and the monastery, he had only said that his studies of the structure of reality, as revealed through that branch of physics known as quantum mechanics, had led him to revelations that humbled him. "Humbled and spooked me," he said.

Now, as I finished the chocolate-chip cookie, he said, "What brings you here at this hour, during the Greater Silence?"

"I know you're awake much of the night."

"I sleep less and less, can't turn my mind off."

A periodic insomniac myself, I said, "Some nights, it seems my brain is someone else's TV, and they won't stop channel surfing."

"And when I *do* nod off," said Brother John, "it's often at inconvenient times. In any day, I'm likely to miss one or two periods of the Divine Office—sometimes Matins and Lauds, sometimes Sext, or Compline. I've even missed the Mass, napping in this chair. The abbot is understanding. The prior is too lenient with me, grants absolution easily and with too little penance."

"They have a lot of respect for you, sir."

"It's like sitting on a beach."

"What is?" I asked, smoothly avoiding *Huh?*

"Here, in the quiet hours after midnight. Like sitting on a beach. The night rolls and breaks and tosses up our losses like bits of wreckage, all that's left of one ship or another."

I said, "I suppose that's true," because in fact I thought I understood his mood if not his full meaning.

"We ceaselessly examine the bits of wreckage in the surf, as though we can put the past together again, but that's just torturing ourselves."

That sentiment had teeth. I, too, had felt its bite. "Brother John, I've got an odd question."

"Of course you do," he said, either commenting on the arcane nature of my curiosity or on my name.

"Sir, this may seem to be an ignorant question, but I have good reason to ask it. Is there a remote possibility that your work here might...blow up or something?"

He bowed his head, raised one hand from the arm of his chair, and stroked his chin, apparently pondering my question.

Although I was grateful to him for giving me a well-considered answer, I would have been happier if he had without hesitation said, *Nope, no chance, impossible, absurd.*

Brother John was part of a long tradition of monk and priest scientists. The Church had created the concept of the university and had established the first of them in the twelfth century. Roger Bacon, a Franciscan monk, was arguably the greatest mathematician of the thirteenth century. Bishop Robert Grosseteste was the first man to write down the necessary steps for performing a scientific experiment. Jesuits had built the first reflecting telescopes, microscopes, barometers, were first to calculate the constant of gravity, the first to measure the height of the mountains on the moon, the first to develop an accurate method of calculating a planet's orbit, the first to devise and publish a coherent description of atomic theory.

As far as I knew, over the centuries, not one of those guys had accidentally blown up a monastery.

Of course, I don't know everything. Considering the infinite amount of knowledge that one could acquire in a virtually innumerable array of intellectual disciplines, it's probably more accurate to say that I don't know *anything*.

Maybe monk scientists have occasionally blown a monastery to bits. I am pretty sure, however, they never did it intentionally.

I could not imagine Brother John, philanthropist and cookie-maker, in a weirdly lighted laboratory, cackling a mad-scientist cackle and scheming to destroy the world. Although brilliant, he was human, so I *could* easily see him looking up in alarm from an experiment and saying *Whoops*, just before unintentionally reducing the abbey to a puddle of nano-goo.

“Something,” he finally said.

“Sir?”

He raised his head to look at me directly again. “Yes, perhaps something.”

“Something, sir?”

“Yes. You asked whether there was a possibility that my work here might blow up or something. I can’t see a way it could blow up. I mean, not the work itself.”

“Oh. But something else could happen.”

“Maybe yes, probably no. Something.”

“But maybe yes. Like what?”

“Whatever.”

“What whatever?” I asked.

“Whatever can be imagined.”

“Sir?”

“Have another cookie.”

“Sir, *anything* can be imagined.”

“Yes. That’s right. Imagination knows no limits.”

“So *anything* might go wrong?”

“*Might* isn’t *will*. Any terrible, disastrous thing might happen, but probably nothing will.”

“Probably?”

“Probability is an important factor, Odd Thomas. A blood vessel *might* burst in your brain, killing you an instant from now.”

At once I regretted not having taken a second cookie.

He smiled. He looked at his watch. He looked at me. He shrugged. “See? The probability was low.”

“The anything that might happen,” I said, “supposing that it *did* happen, could it result in a lot of people dying horribly?”

“Horribly?”

“Yes, sir. Horribly.”

“That’s a subjective judgment. Horrible to one person might not be the same as horrible to another.”

“Shattering bones, bursting hearts, exploding heads, burning flesh, blood, pain, screaming—that kind of horrible.”

“Maybe yes, probably no.”

“This again.”

“More likely, they would just cease to exist.”

“That’s death.”

“No, it’s different. Death leaves a corpse.”

I had been reaching for a cookie. I pulled my hand back without taking one from the plate.

“Sir, you’re scaring me.”

A settled blue heron astonishes when it reveals its true height by unfolding its long sticklike legs; likewise, Brother John proved even taller than I remembered when he rose from his chair. “I’ve been badly scared myself, badly, for quite a few years now. You learn to live with it.”

Getting to my feet, I said, “Brother John...whatever this work is you do here, are you sure you should be doing it?”

“My intellect is God-given. I’ve a sacred obligation to use it.”

His words resonated with me. When one of the lingering dead has been murdered and comes to me for justice, I always feel obliged to help the poor soul.

The difference is that I rely both on reason and on something that you might call a sixth sense, while in his research Brother John is strictly using his intellect.

A sixth sense is a miraculous thing, which in itself suggests a supernatural order. The human intellect, however, for all its power and triumphs, is largely formed by this world and is therefore corruptible.

This monk’s hands, like his intellect, were also God-given, but he could choose to use them to strangle babies.

I did not need to remind him of this. I only said, "I had a terrible dream. I'm worried about the children at the school."

Unlike Sister Angela, he did not instantly recognize that my dream was a lie. He said, "Have your dreams come true in the past?"

"No, sir. But this was very...real."

He pulled his hood over his head. "Try to dream of something pleasant, Odd Thomas."

"I can't control my dreams, sir."

In a fatherly way, he put an arm around my shoulders. "Then perhaps you shouldn't sleep. The imagination has terrifying power."

I was not conscious of crossing the room with him, but now the arrangement of armchairs lay behind us, and before me, a door slid soundlessly open. Beyond the door lay the antechamber awash in red light.

Having crossed the threshold alone, I turned to look back at Brother John.

"Sir, when you traded being just a scientist for being a monk scientist, did you ever consider, instead, being a tire salesman?"

"What's the punch line?"

"It's not a joke, sir. When my life became too complicated and I had to give up being a fry cook, I considered the tire life. But I came here instead."

He said nothing.

"If I could be a tire salesman, help people get rolling on good rubber, at a fair price, that would be useful work. If I could be a tire salesman *and nothing else*, just a good tire salesman with a little apartment and this girl I once knew, that would be enough."

His violet eyes were ruddy with the light of the vestibule. He shook his head, rejecting the tire life. "I want to know."

"Know what?" I asked.

"Everything," he said, and the door slid shut between us.

Polished-steel letters on brushed steel: PER OMNIA SAECULA
SAECULORUM.

For ever and ever.

Through hissing doors, through buttery light and blue, I went to the surface, into the night, and locked the bronze door with my universal key.

LIBERA NOS A MALO said the door.

Deliver us from evil.

As I climbed the stone steps to the abbey yard, snow began to fall. Huge flakes turned gracefully in the windless dark, turned as if to a waltz that I could not hear.

The night did not seem as frigid as it had been earlier. Perhaps I had been colder in John's Mew than I realized, and by comparison to that realm, the winter night seemed mild.

In moments, the flakes as big as frosted flowers gave way to smaller formations. The air filled with fine shavings of the unseen clouds.

This was the moment that I had been waiting for at the window of my small guest suite, before Boo and bodach had appeared in the yard below.

Until coming to this monastery, I had spent my life in the town of Pico Mundo, in the California desert. I had never seen snow fall until, earlier in the night, the sky had spit out a few flakes in a false start.

Here in the first minute of the true storm, I stood transfixed by the spectacle, taking on faith what I had heard, that no two snowflakes are alike.

The beauty took my breath, the way the snow fell and yet the night was still, the intricacy of the simplicity. Although the night would have been even more beautiful if she had been here to share it with me, for a moment all was well, all manner of things were well, and then of course someone screamed.

CHAPTER 7

THE SHARP CRY OF ALARM WAS SO BRIEF THAT you might have thought it was imagined or that a night bird, chased by snow to the shelter of the forest, had shrilled just as it flew overhead and away.

In the summer of the previous year, when gunmen stormed the mall in Pico Mundo, I had heard so many screams that I hoped my ears would fail me thereafter. Forty-one innocent people had been shot. Nineteen perished. I would have traded music and the voices of my friends for a silence that would exclude for the rest of my life all human cries of pain and mortal terror.

We so often hope for the wrong things, and my selfish hope was not fulfilled. I am not deaf to pain or blind to blood—or dead, as for a while I might have wished to be.

Instinctively, I hurried around the nearby corner of the abbey. I turned north along the refectory, in which the monks take their meals, and no lights were aglow at one o'clock in the morning.

Squinting through the screening snow, I scanned the night toward the western forest. If someone was out there, the storm hid him.

The refectory formed an inner corner with the library wing. I headed west again, past deep-set windows beyond which lay a darkness of ordered books.

As I turned the southwest corner of the library, I almost fell over a man lying facedown on the ground. He wore the hooded black habit of a monk.

Surprise brought cold air suddenly into my lungs—a brief ache in the chest—and expelled it in a pale rushing plume.

I dropped to my knees at the monk's side, but then hesitated to touch him, for fear that I would find he had not merely fallen, that he had been beaten to the ground.

The world beyond this mountain retreat was largely barbarian, a condition it had been striving toward for perhaps a century and a half. A once-glorious civilization was now only a pretense, a mask allowing barbarians to commit ever greater cruelties in the name of virtues that a truly civilized world would have recognized as evils.

Having fled that barbaric disorder, I was reluctant to admit that no place was safe, no retreat beyond the reach of anarchy. The huddled form on the ground beside me might be proof, more solid than bodachs, that no haven existed to which I could safely withdraw.

Anticipating his smashed face, his slashed face, I touched him as snow ornamented his plain tunic. With a shudder of expectation, I turned him on his back.

The falling snow seemed to bring light to the night, but it was a ghost light that illuminated nothing. Although the hood had slipped back from the victim's face, I could not see him clearly enough to identify him.

Putting a hand to his mouth, I felt no breath, also no beard. Some of the brothers wear beards, but some do not.

I pressed my fingertips to his throat, which was still warm, and felt for the artery. I thought I detected a pulse.

Because my hands were half numb with cold and therefore less sensitive to heat, I might not have felt a faint exhalation, when I had touched his lips.

As I leaned forward to put my ear to his mouth, hoping to hear at least a sigh of breath, I was struck from behind.

No doubt the assailant meant to shatter my skull. He swung just as I bent forward, and the club grazed the back of my head, thumped hard off my left shoulder.

I pitched forward, rolled to the left, rolled again, scrambled to my feet, ran. I had no weapon. He had a club and maybe something

worse, a knife.

The hands-on kind of killers, the gunless kind, might stave in with a club or strangle with a scarf, but most of them carry blades, as well, for backup, or for entertainment that might come as foreplay or as aftermath.

The guys in the porkpie hats, mentioned earlier, had blackjacks and guns and even a hydraulic automobile press, and *still* they had carried knives. If your work is deathwork, one weapon is not enough, just as a plumber would not answer an urgent service call with a single wrench.

Although life has made me old for my age, I am still fast in my youth. Hoping my assailant was older and therefore slower, I sprinted away from the abbey, into the open yard, where there were no corners in which to be cornered.

I hurled myself through the snowfall, so it seemed as though a wind had sprung up, pasting flakes to my lashes.

In this second minute of the storm, the ground remained black, unchanged by the blizzard's brush. Within a few bounding steps, the land began to slope gently toward woods that I could not see, open dark descending toward a bristling dark.

Intuition insisted that the forest would be the death of me. Running into it, I would be running to my grave.

The wilds are not my natural habitat. I am a town boy, at home with pavement under my feet, a whiz with a library card, a master at the gas grill and griddle.

If my pursuer was a beast of the new barbarism, he might not be able to make a fire with two sticks and a stone, might not be able to discern true north from the growth of moss on trees, but his lawless nature would make him more at home in the woods than I would ever be.

I needed a weapon, but I had nothing except my universal key, a Kleenex, and insufficient martial-arts knowledge to make a deadly weapon of them.

Cut grass relented to tall grass, and ten yards later, nature put weapons under my feet: loose stones that tested my agility and

balance. I skidded to a halt, stooped, scooped up two stones the size of plums, turned, and threw one, threw it hard, and then the other.

The stones vanished into snow and gloom. I had either lost my pursuer or, intuiting my intent, he had circled around me when I stopped and stooped.

I clawed more missiles off the ground, turned 360 degrees, and surveyed the night, ready to pelt him with a couple of half-pound stones.

Nothing moved but the snow, seeming to come down in skeins as straight as the strands of a beaded curtain, yet each flake turning as it fell.

I could see no more than fifteen feet. I had never realized that snow could fall heavily enough to limit visibility this much.

Once, twice, I thought I glimpsed someone moving at the limits of vision, but it must have been an illusion of movement because I couldn't fix on any shape. The patterns of snow on night gradually dizzied me.

Holding my breath, I listened. The snow did not even whisper its way to the earth, but seemed to salt the night with silence.

I waited. I'm good at waiting. I waited sixteen years for my disturbed mother to kill me in my sleep before at last I moved out and left her home alone with her beloved gun.

If, in spite of the periodic peril that comes with my gift, I should live an average life span, I've got another sixty years before I will see Stormy Llewellyn again, in the next world. That will be a long wait, but I am patient.

My left shoulder ached, and the back of my head, grazed by the club, felt less than wonderful. I was cold to the bone.

For some reason, I had not been pursued.

If the storm had been storming long enough to whiten the ground, I could have stretched out on my back and made snow angels. But the conditions were not yet right for play. Maybe later.

The abbey was out of sight. I wasn't sure from which direction I had come, but I wasn't worried that I would lose my way. I have never been lost.

Announcing my return with an uncontrollable chattering of teeth, holding a stone in each hand, I warily retraced my route across the meadow, found the short grass of the yard again. Out of the silent storm, the abbey loomed.

When I reached the corner of the library where I had nearly fallen over the prone monk, I found neither victim nor assailant. Concerned that the man might have regained consciousness and, badly hurt and disoriented, might have crawled away, only to pass out once more, I searched in a widening arc, but found no one.

The library formed an L with the back wall of the guest wing, from which I had set out in pursuit of a bodach little more than an hour ago. At last I dropped the stones around which my hands were clenched and half frozen, unlocked the door to the back stairs, and climbed to the third floor.

In the highest hallway, the door to my small suite stood open, as I'd left it. Waiting for snow, I'd been sitting in candlelight, but now a brighter light spilled from my front room.

CHAPTER 8

AT SHORTLY PAST ONE IN THE MORNING, THE guestmaster, Brother Roland, was not likely to be changing the bed linens or delivering a portion of the “two hogsheads of wine” that St. Benedict, when he wrote the Rule that established monastic order in the sixth century, had specified as a necessary provision for every guesthouse.

St. Bartholomew’s does not provide any wine. The small under-the-counter refrigerator in my bathroom contains cans of Coke and bottles of iced tea.

Entering my front room, prepared to shout “Varlet,” or “Blackguard,” or some other epithet that would sound appropriate to the medieval atmosphere, I found not an enemy, but a friend. Brother Knuckles, known sometimes as Brother Salvatore, stood at the window, peering out at the falling snow.

Brother Knuckles is acutely aware of the world around him, of the slightest sounds and telltale scents, which is why he survived the world he operated in before becoming a monk. Even as I stepped silently across the threshold, he said, “You’ll catch your death, traipsin’ about on a night like this, dressed like that.”

“I wasn’t traipsing,” I said, closing the door quietly behind me. “I was skulking.”

He turned from the window to face me. “I was in the kitchen, scarfin’ down some roast beef and provolone, when I seen you come up the stairs from John’s Mew.”

“There weren’t any lights in the kitchen, sir. I would’ve noticed.”

“The fridge light is enough to make a snack, and you can eat good by the glow from the clock on the microwave.”

“Committing the sin of gluttony in the dark, were you?”

“The cellarer’s gotta be sure things are fresh, don’t he?”

As the abbey’s cellarer, Brother Knuckles purchased, stocked, and inventoried the food, beverages, and other material goods for the monastery and school.

“Anyway,” he said, “a guy, he eats at night in a bright kitchen that’s got no window blinds—he’s a guy tastin’ his last sandwich.”

“Even if the guy’s a monk in a monastery?”

Brother Knuckles shrugged. “You can never be too careful.”

In exercise sweats instead of his habit, at five feet seven and two hundred pounds of bone and muscle, he looked like a die-casting machine that had been covered in a gray-flannel cozy.

The rainwater eyes, the hard angles and blunt edges of brow and jaw, should have given him a cruel or even threatening appearance. In his previous life, people had feared him, and for good reason.

Twelve years in a monastery, years of remorse and contrition, had brought warmth to those once-icy eyes and had inspired in him a kindness that transformed his unfortunate face. Now, at fifty-five, he might be mistaken for a prizefighter who stayed in the sport too long: cauliflower ears, portobello nose, the humility of a basically sweet palooka who has learned the hard way that brute strength does not a champion make.

A small glob of icy slush slid down my forehead and along my right cheek.

“You’re wearin’ snow like a poofy white hat.” Knuckles headed toward the bathroom. “I’ll get you a towel.”

“There’s a bottle of aspirin by the sink. I need aspirin.”

He returned with a towel and the aspirin. “You want some water to wash ’em down, maybe a Coke?”

“Give me a hogshead of wine.”

“They must’ve had livers of iron back in Saint Benny’s day. A hogshead was like sixty-three gallons.”

“Then I’ll only need half a hogshead.”

By the time I toweled my hair half dry, he had brought me a Coke. “You come up the stairs from John’s Mew and stood there lookin’ up at the snow the way a turkey stares up at the rain with its mouth open till it drowns.”

“Well, sir, I never saw snow before.”

“Then, boom, you’re off like a shot around the corner of the refectory.”

Settling into an armchair and shaking two aspirin out of the bottle, I said, “I heard someone scream.”

“I didn’t hear no scream.”

“You were inside,” I reminded him, “and making a lot of chewing noises.”

Knuckles sat in the other armchair. “So who screamed?”

I washed down two aspirin with Coke and said, “I found one of the brothers facedown on the ground by the library. Didn’t see him at first in his black habit, almost fell over him.”

“Who?”

“Don’t know. A heavy guy. I rolled him over, couldn’t see his face in the dark—then someone tried to brain me from behind.”

His brush-cut hair seemed to bristle with indignation. “This don’t sound like St. Bart’s.”

“The club, whatever it was, grazed the back of my head, and my left shoulder took the worst of it.”

“We might as well be in Jersey, stuff like this goin’ down.”

“I’ve never been to New Jersey.”

“You’d like it. Even where it’s bad, Jersey is always real.”

“They’ve got one of the world’s largest used-tire dumps. You’ve probably seen it.”

“Never did. Ain’t that sad? You live in a place most of your life, you take it for granted.”

“You didn’t even know about the tire dump, sir?”

“People, they live in New York City all their lives, never go to the top of the Empire State Building. You okay, son? Your shoulder?”

“I’ve been worse.”

“Maybe you should go to the infirmary, ring Brother Gregory, have your shoulder examined.”

Brother Gregory is the infirmarian. He has a nursing degree.

The size of the monastic community isn't sufficient to justify a full-time infirmarian—especially since the sisters have one of their own for the convent and for the children at the school—so Brother Gregory also does the laundry with Brother Norbert.

"I'll be okay, sir," I assured him.

"So who tried to knock your block off?"

"Never got a look at him."

I explained how I had rolled and run, thinking my assailant was at my heels, and how the monk I'd almost fallen over was gone when I returned.

"So we don't know," said Knuckles, "did he get up on his own and walk away or was he carried."

"We don't know, either, if he was just unconscious or dead."

Frowning, Knuckles said, "I don't like dead. Anyway, it don't make sense. Who would kill a monk?"

"Yes, sir, but who would knock one unconscious?"

Knuckles brooded for a moment. "One time this guy whacked a Lutheran preacher, but he didn't mean to."

"I don't think you should be telling me this, sir."

With a wave of a hand, he dismissed my concern. His strong hands appear to be all knuckles, hence his nickname.

"I don't mean it was me. I told you, I never done the big one. You do believe me on that score, don't you, son?"

"Yes, sir. But you did say this was an accidental whack."

"Never offed no one accidental either."

"All right then."

Brother Knuckles, formerly Salvatore Giancomo, had been well-paid muscle for the mob before God turned his life around.

"Busted faces, broke some legs, but I never chilled no one."

When he was forty, Knuckles had begun to have second thoughts about his career path. He felt "empty, driftin', like a rowboat out on the sea and nobody in it."

During this crisis of confidence, because of death threats to his boss—Tony "the Eggbeater" Martinelli—Knuckles and some other guys like him were sleeping-over at the boss's home. It wasn't a

pajamas-and-s'mores kind of sleepover, but the kind of sleepover where everyone brings his two favorite automatic weapons. Anyway, one evening, Knuckles found himself reading a story to the Eggbeater's six-year-old daughter.

The tale was about a toy, a china-rabbit doll, that was proud of his appearance and thoroughly self-satisfied. Then the rabbit endured a series of terrible misfortunes that humbled him, and with humility came empathy for the suffering of others.

The girl fell asleep with half the story still to be read. Knuckles needed in the worst way to know what happened to the rabbit, but he didn't want his fellow face-busters to think that he was really interested in a kid's book.

A few days later, when the threat to the Eggbeater had passed, Knuckles went to a bookstore and bought a copy of the rabbit's tale. He started from the beginning, and by the time he reached the end, when the china rabbit found its way back to the little girl who had loved him, Knuckles broke down and wept.

Never before had he shed tears. That afternoon, in the kitchen of his row house, where he lived alone, he sobbed like a child.

In those days, no one who knew Salvatore "Knuckles" Giancomo, not even his mother, would have said he was an introspective kind of guy, but he nevertheless realized that he was not crying only about the china rabbit's return home. He was crying about the rabbit, all right, but also about something else.

For a while, he could not imagine what that something else might be. He sat at the kitchen table, drinking cup after cup of coffee, eating stacks of his mother's pizzelles, repeatedly recovering his composure, only to break down and weep again.

Eventually he understood that he was crying for himself. He was ashamed of the man whom he had become, mourning the man whom he had expected to be when he'd been a boy.

This realization left him conflicted. He still wanted to be tough, took pride in being strong and stoic. Yet it seemed that he had become weak and emotional.

Over the next month, he read and reread the rabbit's story. He began to understand that when Edward, the rabbit, discovered

humility and learned to sympathize with other people's losses, he did not grow weak but in fact became stronger.

Knuckles bought another book by the same author. This one concerned an outcast big-eared mouse who saved a princess.

The mouse had less impact on him than the bunny did, but, oh, he loved the mouse, too. He loved the mouse for its courage and for its willingness to sacrifice itself for love.

Three months after he first read the story of the china rabbit, Knuckles arranged a meeting with the FBI. He offered to turn state's evidence against his boss and a slew of other mugs.

He ratted them out in part to redeem himself but no less because he wanted to save the little girl to whom he had read part of the rabbit's story. He hoped to spare her from the cold and crippling life of a crime boss's daughter that daily would harden around her, as imprisoning as concrete.

Thereafter, Knuckles had been placed in Vermont, in the Witness Protection Program. His new name was Bob Loudermilk.

Vermont proved to be too much culture shock. Birkenstocks, flannel shirts, and fifty-year-old men with ponytails annoyed him.

He tried to resist the worst temptations of the world with a growing library of kids' books. He discovered that some book writers seemed subtly to approve of the kind of behavior and the values that he had once embraced, and they scared him. He couldn't find enough thoughtful china rabbits and courageous big-eared mice.

Having dinner in a mediocre Italian restaurant, yearning for Jersey, he suddenly got the calling to the monastic life. It happened shortly after a waiter put before him an order of bad gnocchi, as chewy as caramels, but that's a story for later.

As a novice, following the path of regret to remorse to absolute contrition, Knuckles found the first unalloyed happiness of his life. At St. Bartholomew's Abbey, he thrived.

Now, on this snowy night years later, as I considered taking two more aspirin, he said, "This minister, name's Hoobner, he felt real bad about American Indians, the way they lost their land and all, so

he was always losin' money at blackjack in their casinos. Some of it was a high-vigorish loan from Tony Martinelli."

"I'm surprised the Eggbeater would lend to a preacher."

"Tony figured if Hoobner couldn't keep payin' eight percent a week from his own pocket, then he could steal it from the Sunday collection plate. As it shook down, though, Hoobner would gamble and butt-pinch the cocktail waitresses, but he wouldn't steal. So when he stops payin' the vig, Tony sends a guy to discuss Hoobner's moral dilemma with him."

"A guy not you," I said.

"A guy not me, we called him Needles."

"I don't think I want to know why you called him Needles."

"No, you don't," Knuckles agreed. "Anyway, Needles gives Hoobner one last chance to pay up, and instead of receivin' this request with Christian consideration, the preacher says 'Go to hell.' Then he pulls a pistol and tries to punch Needles's ticket for the trip."

"The preacher shoots Needles?"

"He might've been a Methodist, not a Lutheran. He shoots Needles but only wounds him in the shoulder, and Needles pulls his piece and shoots Hoobner dead."

"So the preacher would shoot somebody, but he wouldn't steal."

"I'm not sayin' that's traditional Methodist teachin'."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"Fact is, now I think on it, the preacher was maybe a Unitarian. Anyway, he was a preacher, and he was shot dead, so bad things can happen to anyone, even a monk."

Although the chill of the winter night had not entirely left me, I pressed the cold can of Coke to my forehead. "This problem we have here involves bodachs."

Because he was one of my few confidants at St. Bartholomew's, I told him about the three demonic shadows hovering at Justine's bed.

"And they was hangin' around the monk you almost stumbled over?"

“No, sir. They’re here for something bigger than one monk being knocked unconscious.”

“You’re right. That ain’t the kind of fight card that draws a crowd anywhere.”

He got up from his chair and went to the window. He gazed out at the night for a moment.

Then: “I wonder.... You think maybe my past life is catchin’ up with me?”

“That was fifteen years ago. Isn’t the Eggbeater in prison?”

“He died in stir. But some of those other mugs, they got long memories.”

“If a hit man tracked you down, sir, wouldn’t you be dead by now?”

“For sure. I’d be parked in an unpadded waitin’-room chair, readin’ old magazines in Purgatory.”

“I don’t think this has anything to do with who you used to be.”

He turned from the window. “From your lips to God’s ear. Worst thing would be anyone here hurt because of me.”

“Everyone here’s been lifted up because of you,” I assured him.

The slabs and lumps of his face shifted into a smile that you would have found scary if you didn’t know him. “You’re a good kid. If I ever would’ve had me a kid, it’s nice to think he might’ve been a little like you.”

“Being me isn’t something I’d wish on anyone, sir.”

“Though if I was your dad,” Brother Knuckles continued, “you’d probably be shorter and thicker, with your head set closer to your shoulders.”

“I don’t need a neck anyway,” I said. “I never wear ties.”

“No, son, you need a neck so you can stick it out. That’s what you do. That’s who you *are*.”

“Lately, I’ve been thinking I might get myself measured for a habit, become a novice.”

He returned to his chair but only sat on the arm of it, studying me. After consideration, he said, “Maybe someday you’ll hear the call. But not anytime soon. You’re of the world, and need to be.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think I need to be of the world.”

“The world needs you to be out there in it. You got things to do, son.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. The things I’ll have to do.”

“The monastery ain’t a hideout. A mug wants to come in here, take the vows, he should come because he wants to open himself to somethin’ bigger than the world, not because he wants to close himself up in a little ball like a pill bug.”

“Some things you just have to close yourself away from, sir.”

“You mean the summer before last, the shootings at the mall. You don’t need no one’s forgiveness, son.”

“I knew it was coming, they were coming, the gunmen. I should’ve been able to stop it. Nineteen people died.”

“Everyone says, without you, hundreds would’ve died.”

“I’m no hero. If people knew about my gift and knew *still* I couldn’t stop it, they wouldn’t call me a hero.”

“You ain’t God, neither. You did all you could, anyone could.”

As I put down the Coke, picked up the bottle of aspirin, and shook two more tablets onto my palm, I changed the subject. “Are you going to wake the abbot and tell him that I fell over an unconscious monk?”

He stared at me, trying to decide whether to *allow* me to change the subject. Then: “Maybe in a while. First, I’m gonna try to take an unofficial bed count, see if maybe I can find someone holdin’ ice to a lump on his head.”

“The monk I fell over.”

“Exactly. We got two questions. Second, why would some guy club a monk? But *first*, why would a monk be out at this hour where he could get himself clubbed?”

“I guess you don’t want to get a brother in trouble.”

“If there’s sin involved, I ain’t gonna help him keep what he done from his confessor. That won’t be no favor to his soul. But if it was just some kinda foolishness, the prior maybe don’t have to know.”

A prior is a monastery’s disciplinarian.

St. Bartholomew’s prior was Father Reinhart, an older monk with thin lips and a narrow nose, less than half the nose of which Brother

Knuckles could boast. His eyes and eyebrows and hair were all the color of an Ash Wednesday forehead spot.

Walking, Father Reinhart appeared to float like a spirit across the ground, and he was uncannily quiet. Many of the brothers called him the Gray Ghost, though with affection.

Father Reinhart was a firm disciplinarian, though not harsh or unfair. Having once been a Catholic-school principal, he warned that he had a paddle, as yet never used, in which he had drilled holes to reduce wind resistance. “Just so you know,” he had said with a wink.

Brother Knuckles went to the door, hesitated, looked back at me. “If somethin’ bad is comin’, how long we got?”

“After the first bodachs show up...it’s sometimes as little as a day, usually two.”

“You sure you ain’t got a concussion or nothin’?”

“Nothing that four aspirin won’t help,” I assured him. I popped the second pair of tablets into my mouth and chewed them.

Knuckles grimaced. “What’re you, a tough guy?”

“I read that they’re absorbed into your bloodstream faster this way, through the tissue in your mouth.”

“What—you get a flu shot, you have the doc inject it in your tongue? Get a few hours’ sleep.”

“I’ll try.”

“Find me after Lauds, before Mass, I’ll tell you who got himself conked—and maybe why, if he knows why. Christ be with you, son.”

“And with you.”

He left and closed the door behind him.

The doors of the suites in the guesthouse, like those of the monks’ rooms in another wing, have no locks. Everyone here respects the privacy of others.

I carried a straight-backed chair to the door and wedged it under the knob, to prevent anyone from entering.

Maybe chewing aspirin and letting them dissolve in your mouth speeds up absorption of the medication, but they taste like crap.

When I drank some Coke to wash out the bad taste, the crushed tablets reacted with the soft drink, and I found myself foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog.

When it comes to tragic figures, I've got a much greater talent for slapstick than Hamlet did, and whereas King Lear would step over a banana peel in his path, my foot will find it every time.

CHAPTER 9

THE COMFORTABLE BUT SIMPLE GUEST SUITE had a shower so small that I felt as if I were standing in a coffin.

For ten minutes I let the hot water beat on my left shoulder, which had been tenderized by the mysterious assailant's club. The muscles relaxed, but the ache remained.

The pain wasn't severe. It didn't concern me. Physical pain, unlike some other kinds, eventually goes away.

When I turned off the water, big white Boo was staring at me through the steam-clouded glass door.

After I had toweled dry and pulled on a pair of briefs, I knelt on the bathroom floor and rubbed the dog behind the ears, which made him grin with pleasure.

"Where were you hiding?" I asked him. "Where were you when some miscreant tried to make my brain squirt out my ears? Huh?"

He didn't answer. He only grinned. I like old Marx Brothers movies, and Boo is the Harpo Marx of dogs in more ways than one.

My toothbrush seemed to weigh five pounds. Even in exhaustion, I am diligent about brushing my teeth.

A few years previously, I had witnessed an autopsy in which the medical examiner, during a preliminary review of the corpse, remarked for his recorder that the deceased was guilty of poor dental hygiene. I had been embarrassed for the dead man, who had been a friend of mine.

I hope that no attendants at *my* autopsy will have any reason to be embarrassed for me.

You might think this is pride of a particularly foolish kind. You're probably right.

Humanity is a parade of fools, and I am at the front of it, twirling a baton.

I have persuaded myself, however, that brushing my teeth in anticipation of my untimely demise is simply consideration for the feelings of any autopsy witness who might have known me when I was alive. Embarrassment for a friend, arising from his shortcomings, is never as awful as being mortified by the exposure of your own faults, but it is piercing.

Boo was in bed, curled up against the footboard, when I came out of the bathroom.

"No belly rub, no more ear scratching," I told him. "I'm coming down like a plane that's lost all engines."

His yawn was superfluous for a dog like him; he was here for companionship, not for sleep.

Lacking enough energy to put on pajamas, I fell into bed in my briefs. The coroner always strips the body, anyway.

After pulling the covers to my chin, I realized that I had left the light on in the adjacent bathroom.

In spite of John Heineman's four-billion-dollar endowment, the brothers at the abbey live frugally, in respect of their vows of poverty. They do not waste resources.

The light seemed far away, growing more distant by the second, and the blankets were turning to stone. To hell with it. I wasn't a monk yet, not even a novice.

I wasn't a fry cook anymore, either—except when I made pancakes on Sundays—or a tire salesman, or much of anything. We not-much-of-anything types don't worry about the cost of leaving a light on unnecessarily.

Nevertheless, I worried. In spite of worrying, I slept.

I dreamed, but not about exploding boilers. Not about nuns on fire, screaming through a snowy night, either.

In the dream, I was sleeping but then awoke to see a bodach standing at the foot of my bed. This dream bodach, unlike those in the waking world, had fierce eyes that glistened with reflections of the light from the half-open bathroom door.

As always, I pretended that I did not see the beast. I watched it through half-closed eyes.

When it moved, it morphed, as things do in dreams, and became not a bodach any longer. At the foot of my bed stood the glowering Russian, Rodion Romanovich, the only other visitor currently staying in the guesthouse.

Boo was in the dream, standing on the bed, baring his teeth at the intruder, but silent.

Romanovich went around the bed to the nightstand.

Boo sprang from the bed to the wall, as though he were a cat, and clung there on the vertical, defying gravity, glaring at the Russian.

Interesting.

Romanovich picked up the picture frame that stood beside the nightstand clock.

The frame protects a small card from a carnival fortune-telling machine called Gypsy Mummy. It declares **YOU ARE DESTINED TO BE TOGETHER FOREVER.**

In my first manuscript, I recounted the curious history of this object, which is sacred to me. Suffice to say that Stormy Llewellyn and I received it in return for the first coin we fed the machine, after a guy and his fiancée, in line before us, got nothing but bad news for their eight quarters.

Because Gypsy Mummy did not accurately forecast events in this world, because Stormy is dead and I am alone, I know the card means that we will be together forever in the *next* world. This promise is more important than food to me, than air.

Although the light from the bathroom did not reach far enough to allow Romanovich to read the words on the framed card, he read them anyway because, being a dream Russian, he could do anything that he wanted, just as dream horses can fly and dream spiders can have the heads of human babies.

In a murmur, in accented speech, he spoke the words aloud: *“You are destined to be together forever.”*

His solemn yet mellifluous voice was suitable for a poet, and those seven words sounded like a line of lyrical verse.

I saw Stormy as she’d been that evening at the carnival, and the dream became about her, about us, about a sweet past beyond recovery.

After less than four hours of troubled sleep, I woke before dawn.

The leaded window showed a black sky, and snow fairies danced down the glass. In the bottom panes, a few ferns of frost twinkled with a strange light, alternately red and blue.

The digital clock on the nightstand was where it had been when I’d fallen into bed, but the framed fortune-teller’s card appeared to have been moved. I felt certain it had been standing upright in front of the lamp. Now it lay flat.

I threw aside the bedclothes and got up. I walked out to the living room, turned on a lamp.

The straight-backed chair remained wedged under the knob of the door to the third-floor hallway. I tested it. Secure.

Before communism bled them of so much of their faith, the Russian people had a history of both Christian and Judaic mysticism. They weren’t known, however, for walking through locked doors or solid walls.

The living-room window was three stories above the ground and not approachable by a ledge. I checked the latch anyhow, and found it engaged.

Although lacking nuns on fire, lacking spiders with the heads of human babies, the night disturbance had been a dream. Nothing but a dream.

Looking down from the latch, I discovered the source of the pulsing light that throbbed in the filigree of frost along the edges of the glass. A thick blanket of snow had been drawn over the land while I slept, and three Ford Explorers, each with the word SHERIFF on its roof, stood idling on the driveway, clouds of exhaust pluming from their tailpipes, emergency beacons flashing.

Although still windless, the storm had not relented. Through the screening cold confetti, I glimpsed six widely separated flashlights wielded by unseen men moving in coordinated fashion, as if quartering the meadow in search of something.

CHAPTER 10

BY THE TIME I CHANGED INTO THERMAL LONG johns, pulled on jeans and a crewneck sweater, got feet into ski boots, grabbed my Gore-Tex/Thermolite jacket, rushed downstairs, crossed the parlor, and pushed through the oak door into the guesthouse cloister, dawn had come.

Sullen light brushed a gray veneer over the limestone columns encircling the courtyard. Under the cloister ceiling, darkness held fast, as if the night were so unimpressed by the dreary morning that it might not retreat.

In the courtyard, without ski boots, St. Bartholomew stood in fresh powder, offering a winterized pumpkin in his outstretched hand.

On the east side of the cloister, directly across from the point at which I burst into it, was the guesthouse entrance to the abbatial church. Voices raised in prayer and a tolling bell echoed to me not from the church but instead along a passageway ahead and to my right.

Four steps led up to that barrel-vaulted stone corridor, which itself led twenty feet into the grand cloister. Here a courtyard four times larger than the first was framed by an even more impressive colonnade.

The forty-six brothers and five novices were gathered in this open courtyard in full habit, facing Abbot Bernard, who stood on the bell dais, with one hand rhythmically drawing upon the toll rope.

Matins had concluded, and near the end of Lauds, they had come out of the church for the final prayer and the abbot's address.

The prayer was the Angelus, which is beautiful in Latin, when raised with many voices.

A chanted response rose from the brothers as I arrived: "*Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.*" Then abbot and all said, "*Ave Maria.*"

Two sheriff's deputies waited in the shelter of the cloister as the brothers in the courtyard finished the prayer. The cops were big men and more solemn than the monks.

They stared at me. Clearly I was not a cop, and apparently I was not a monk. My indeterminate status made me a person of interest.

Their stares were so intense that I wouldn't have been surprised if, in the bitter air, their eyes had begun to steam as did their every exhalation.

Having had much experience of police, I knew better than to approach them with the suggestion that their suspicions would best be directed at the glowering Russian, wherever he might coil at this moment. As a consequence, their interest in me would only intensify.

Although anxious to know the reason that the sheriff had been called, I resisted the urge to ask them. They would be inclined to view my ignorance as merely a *pretense* of ignorance, and they would regard me with greater suspicion than they did now.

Once a cop has found you of even passing interest, regarding a criminal matter, you can do nothing to remove yourself from his list of potential suspects. Only events beyond your control can clear you. Like being stabbed, shot, or strangled by the *real* villain.

"*Ut digni efficiamur promissionibus Christi,*" said the brothers, and the abbot said, "*Oremus,*" which meant "Let us pray."

Less than half a minute later, the Angelus concluded.

Usually, after the Angelus, the abbot's address consists of a brief commentary on some sacred text and its application to monastic life. Then he does a soft-shoe number while singing "Tea for Two."

All right, I made up the soft-shoe and "Tea for Two." Abbot Bernard *does* resemble Fred Astaire, which is why I've never been able to get this irreverent image out of my head.

Instead of his usual address, the abbot announced a dispensation from attendance at morning Mass to all those who might be needed to assist the sheriff's deputies in a thorough search of the buildings.

The time was 6:28. Mass would begin at seven o'clock.

Those essential to the conduct of Mass were to attend and, after the service, were to make themselves available to the authorities to answer questions and to assist as needed.

Mass would be over at about 7:50. Breakfast, which is taken in silence, always begins at eight o'clock.

The abbot also excused those assisting the police from Terce, the third of seven periods of daily prayer. Terce is at 8:40 and lasts for about fifteen minutes. The fourth period in the Divine Office is Sext, at eleven-thirty, before lunch.

When most laymen learn that a monk's life is so regimented and that the same routine is followed day after day, they grimace. They think this life must be boring, even tedious.

From my months among the monks, I had learned that, quite the contrary, these men are energized by worship and meditation. During the recreation hours, between dinner and Compline, which is the night prayer, they are a lively bunch, intellectually engaging and amusing.

Well, most of them are as I've described, but a handful are shy. And a couple are too pleased by their selfless offering of their lives to make the offering seem entirely selfless.

One of them, Brother Matthias, has such encyclopedic knowledge of—and such strong opinions about—the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan that he can bore your ass off.

Monks are not necessarily holy by virtue of being monks. And they are always and entirely human.

At the end of the abbot's remarks, many brothers hurried to the deputies waiting in the shelter of the cloister, eager to assist.

I became aware of one novice lingering in the courtyard, in the descending snow. Although his face was shadowed by his hood, I could see that he was staring at me.

This was Brother Leopold, who had finished his postulancy only in October and had worn the habit of a novice less than two months.

He had a wholesome Midwestern face, with freckles and a winning smile.

Of the five current novices, I distrusted only him. My reason for not trusting him eluded me. It was a gut feeling, nothing more.

Brother Knuckles approached me, stopped, shook himself rather like a dog might, and cast the clinging snow from his habit. Pushing back his hood, he said softly, "Brother Timothy is missing."

Brother Timothy, master of the mechanical systems that kept the abbey and school habitable, wasn't one to arrive late for Matins, and certainly wasn't a man who would run off for a secular adventure, in violation of his vows. His greatest weakness was Kit Kat bars.

"He must've been the one I nearly fell over last night, at the corner of the library. I have to speak to the police."

"Not yet. Walk with me," said Brother Knuckles. "We need a place don't have a hundred ears."

I glanced toward the courtyard. Brother Leopold had vanished.

With his fresh face and Midwestern directness, Leopold in no way seems calculating or sly, furtive or deceitful.

Yet he has an unsettling way of arriving and departing with a suddenness that sometimes reminds me of a ghost materializing and dematerializing. He is there, then isn't. Isn't, then is.

With Knuckles, I left the grand cloister and followed the stone passage to the guest cloister, from there through the oak door into the main parlor on the ground floor of the guesthouse.

We went to the fireplace at the north end of the room, though no fire was burning, and sat forward on armchairs, facing each other.

"After we talked last night," Knuckles said, "I did a bed check. Don't have no authority. Felt sneaky. But it seemed the right thing."

"You made an executive decision."

"That's just what I done. Even back when I was dumb muscle and lost to God, I sometimes made executive decisions. Like, the boss sends me to break a guy's legs, but the guy gets the point after I break one, so I don't do the second. Things like that."

"Sir, I'm just curious.... When you presented yourself as a postulant to the Brothers of St. Bartholomew, how long did your first confession last?"

“Father Reinhart says two hours ten minutes, but it felt like a month and a half.”

“I’ll bet it did.”

“Anyway, some brothers leave their doors part open, some don’t, but no room’s ever locked. I used a flashlight from each doorway to quick scope the bed. Nobody was missin’.”

“Anybody awake?”

“Brother Jeremiah suffers insomnia. Brother John Anthony had a gut full of acid from yesterday’s dinner.”

“The chile relleños.”

“I told ’em I thought maybe I smelled somethin’ burnin’, I was just checkin’ around to be sure there weren’t no problem.”

“You lied, sir,” I said, just to tweak him.

“It ain’t a lie that’s gonna put me in the pit with Al Capone, but it’s one step on a slippery slope I been down before.”

His hand, so brutal-looking, invested the sign of the cross with a special poignancy, and called to mind the hymn “Amazing Grace.”

The brothers arise at five o’clock, wash, dress, and line up at 5:40 in the courtyard of the grand cloister, to proceed together into the church for Matins and Lauds. At two o’clock in the morning, therefore, they’re sacked out, not reading or playing a Game Boy.

“Did you go over to the novitiate wing, check on the novices?”

“No. You said the brother facedown in the yard was in black, you almost fell over him.”

In some orders, the novices wear habits similar to—or the same as—those worn by the brothers who have professed their final vows, but at St. Bartholomew’s, the novices wear gray, not black.

Knuckles said, “I figured the unconscious guy in the yard, he maybe came to, got up, went back to bed—or he was the abbot.”

“You checked on the abbot?”

“Son, I ain’t gonna try that smelled-somethin’-burnin’ routine on the abbot in his private quarters, him as smart as three of me. Besides, the guy in the yard was heavy, right? You said heavy. And Abbot Bernard, you gotta tie him down in a mild wind.”

“Fred Astaire.”

Knuckles winced. He pinched the lumpy bridge of his mushroom nose. "Wish you never told me that 'Tea for Two' thing. Can't keep my mind on the abbot's mornin' address, just waitin' for his soft-shoe."

"When did they discover Brother Timothy was missing?"

"I seen he ain't in line for Matins. By Lauds, he still don't show, so I duck outta church to check his room. He's just pillows."

"Pillows?"

"The night before, what looked like Brother Timothy under the blanket, by flashlight from his doorway, was just extra pillows."

"Why would he do that? There's no rule about lights out. There's no bed check."

"Maybe Tim, he didn't do it himself, somebody else faked it to buy time, keep us from realizin' Tim was gone."

"Time for what?"

"Don't know. But if I'd seen he was gone last night, I would've known it was him you found in the yard, and I'd have woke the abbot."

"He's a little heavy, all right," I said.

"Kit Kat belly. If a brother was missin' when I did bed check, the cops would've been here hours ago, before the storm got so bad."

"And now the search is harder," I said. "He's...dead, isn't he?"

Knuckles looked into the fireplace, where no fire burned. "My professional opinion is, I kinda think so."

I'd had too much of Death. I'd fled from Death to this haven, but of course in running from him, I had only run into his arms.

Life you can evade; death you cannot.

CHAPTER 11

THE LAMB OF DAWN BECAME A MORNING LION with a sudden roar of wind that raked the parlor windows with ticking teeth of snow. A mere snowstorm swelled into a biting blizzard.

“I liked Brother Timothy,” I said.

“He was a sweet guy,” Knuckles agreed. “That amazing blush.”

I remembered the outer light that revealed the inner brightness of the monk’s innocence. “Somebody put pillows under Tim’s blankets so he wouldn’t be missed till the storm could complicate things. The killer bought time to finish what he came here to do.”

“He who?” Knuckles asked.

“I told you, sir, I’m not psychic.”

“Ain’t askin’ for psychic. Thought you seen some clues.”

“I’m not Sherlock Holmes, either. I better talk to the police.”

“Maybe you should think on whether that’s smart.”

“But I should tell them what happened.”

“You gonna tell ’em about bodachs?”

In Pico Mundo, the chief of police, Wyatt Porter, was like a father to me. He had known about my gift since I was fifteen.

I didn’t relish sitting with the county sheriff and explaining that I saw dead people as well as demons, wolfish and swift.

“Chief Porter can call the sheriff here and vouch for me.”

Knuckles looked doubtful. “And how long might that take?”

“Maybe not long, if I can reach Wyatt quick.”

“I don’t mean how long for Chief Porter to tell the locals you’re real. I mean how long for the locals to believe it.”

He had a point. Even Wyatt Porter, an intelligent man, who knew my grandmother well and knew me, required convincing when I first took him information that solved a stalled murder investigation.

“Son, nobody but you sees bodachs. If the kids or all of us is gonna get slammed by somebody, by somethin’—you got the best chance of figurin’ out what-how-when, the best chance to stop it.”

On the mahogany floor lay a Persian-style carpet. In the figured world of wool between my feet, a dragon twisted, glaring.

“I don’t want that much responsibility. I can’t carry it.”

“God seems to think you can.”

“Nineteen dead,” I reminded him.

“When it might’ve been two hundred. Listen, son, don’t think the law is always like Wyatt Porter.”

“I know it’s not.”

“These days law thinks it’s about nothin’ but laws. Law don’t remember it was once handed down from somewhere, that it once meant not just *no*, but was a way to live and a reason to live that way. Law now thinks nobody but politicians made it or remake it, so maybe it ain’t a surprise some people don’t care anymore about law, and even some lawmen don’t understand the real reason for law. You pour your story out to a wrong kind of lawman, he’s never gonna see you’re on his side. Never gonna believe you’re gifted. A lawman like that, he thinks you’re what’s wrong with the world the way it used to be, the way he’s glad it ain’t anymore. He thinks you’re a psych case. He can’t trust you. He won’t. Suppose they take you in for observation, or even for suspicion if they find a body, what do we do then?”

I didn’t like the arrogant expression of the dragon in the woven wool, or the way bright threads lent violence to its eyes. I shifted my left foot to cover its face.

“Sir, maybe I don’t mention my gift or bodachs. I could just say I found a monk on the ground, then I was clubbed by someone.”

“What was you doin’ out at that hour? Where was you comin’ from, goin’ to, what was you *up* to? Why your funny name? You mean you’re the kid was a hero at the Green Moon Mall summer before last? How come trouble follows you, or is it maybe you yourself are trouble?”

He was playing the devil’s advocate.

I half believed I could feel the carpet dragon squirming under my foot.

“I don’t really have much to tell them that would be helpful,” I relented. “I guess we could wait until they find the body.”

“They won’t find it,” Brother Knuckles said. “They ain’t lookin’ for a Brother Tim who’s been murdered, the body hidden. What they’re lookin’ for is a Brother Tim somewhere who slashed his wrists or hung himself from a rafter.”

I stared at him, not fully comprehending.

“It’s only two years since Brother Constantine committed suicide,” he reminded me.

Constantine is the dead monk who lingers in this world, and sometimes manifests as an energetic poltergeist in unexpected ways.

For reasons no one understands, he climbed into the church tower one night, while his brothers slept, tied one end of a rope around the mechanism that turns the three-bell carillon, knotted the other end around his neck, climbed onto the tower parapet, and jumped, ringing awake the entire community of St. Bartholomew’s.

Among men of faith, perhaps self-destruction is the most damning of all transgressions. The effect on the brothers had been profound; time had not diminished it.

Knuckles said, “Sheriff thinks we’re a rough crew, he can’t trust us. He’s the kind believes albino-monk assassins live here in secret catacombs, goin’ out to murder in the night, all that old Ku Klux Klan anti-Catholic stuff, though maybe he don’t know it’s from the KKK. Funny how people that don’t believe in nothin’ are so quick to believe every crazy story about people like us.”

“So they expect that Brother Timothy killed himself.”

“Sheriff probably thinks we’ll all kill ourselves before we’re done. Like those Jim Jones Kool-Aid drinkers.”

I thought wistfully of Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald. “Saw an old movie the other night—*Going My Way*.”

“That wasn’t just another time, son. That was another planet.”

The outer door of the parlor opened. A sheriff’s deputy and four monks entered. They had come to search the guesthouse, though it was not likely that a suicidal brother would have repaired to this wing to drink a quart of Clorox.

Brother Knuckles recited the last few lines of a prayer and made the sign of the cross, and I followed his example, as though we had retreated here to pray together for Brother Timothy’s safe return.

I don’t know if this deception qualified as a half-step down the slippery slope. I had no sensation of sliding. But of course we never notice the descent until we’re rocketing along at high velocity.

Knuckles had convinced me that I would find no friends among these authorities, that I must remain a free agent to discover the nature of the looming violence that drew the bodachs. Consequently, I preferred to avoid the deputies without appearing to be dodging them.

Brother Fletcher, the monastery’s cantor and music director, one of the four monks with the deputy, asked for permission to search my suite. I gave it without hesitation.

For the benefit of the deputy, whose eyes were compressed to slits by the weight of his suspicion, Knuckles asked me to help search the pantries and storerooms that were his domain, as cellarer.

When we stepped out of the parlor, into the guesthouse cloister, where wind blustered among the columns, Elvis was waiting for me.

In my previous two manuscripts, I have recounted my experiences with the lingering spirit of Elvis Presley in Pico Mundo. When I left that desert town for a mountain monastery, he had come with me.

Instead of haunting a place, especially an appropriate place like Graceland, he haunts *me*. He thinks that, through me, he will in time find the courage to move on to a higher place.

I suppose I should be glad that I’m being haunted by Elvis instead of, say, by a punker like Sid Vicious. The King is an easy spirit with a sense of humor and with concern for me, though once in a while he weeps uncontrollably. Silently, of course, but copiously.

Because the dead don't talk or even carry text-messaging devices, I needed a long time to learn why Elvis hangs around our troubled world. At first I thought he was reluctant to leave here because this world had been so good to him.

The truth is, he's desperate to see his mother, Gladys, in the next world, but he's reluctant to cross over because he's filled with anxiety about the reunion.

Few men have loved their mothers more than Elvis loved Gladys. She died young, and he grieved for her until his death.

He fears, however, that his use of drugs and his other personal failures in the years that followed her passage must have shamed her. He is embarrassed by his ignominious death—overdosed on prescription medications, facedown in vomit—though this seems to be the preferred exit scene for a significant percentage of rock-and-roll royalty.

I have often assured him that there can be no shame, no anger, no disappointment where Gladys waits, only love and understanding. I tell him that she will open her arms to him on the Other Side.

Thus far my assurances have not convinced him. Of course there is no reason why they should. Remember: In Chapter Six, I admitted that I don't know *anything*.

So as we entered the passageway between the guest and the grand cloisters, I said to Brother Knuckles, "Elvis is here."

"Yeah? What movie's he in?"

This was Knuckles's way of asking how the King was dressed.

Other lingering spirits manifest only in the clothes they were wearing when they died. Donny Mosquith, a former mayor of Pico Mundo, had a heart attack during vigorous and kinky intimacy with a young woman. Cross-dressing in spike heels and women's underwear stimulated him. Hairy in lace, wobbling along the streets of a town that named a park after him when he was alive but later renamed it after a game-show host, Mayor Mosquith does not make a pretty ghost.

In death as in life, Elvis exudes cool. He appears in costumes from his movies and stage performances, as he chooses. Now he wore black boots, tight black tuxedo trousers, a tight and open black

jacket that came only to the waistline, a red cummerbund, a ruffled white shirt, and an elaborate black foulard.

“It’s the flamenco-dancer outfit from *Fun in Acapulco*,” I told Knuckles.

“In a Sierra winter?”

“He can’t feel the cold.”

“Ain’t exactly suitable to a monastery, neither.”

“He didn’t make any monk movies.”

Walking at my side, as we neared the end of the passageway, Elvis put an arm around my shoulders, as though to comfort me. It felt no less substantial than the arm of a living person.

I do not know why ghosts feel solid to me, why their touch is warm instead of cold, yet they walk through walls or dematerialize at will. It’s a mystery that I most likely will never solve—like the popularity of aerosol cheese in a can or Mr. William Shatner’s brief post-*Star Trek* turn as a lounge singer.

In the large courtyard of the grand cloister, wind rushed down the three-story walls, wielding lashes of brittle snow, whipping up clouds of the softer early snow from the cobblestone floor, thrashing between columns as we hurried along the colonnade toward the kitchen door in the south wing.

Like a crumbling ceiling shedding plaster, the sky lowered on St. Bart’s, and the day seemed to be collapsing upon us, great white walls more formidable than the stone abbey, alabaster ruins burying all, soft and yet imprisoning.

CHAPTER 12

KNUCKLES AND I DID IN FACT SEARCH THE pantry and associated storerooms, though we found no trace of Brother Timothy.

Elvis admired the jars of peanut butter that filled one shelf, perhaps recalling the fried-banana-and-peanut-butter sandwiches that had been a staple of his diet when he was alive.

For a while, monks and deputies were busy in the hallways, the refectory, the kitchen, and other nearby rooms. Then quiet descended, except for the wind at windows, as the quest moved elsewhere.

After the library had been searched, I retreated there to worry and to keep a low profile until the authorities departed.

Elvis went with me, but Knuckles wanted to spend a few minutes at his desk in a storeroom, reviewing invoices, before going to Mass. As distressing as Brother Tim's disappearance was, work must go on.

It is a fundamental of the brothers' faith that when the Day comes and time ends, being taken while at honest work is as good as being taken while in prayer.

In the library, Elvis wandered the aisles, sometimes phasing *through* the stacks, reading the spines of the books.

He had periodically been a reader. Following his early fame, he ordered twenty hardcovers at a time from a Memphis bookstore.

The abbey offers sixty thousand volumes. A purpose of monks, especially Benedictines, has always been to preserve knowledge.

Many Old World monasteries were built like fortresses, on peaks, with one approach that could be blockaded. The knowledge of nearly two millennia, including the great works of the ancient Greeks and the Romans, had been preserved through the efforts of monks when invasions of barbarians—the Goths, the Huns, the Vandals—repeatedly destroyed Western civilization, and twice when Islamic armies nearly conquered Europe in some of the bloodiest campaigns in history.

Civilization—says my friend Ozzie Boone—exists only because the world has barely enough of two kinds of people: those who are able to build with a trowel in one hand, a sword in the other; and those who believe that in the beginning was the Word, and will risk death to preserve all books for the truths they might contain.

I think a few fry cooks are essential, as well. To build, to fight, to risk death in a good cause requires high morale. Nothing boosts morale like a perfectly prepared plate of eggs sunny-side up and a pile of crispy hash browns.

Restlessly wandering the library aisles, I turned a corner and came face to face with the Russian, Rodion Romanovich, most recently seen in a dream.

I never claimed to possess James Bond's aplomb, so I'm not embarrassed to admit I startled backward and said, "Sonofabitch!"

Bearish, glowering so hard that his bushy eyebrows knitted together, he spoke with a faint accent: "What's wrong with you?"

"You frightened me."

"I certainly did not."

"Well, it felt like frightened."

"You frightened yourself."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"What are you sorry for?"

"For my language," I said.

"I speak English."

"You do, yes, and so well. Better than I speak Russian, for sure."

"Do you speak Russian?"

"No, sir. Not a word."

"You are a peculiar young man."

“Yes, sir, I know.”

At perhaps fifty, Romanovich did not appear old, but time had battered his face with much experience. Across his broad forehead lay a stitchery of tiny white scars. His laugh lines did not suggest that he had spent a life smiling; they were deep, severe, like old wounds sustained in a sword fight.

Clarifying, I said, “I meant I was sorry for my *bad* language.”

“Why would I frighten you?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t realize you were here.”

“I did not realize you were here, either,” he said, “but you did not frighten me.”

“I don’t have the equipment.”

“What equipment?”

“I mean, I’m not a scary guy. I’m innocuous.”

“And I *am* a scary guy?” he asked.

“No, sir. Not really. No. Imposing.”

“I am imposing?”

“Yes, sir. Quite imposing.”

“Are you one of those people who uses words more for the sound than for the sense of them? Or do you know what *innocuous* means?”

“It means ‘harmless,’ sir.”

“Yes. And you are certainly not innocuous.”

“It’s just the black ski boots, sir. They tend to make anybody look like he could kick butt.”

“You appear clear, direct, even simple.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“But you are complex, complicated, even intricate, I suspect.”

“What you see is what you get,” I assured him. “I’m just a fry cook.”

“Yes, you make that quite plausible, with your exceptionally fluffy pancakes. And I am a librarian from Indianapolis.”

I indicated the book in his hand, which he held in such a way that I could not see the title. “What do you like to read?”

“It is about poisons and the great poisoners in history.”

“Not the uplifting stuff you’d expect in an abbey library.”

“It is an important aspect of Church history,” said Romanovich. “Throughout the centuries, clergymen have been poisoned by royals and politicians. Catherine de’ Medicis murdered the Cardinal of Lorraine with poison-saturated money. The toxin penetrated through his skin, and he was dead within five minutes.”

“I guess it’s good we’re moving toward a cashless economy.”

“Why,” Romanovich asked, “would just-a-fry-cook spend months in a monastery guesthouse?”

“No rent. Griddle exhaustion. Carpal tunnel syndrome from bad spatula technique. A need for spiritual revitalization.”

“Is that common to fry cooks—a periodic quest for spiritual revitalization?”

“It might be the defining characteristic of the profession, sir. Poke Barnett has to go out to a shack in the desert twice a year to meditate.”

Layering a frown over his glower, Romanovich said, “What is Poke Barnett?”

“He’s the other fry cook at the diner where I used to work. He buys like two hundred boxes of ammunition for his pistol, drives out in the Mojave fifty miles from anyone, and spends a few days blasting the living hell out of cactuses.”

“He shoots cactuses?”

“Poke has many fine qualities, sir, but he’s not much of an environmentalist.”

“You said that he went into the desert to meditate.”

“While shooting the cactuses, Poke says he thinks about the meaning of life.”

The Russian stared at me.

He had the least readable eyes of anyone I had ever met. From his eyes, I could learn nothing more about him than a paramecium on a glass slide, gazing up at the lens of a microscope, would be able to learn about the examining scientist’s opinion of it.

After a silence, Rodion Romanovich changed the subject: “What book are you looking for, Mr. Thomas?”

“Anything with a china bunny on a magical journey, or mice who save princesses.”

“I doubt you will find that kind of thing in this section.”

“You’re probably right. Bunnies and mice generally don’t go around poisoning people.”

That statement earned another brief silence from the Russian. I don’t believe that he was pondering his own opinion of the homicidal tendencies of bunnies and mice. I think, instead, he was trying to decide whether my words implied that I might be suspicious of him.

“You are a peculiar young man, Mr. Thomas.”

“I don’t try to be, sir.”

“And droll.”

“But not grotesque,” I hoped.

“No. Not grotesque. But droll.”

He turned and walked away with his book, which might have been about poisons and famous poisoners in history. Or not.

At the far end of the aisle, Elvis appeared, still dressed as a flamenco dancer. He approached as Romanovich receded, slouching his shoulders and imitating the Russian’s hulking, troll-like shamble, scowling at the man as he passed him.

When Rodion Romanovich reached the end of these stacks, before turning out of sight, he paused, looked back, and said, “I do not judge you by your name, Odd Thomas. You should not judge me by mine.”

He departed, leaving me to wonder what he had meant. He had not, after all, been named for the mass murderer Joseph Stalin.

By the time Elvis reached me, he had contorted his face into a recognizable and comic impression of the Russian.

Watching the King as he mugged for me, I realized how unusual it was that neither I nor Romanovich had mentioned either Brother Timothy being missing or the deputies swarming the grounds in search of him. In the closed world of a monastery, where deviations from routine are rare, the disturbing events of the morning ought to have been the first subject of which we spoke.

Our mutual failure to remark on Brother Timothy’s disappearance, even in passing, seemed to suggest some shared perception of events, or at least a shared attitude, that made us in some important

way alike. I had no idea what I meant by that, but I intuited the truth of it.

When Elvis couldn't tease a smile from me with his impression of the somber Russian, he stuck one finger up his left nostril all the way to the third knuckle, pretending to be mining deep for boogers.

Death had not relieved him of his compulsion to entertain. As a voiceless spirit, he could no longer sing or tell jokes. Sometimes he danced, remembering a simple routine from one of his movies or from his Las Vegas act, though he was no more Fred Astaire than was Abbot Bernard. Sadly, in his desperation, he sometimes resorted to juvenile humor that was not worthy of him.

He withdrew his finger from his nostril, extracting an imaginary string of snot, then pretending that it was of extraordinary length, soon pulling yard after yard of it out of his nose with both hands.

I went in search of the reference-book collection and stood for a while reading about Indianapolis.

Elvis faced me over the open book, continuing his performance, but I ignored him.

Indianapolis has eight universities and colleges, and a large public library system.

When the King gently rapped me on the head, I sighed and looked up from the book.

He had an index finger stuck in his right nostril, all the way to the third knuckle, as before, but this time the tip of the finger was impossibly protruding from his left ear. He wiggled it.

I couldn't help smiling. He so badly wants to please.

Gratified to have pried a smile from me, he took the finger from his nose and wiped both hands on my jacket, pretending that they were sticky with snot.

"It's hard to believe," I told him, "that you're the same man who sang 'Love Me Tender.' "

He pretended to use the remaining snot to smooth back his hair.

"You're not droll," I told him. "You're grotesque."

This judgment delighted him. Grinning, he performed a series of quarter bows, as though to an audience, silently mouthing the words *Thank you, thank you, thank you very much.*

Sitting at a library table, I read about Indianapolis, which is intersected by more highways than any other city in the U.S. They once had a thriving tire industry, but no more.

Elvis sat at a window, watching the snow fall. With his hands, he tapped out rhythms on the window sill, but he made no sound.

Later, we went to the guesthouse receiving room at the front of the abbey, to see how the sheriff's-department search was proceeding.

The receiving room, furnished like a small shabby-genteel hotel lobby, was currently unoccupied.

As I approached the front door, it opened, and Brother Rafael entered in a carousel of glittering snow, wind chasing around him and howling like a pipe organ tuned in Hell. Meeting with resistance, he forced the door shut, and the whirling snow settled to the floor, but the wind still raised a muffled groan outside.

"What a terrible thing," he said to me, his voice trembling with distress.

A cold many-legged something crawled under the skin of my scalp, down the back of my neck. "Have the police found Brother Timothy?"

"They *haven't* found him, but they've left anyway." His large brown eyes were so wide with disbelief that he might have been named Brother Owl. "They've *left!*"

"What did they say?"

"With the storm, they're shorthanded. Highway accidents, unusual demands on their manpower."

Elvis listened to this, nodding judiciously, apparently in sympathy with the authorities.

In life, he sought and received actual—as opposed to honorary—special-deputy badges from several police agencies, including from the Shelby County, Tennessee, Sheriff's Office. Among other things, the badges permitted him to carry a concealed weapon. He had always been proud of his association with law enforcement.

One night in March 1976, coming upon a two-vehicle collision on Interstate 240, he displayed his badge and helped the victims until the police arrived. Fortunately, he never accidentally shot anyone.

“They searched all the buildings?” I asked.

“Yes,” Brother Rafael confirmed. “And the yards. But what if he went for a walk in the woods and something happened to him, a fall or something, and he’s lying out there?”

“Some of the brothers like to walk in the woods,” I said, “but not at night, and not Brother Timothy.”

The monk thought about that, and then nodded. “Brother Tim is awfully sedentary.”

In the current situation, applying the word *sedentary* to Brother Timothy might be stretching the definition to include the ultimate sedentary condition, death.

“If he’s not out there in the woods, where is he?” Brother Rafael wondered. A look of dismay overcame him. “The police don’t understand us at all. They don’t understand *anything* about us. They said maybe he went AWOL.”

“Absent without leave? That’s ridiculous.”

“More than ridiculous, worse. It’s an insult,” Rafael declared, indignant. “One of them said maybe Tim went to Reno for ‘some R and R—rum and roulette.’ ”

If one of Wyatt Porter’s men in Pico Mundo had said such a thing, the chief would have put him on probation without pay and, depending on the officer’s response to a dressing down, might have fired him.

Brother Knuckles’s suggestion that I keep a low profile with these authorities appeared to have been wise advice.

“What’re we going to do?” Brother Rafael worried.

I shook my head. I didn’t have an answer.

Hurrying out of the room, speaking more to himself now than to me, he repeated, “What’re we going to do?”

I consulted my wristwatch and then went to a front window.

Elvis phased through the closed door and stood outside in the sheeting snow, a striking figure in his black flamenco outfit with red cummerbund.

The time was 8:40 A.M.

Only the tire tracks of the recently departed police vehicles marked the path of the driveway. Otherwise, the storm had

plastered over the variety and the roughness of the land, smoothing it into a white-on-white geometry of soft planes and gentle undulations.

From the look of things, eight or ten inches had piled up in about seven and a half hours. The snow was falling much faster now than it had fallen earlier.

Outside, Elvis stood with his head tipped back and his tongue out, in a fruitless attempt to catch flakes. Of course he was but a spirit, unable to feel the cold or taste the snow. Something about the effort he made, however, charmed me...and saddened me, as well.

How passionately we love everything that cannot last: the dazzling crystallory of winter, the spring in bloom, the fragile flight of butterflies, crimson sunsets, a kiss, and life.

The previous evening, the TV weather report had predicted a minimum two-foot accumulation. Storms in the High Sierra could be prolonged, brutal, and might result in an even deeper accumulation than what had been forecast.

By this afternoon, certainly before the early winter dusk, St. Bartholomew's Abbey would be snowbound. Isolated.

CHAPTER 13

I TRIED TO BE THE SHERLOCK HOLMES THAT Brother Knuckles hoped I could be, but my deductive reasoning led me through a maze of facts and suspicions that brought me back to where I started: clueless.

Because I am not much fun when I'm pretending to be a thinker, Elvis left me alone in the library. He might have gone to the church, hoping that Brother Fletcher intended to practice on the choir organ.

Even in death, he likes to be around music; and in life he had recorded six albums of gospel and inspirational songs, plus three Christmas albums. He might have preferred to dance to something with a backbeat, but you don't get much rock and roll in a monastery.

A poltergeist could have blasted out "All Shook Up" on the organ, could have pounded through "Hound Dog" on the piano in the guesthouse receiving room, the same way that Brother Constantine, deceased, rings church bells when in the mood. But poltergeists are angry; their rage is the source of their power.

Elvis could never be a poltergeist. He is a sweet spirit.

The wintry morning ticked toward whatever disaster might be coming. Recently I had learned that really brainy guys divide the day into units amounting to one-millionth of a billionth of a billionth of a second, which made each *whole* second that I dithered seem to be an unconscionable waste of time.

I wandered out of the receiving room, from cloister to grand cloister, thereafter into other wings of the abbey, trusting that my intuition would lead me toward some clue to the source of the pending violence that had drawn the bodachs.

No offense intended, but my intuition is better than yours. Maybe you took an umbrella to work on a sunny day and needed it by afternoon. Maybe you declined to date an apparently ideal man, for reasons you didn't understand, only to see him on the evening news, months later, arrested for having sexual relations with his pet llama. Maybe you bought a lottery ticket, using the date of your last proctological examination to select your numbers, and won ten million bucks. My intuition is still way better than yours.

The spookiest aspect of my intuition is what I call psychic magnetism. In Pico Mundo, when I had needed to find someone who was not where I expected him to be, I kept his name or face in mind while driving at random from street to street. Usually I found him within minutes.

Psychic magnetism isn't always reliable. Nothing is one hundred percent reliable this side of paradise, except that your cell-phone provider will never fulfill the service promises that you were naïve enough to believe.

St. Bartholomew's population is a tiny fraction of that in Pico Mundo. Here, when giving myself to psychic magnetism, I proceed on foot instead of cruising in a car.

Initially, I kept Brother Timothy in mind: his kind eyes, his legendary blush. Now that the deputies were gone, if I found the monk's body, I faced no risk of being taken away to the nearest sheriff's station for questioning.

Seeking murder victims where their killers have hidden them is not as much fun as an Easter-egg hunt, although if you overlook an egg and find it a month later, the smells can be similar. Because the condition of the cadaver might provide a clue to the identity of the killer, might even suggest his ultimate intentions, the search was essential.

Fortunately, I had skipped breakfast.

When intuition brought me three times to three different outside doors, I stopped resisting the compulsion to take the search into the storm. I zippered shut my jacket, pulled up the hood, tightened it under my chin with a Velcro closure, and put on a pair of gloves that were tucked in a jacket pocket.

The snowfall that I had welcomed the previous night, with my face turned to the sky and my mouth open as if I were a turkey, had been a pathetic production compared to the extravaganza of snow that befell the mountain now, a wide-screen storm as directed by Peter Jackson on steroids.

The wind contradicted itself, seeming to slam into me from the west, then from the north, then from both directions at once, as if it surely must spend itself against itself, and be extinguished by its own fury.

Such schizophrenic wind threw-spun-whipped flakes in stinging sheets, in funnels, in icy lashes, a spectacle some poet once called “the frolic architecture of snow,” but in this instance, there was a lot less frolic than fusillade, wind booming as loud as mortar fire and the snow like shrapnel.

My special intuition led me first north toward the front of the abbey, then east, then south.... After a while I realized that I had trudged more than once in a circle.

Perhaps psychic magnetism didn’t work well in such a distracting environment: the white tumult of the storm, the caterwauling wind, the cold that pinched my face, that stung tears from my eyes and froze them on my cheeks.

As a desert-town boy, I was raised in fierce dry heat, which does not distract, but tends either to enervate or to toughen the sinews of the mind and focus thought. I felt displaced in this cold and whirling chaos, and not entirely myself.

I might have been hampered, as well, by a dread of looking into Brother Timothy’s dead face. What I needed to find was, in this case, not what I wanted to find.

Repurposing my search, I let Brother Timothy rest and thought instead of bodachs and wondered what terror might be coming, and in general gave myself to worry about the indefinable threat, with

the hope that I would be drawn toward some person or some place that in some way as yet unknowable would prove to be connected to the pending violence.

On the spectrum of detective work, this plan was a dismaying distance from the Sherlock end and closer to the tea-leaf-reading end than I cared to acknowledge.

I found myself, nevertheless, breaking out of the meaningless ramble on which I had been engaged. Moving with more purpose, I slogged east through the ten-inch-deep mantle of snow toward the convent and the school.

Halfway across the meadow, I succumbed to a sudden alarm and ducked, turned, flinched, certain that I was about to receive a blow.

I stood alone.

In spite of the evidence of my eyes, I didn't *feel* that I was alone. I felt watched. More than watched. Stalked.

A sound in the storm but not of the storm, a keening different from the shrill lament of the wind, drew near, receded, drew near, and once more receded.

To the west, the abbey stood barely visible through a thousand shifting veils, white drifts obscuring its foundations, wind-pasted snow erasing portions of its mighty stone walls. The bell tower grew less visible as it rose, seeming to dissolve toward the top, and the steeple—and the cross—could not be seen at all.

Downhill and to the east, the school was as obscure as a ghost ship becalmed in fog, less seen than suggested, a paleness in the lesser paleness of the blizzard.

No one at a window in either building would be able to see me at this distance, in these conditions. My scream would not carry in the wind.

The keening rose again, needful and agitated.

I turned in a circle, seeking the source. Much was obscured by the falling snow and by clouds of already-fallen snow whisked off the ground, and the bleak light deceived.

Although I had only turned in place, the school had entirely vanished along with the lower portion of the meadow. Uphill, the

abbey shimmered like a mirage, rippled like an image painted on a sheer curtain.

Because I live with the dead, my tolerance for the macabre is so high that I am seldom spooked. The part-shriek-part-squeal-part-buzz, however, was so otherworldly that my imagination failed to conjure a creature that might have made it, and the marrow in my bones seemed to shrink in the way that mercury, in winter, contracts to the bottom of a thermometer.

I took one step toward where the school ought to be, but then halted, retracted that step. I turned uphill but dared not retreat to the abbey. Something unseen in the camouflaging storm, something with an alien voice full of need and fury, seemed to await me no matter in which direction I proceeded.

CHAPTER 14

STRIPPING VELCRO FROM VELCRO, PUSHING BACK the insulated hood of my jacket, I raised my head, turned my head, cocked my head, striving to determine from which point of the compass the cry arose.

Icy wind tossed my hair and frosted it with snow, boxed my ears and made them burn.

All magic had been snuffed from the storm. The grace of falling snow was now a graceless wildness, a churning maelstrom as raw and flaying as human rage.

I had the strange perception, beyond my power to explain, that reality had shifted, down there twenty powers of ten below the level of protons, that nothing was as it had been, nothing as it should be.

Even with my hood off, I could not locate the source of the eerie keening. The wind might be distorting and displacing the sound, but perhaps the cry seemed to come from every side because more than one shrieking entity prowled the snowblind morning.

Reason asserted that anything stalking me must be of the Sierra, but this didn't sound like wolves or mountain lions. And bears were cavebound now, lost in dreams of fruit and honey.

I am not a guy who likes to pack a gun. My mother's affection for her pistol—and the threats of suicide that she employed to control me when I was a child—left me with a preference for other forms of self-defense.

Over the years, in pinches and crunches, I have survived—often just barely—by the effective use of such weapons as fists, feet, knees, elbows, a baseball bat, a shovel, a knife, a rubber snake, a real snake, three expensive antique porcelain vases, about a hundred gallons of molten tar, a bucket, a lug wrench, an angry cross-eyed ferret, a broom, a frying pan, a toaster, butter, a fire hose, and a large bratwurst.

As reckless as this strategy might be in my case, I prefer to rely on my wits rather than on a personal armory. Unfortunately, at that moment in the meadow, my wits were so dry that I could wring from them no idea except that perhaps I should make snowballs.

Because I doubted that my eerily keening, unknown stalkers were mischievous ten-year-old boys, I rejected the snowball defense. I pulled the hood over my half-frozen head and fixed the Velcro clasp under my chin.

These cries were purposeful, but in spite of how different they were from other chaotic blusterings of the storm, perhaps they were only wind noises, after all.

When my wits fail me, I resort to self-deception.

I started toward the school again and at once detected movement to my left, at the periphery of vision.

Turning to confront the threat, I saw something white and quick, visible only because it was angular and bristling in contrast to the undulant billow and whirl of falling and upswept snow. Like a goblin in a dream, it was gone even as it appeared, infolding into the downfall, leaving a vague impression of sharp points, hard edges, gloss and translucency.

The keening stopped. The groan and hiss and whistle of the wind sounded almost welcoming without that other craving cry.

Movies offer no wisdom and have little to do with real life, but I remembered old adventure films in which the ceaseless pounding of jungle drums had put the sweaty pith-helmeted explorers on edge. The abrupt cessation of the drumming was never the relief that it ought to have been, however, because often the silence signaled imminent attack.

I suspected Hollywood had gotten that one right.

Sensing that I was soon to receive something worse and stranger than a poison dart in the throat or an arrow through an eye, I cast aside indecision and hurried toward the school.

Something loomed in the storm ahead and to the right, veiled by snow, suggestive of the bare frosted limbs of a tree thrashing in the wind. Not a tree. No trees stood in the meadow between the abbey and the school.

Instead, I had glimpsed a narrow aspect of a mysterious presence that was more aware than wood, that moved not as the wind commanded it but with a fierce purpose of its own.

Having revealed only enough to make of itself a deeper enigma than it had been previously, the thing drew cloaks of snow around itself, vanishing. It had not gone away, still paralleled me out of sight, like a lion pacing a gazelle that had become separated from its herd.

Intuitively perceived but not seen, another predator rose at my back. I became convinced that I would be seized from behind and that my head would be ripped off as if it were the pull-tab on a can of cola.

I do not want a fancy funeral. I would be embarrassed by flowery tributes delivered over my casket. On the other hand, I do not want my death to be observed solely by the belch of some beast that has slaked its thirst with my precious bodily fluids.

As I plunged across the sloping meadow, kicking through drifts, heart knocking, the all-enveloping whiteness of the blizzard bleached my vision. The fluorescence of the snow made my eyes ache, and the driven flakes appeared to strobe.

In this further-reduced visibility, something crossed my path, perhaps ten feet ahead, from right to left, its size and shape and nature obscured, but not simply obscured, also distorted, surely distorted, because the quick scuttling something, judging by the portion briefly glimpsed in glare, appeared to be a construct of bones jacketed in ice. With its impossible biological architecture, it should have moved, if at all, with a shambling instability but instead exhibited a wicked kind of grace, a visual glissando of rippling motion, gliding past, gone.

I had momentum, and the school was near, so I didn't halt or turn, but crossed the tracks of whatever had passed in front of me. I didn't pause to examine the prints it left. The fact that there *were* prints proved that I hadn't been hallucinating.

No keening rose—just the stillness of imminent attack, the sense of something rearing up behind me to strike—and through my mind flew words like *horde, host, legion, swarm*.

Snow had drifted across the front steps of the school. The footprints of the searchers, who had been here seeking poor Brother Timothy, had already been erased by the wind.

I scrambled up the steps, tore open the door, expecting to be snatched off the threshold, one step from safety. I crossed into the reception lounge, shoved the door shut, leaned against it.

The moment that I was out of the wind, out of the eye-searing glare, in a bath of warm air, the pursuit seemed like a dream from which I had awakened, the beasts in the blizzard only figments of a particularly vivid nightmare. Then something scraped against the far side of the door.

CHAPTER 15

HAD THE VISITOR BEEN A MAN, HE WOULD HAVE knocked. If it had been only the wind, it would have huffed and strained against the door until the planks creaked.

This scrape was the sound of bone on wood, or something like bone. I could imagine an animated skeleton clawing with mindless persistence at the other side of the door.

In all my bizarre experiences, I had never actually encountered an animated skeleton. But in a world where McDonald's now sells salads with low-fat dressing, anything is possible.

The reception lounge was deserted. Had it been staffed, only a nun or two would have been there, anyway.

If something like what I had glimpsed in the storm was able to break the door off its hinges, I would have preferred better backup than the average nun could provide. I needed someone even tougher than Sister Angela with her penetrating periwinkle stare.

The doorknob rattled, rattled, turned.

Doubtful that my resistance alone would keep out this unwanted caller, I engaged the dead-bolt lock.

A scene from an old movie played in my memory: a man standing with his back pressed to a stout oak door, believing himself to be safe from preternatural forces on the farther side.

The film had been about the evils of nuclear energy, about how minimal exposure to radiation will overnight cause ordinary creatures to mutate into monsters and to grow gigantic as well. As

we know, in the real world, this has had a devastating impact on the real-estate values in the monster-plagued communities near all of our nuclear power plants.

Anyway, the guy is standing with his back to the door, feeling safe, when a giant stinger, curved like a rhino horn, pierces the oak. It bursts through his chest, exploding his heart.

The monsters in this flick were only marginally more convincing than the actors, on a par with sock puppets, but the skewering-stinger scene stuck in my mind.

Now I stepped away from the door. Watched the knob rattling back and forth. Eased farther away.

I had seen movies in which one kind of fool or another, putting his face to a window to scope the territory, gets shotgunned or gets seized by a creature that doesn't need a gun and that smashes through the glass and drags him screaming into the night. Nevertheless, I went to the window beside the door.

If I lived my entire life according to movie wisdom, I would risk winding up as spinning-eyed crazy as do many of our nation's most successful actors.

Besides, this wasn't a night scene. This was a morning scene, and snow was falling, so probably the worst that would happen, if life imitated films, would be someone breaking into "White Christmas" or the equivalent.

A thin crust of ice had crystallized across the exterior of the windowpanes. I detected something moving outside, but it was no more than a white blur, an amorphous shape, a pallid form quivering with potential.

Squinting, I put my nose to the cold glass.

To my left, the knob ceased rattling.

I held my breath for a moment to avoid further clouding the window with every exhalation.

The visitor on the doorstep surged forward and bumped against the glass, as if peering in at me.

I twitched but did not reel back. Curiosity transfixed me.

The opaque glass still masked the visitor even as it pressed forward insistently. In spite of the obscuring ice, if this had been a

face before me, I should have seen at least the hollows of eyes and something that might have been a mouth, but I did not.

What I *did* see, I could not understand. Again, the impression was of bones, but not the bones of any animal known to me. Longer and broader than fingers, they were lined up like piano keys, although they were not in straight keyboards, but were serpentine, and curved through other undulant rows of bones. They appeared to be joined by a variety of knuckles and sockets that I observed, in spite of the veil of ice, were of extraordinary design.

This macabre collage, which filled the window from side to side, from sill to header, abruptly flexed. With a soft click-and-rattle like a thousand tumbling dice on a felt-lined craps table, all the elements shifted as if they were fragments in a kaleidoscope, forming a new pattern more amazing than the previous.

I leaned back from the window just far enough to be able to appreciate the entire elaborate mosaic, which had both a cold beauty and a fearsome quality.

The joints that linked these ranked rows of bones—if bones they were, and not insectile limbs sheathed in chitin—evidently permitted 360-degree rotation along more than one plane of movement.

With the dice-on-felt sound, the kaleidoscope shifted, producing another intricate pattern as eerily beautiful as the one before it, though a degree more menacing.

I got the distinct feeling that the joints between the bones allowed universal rotation on numerous if not infinite planes, which was not just biologically impossible but *mechanically* impossible.

Perhaps to taunt me, the spectacle remade itself once more.

Yes, I have seen the dead, the tragic dead and the foolish dead, the dead who linger in hatred and the dead who are chained to this world by love, and they are different from one another yet all the same, the same in that they cannot accept the truth of their place in the vertical of sacred order, cannot move in any direction from this place, neither to glory nor to an eternal void.

And I have seen bodachs, whatever they may be. I have more than one theory about them but not a single fact to support a

theory.

Ghosts and bodachs are the sum of it. I do not see fairyfolk or elves, neither gremlins nor goblins, neither dryads nor nymphs, nor pixies, neither vampires nor werewolves. A long time ago, I stopped keeping an eye out for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve because, when I was five, my mother told me that Santa was a wicked pervert who would cut off my peepee with a pair of scissors and that if I didn't stop chattering about him, he would be certain to put me on his list and look me up.

Christmas was never the same after that, but at least I still have my peepee.

Although my experience with supernatural presences had been limited to the dead and bodachs, the thing pressed to the window seemed more supernatural than real. I had no idea what it might be, but I was reasonably confident that the words *fiend* and *demon* were more applicable than the word *angel*.

Whatever it was, thing of bone or thing of ectoplasm, it had something to do with the threat of violence that hung over the nuns and the children in their charge. I didn't have to be Sherlock Holmes to figure that out.

Apparently each time the bones shifted, they abraded the ice and shaved some off the glass, for this mosaic was clearer than those that had preceded it, the edges of the bones sharper, the details of the joints slightly more defined.

Seeking a better understanding of the apparition, I leaned close to the glass again, studying the disturbing details of this unearthly osteography.

Nothing supernatural has ever harmed me. My wounds and losses have all been at the hands of human beings, some in porkpie hats but most dressed otherwise.

None of the many elements in the bony mosaic trembled, but I had an impression that it was tight with tension.

Although my breath bloomed directly against the window, the surface did not cloud, most likely because my exhalations remained shallow, expelled with little force.

I had the disturbing thought, however, that my breath was without warmth, too frigid to cloud the glass, and that I inhaled darkness with the air but breathed no darkness out, which was a strange notion even for me.

I stripped off my gloves, shoved them in my jacket pockets, and placed one hand lightly on the cold glass.

Again the bones clicked, fanned, seemed almost to shuffle in the manner of a deck of cards, and rearranged themselves.

Shavings of ice in fact peeled from the outside of the window.

This new pattern of bones must have expressed a primal image of evil that spoke to my unconscious mind, for I saw nothing of beauty anymore, but felt as though something with a thin flicking tail had skittered the length of my spine.

My curiosity had ripened into a less healthy fascination, and fascination had become something darker. I wondered if I might be spellbound, somehow mesmerized, but I figured that I could not be spellbound if I remained capable of considering the possibility, though I was *something*, if not spellbound, because I found myself contemplating a return to the front steps to consider this visitor without the hampering interface of ice and glass.

A splintering sound came from a couple of the wooden muntins that divided the window into panes. I saw a hairline crack open in the white paint that sealed the wood; the fissure traced a crooked path along a vertical muntin, across a horizontal.

Under the hand that I still pressed to the window, the pane cracked.

The single brittle *snap* of failing glass alarmed me, broke the spell. I snatched my hand back and retreated three steps from the window.

No loose glass fell. The fractured pane remained within the framing muntins.

The thing of bone or ectoplasm flexed once more, conjuring yet another but no less menacing pattern, as if seeking a new arrangement of its elements that would apply greater pressure to the stubborn window.

Although it changed from one malignant mosaic to another, the effect was nonetheless elegant, as economical as the movements of an efficient machine.

The word *machine* resonated in my mind, seemed important, seemed revealing, though I knew this could not be a machine. If this world could not produce such a biological structure as the one to which I now stood fearful witness—and it could not—then just as surely, human beings did not possess the knowledge to engineer and build a machine with this phenomenal dexterity.

The storm-born thing flexed again. This newest kaleidoscopic wonder of bones suggested that, just as no two snowflakes in history have been alike, so no two of the thing's manifestations would produce the same pattern.

My expectation was not merely that the glass would shatter, all eight bright panes at once, but also that every muntin would burst into splinters and that the frame would tear out of the wall, taking chunks of plaster with it, and that the thing would clamber into the school behind a cascade of debris.

I wished that I had a hundred gallons of molten tar, an angry cross-eyed ferret, or at least a toaster.

Abruptly, the apparition flexed *away* from the window, ceased to present a malevolent bony pattern. I thought it must be rearing back to throw itself through that barrier, but the attack did not come. This spawn of the storm became again just a pale blur, a trembling potential seen through frosted glass.

A moment later, it seemed to return to the storm. No movement shadowed the window, and the eight panes were as lifeless as eight TV screens tuned to a dead channel.

One square of glass remained cracked.

I suppose I knew then how the heart in a rabbit's breast feels to the rabbit, how it feels like a leaping thing alive within, when the coyote is eye to eye and peels its lips back from teeth stained by years of blood.

No keening rose in the storm. Only the wind huffed at the window and whistled through the keyhole in the door.

Even to one accustomed to encounters with the supernatural, the aftermath of such an unlikely event sometimes includes equal measures of wonder and doubt. A fear that makes you shrink from the prospect of any further such experience is matched by a compulsion to see more and to *understand*.

I felt compelled to unlock and open the door. I quashed that compulsion, did not lift a foot, did not raise a hand, just stood with my arms wrapped around myself, as if holding myself together, and took long shuddery breaths until Sister Clare Marie arrived and politely insisted that I remove my ski boots.

CHAPTER 16

GAZING AT THE WINDOW, TRYING TO UNDERSTAND what I had seen and silently congratulating myself on the fact that I still had clean underwear, I didn't realize that Sister Clare Marie had entered the reception lounge. She circled around from behind me, coming between me and the window, as white and silent as an orbiting moon.

In her habit, with her soft pink face, button nose, and slight overbite, she needed only a pair of long furry ears to call herself a rabbit and attend a costume party.

"Child," she said, "you look as if you've seen a ghost."

"Yes, Sister."

"Are you all right?"

"No, Sister."

Twitching her nose, as though she detected a scent that alarmed her, she said, "Child?"

I do not know why she calls me *child*. I have never heard her address anyone else that way, not even any of the children in the school.

Because Sister Clare Marie was a sweet gentle person, I did not want to alarm her, especially considering that the threat had passed, at least for the moment, and considering as well that, being a nun, she didn't carry the hand grenades I would need before venturing again into the storm.

"It's just the snow," I said.

“The snow?”

“The wind and cold and snow. I’m a desert boy, ma’am. I’m not used to weather like this. It’s mean out there.”

“The weather isn’t mean,” she assured me with a smile. “The weather is glorious. The world is beautiful and glorious. Humanity can be mean, and turn away from what’s good. But weather is a gift.”

“All right,” I said.

Sensing that I hadn’t been convinced, she continued: “Blizzards dress the land in a clean habit, lightning and thunder make a music of celebration, wind blows away all that’s stale, even floods raise up everything green. For cold there’s hot. For dry there’s wet. For wind there’s calm. For night there’s day, which might not seem like weather to you, but it is. Embrace the weather, child, and you’ll understand the *balance* of the world.”

I am twenty-one, have known the misery of an indifferent father and a hostile mother, have had a part of my heart cut out by a sharp knife of loss, have killed men in self-defense and to spare the lives of innocents, and have left behind all the friends whom I cherished in Pico Mundo. I believe all this must show that I am a page on which the past has written clearly for anyone to read. Yet Sister Clare Marie sees some reason to call me—and only me—*child*, which sometimes I hope means that she possesses some understanding I do not have, but which most often I suspect means that she is as naïve as she is sweet and that she does not know me at all.

“Embrace the weather,” she said, “but please don’t puddle on the floor.”

This seemed to be an admonition that once might have been better directed at Boo than at me. Then I realized that my ski boots were caked with snow, which was melting on the limestone.

“Oh. Sorry, Sister.”

When I took off my jacket, she hung it on a coatrack, and when I shucked off my boots, she picked them up to put them on the rubber mat under the rack.

As she moved away with the boots, I pulled the bottom of my sweater over my head, and used it as a towel to blot my soaked hair

and damp face.

I heard the door open and the wind shriek.

Panicked, I pulled down my sweater and saw Sister Clare Marie standing on the threshold, looking less like a rabbit than like an array of sails on a vessel on course in Arctic straits, vigorously knocking my boots together so the snow caked on them would be left outside.

Beyond her, the blizzard didn't seem as though it wanted to be embraced, not this storm of storms. It looked instead as though it wanted to blow down the school and the abbey and the forest beyond, blow down everything on the face of the earth that dared to stand upright, and bury everything, and be done with civilization and with humanity once and for all.

By the time I reached her, before I could shout a warning above the wind, Sister Clare Marie retreated from the threshold.

Neither a demon nor an Amway salesperson loomed out of the frigid tempest before I pushed the door shut and engaged the dead-bolt lock once more.

As she placed the boots on the rubber mat, I said, "Wait, I'll get a mop, don't open the door, I'll get a mop and clean this up."

I sounded shaky, as if I had once been badly traumatized by a mop and needed to summon the courage to use one.

The nun didn't seem to notice the quaver in my voice. With a sunny smile, she said, "You'll do no such thing. You're a guest here. Letting you do my work, I'd be embarrassed in front of the Lord."

Indicating the puddle of melting slush on the floor, I said, "But I'm the one who made the mess."

"That's not a mess, child."

"It looks like a mess to me."

"That's weather! And it's my work. Besides, Mother Superior wants to see you. She called up to the abbey, and they said you'd been seen going outside, maybe you were coming this way, and here you are. She's in her office."

I watched her fetch a mop from a closet near the front door.

When she turned and saw that I hadn't left, she said, "Go on now, shoo, see what Mother Superior wants."

“You won’t open the door to wring out the mop on the stoop, will you, Sister?”

“Oh, there’s not enough to wring. It’s just a small puddle of weather come inside.”

“You won’t open the door just to glory in the blizzard, will you?” I asked.

“It is a fantastic day, isn’t it?”

“Fantastic,” I said with no enthusiasm.

“If I’ve got my chores done before None and rosary, then I might take time for the weather.”

None was the midafternoon prayer, at twenty minutes past four, more than six and a half hours from now.

“Good. Just before None—that’ll be a nice time for watching a storm. Much nicer than now.”

She said, “I might make a cup of hot chocolate and sit by a window and glory in the blizzard from a cozy corner of the kitchen.”

“Not too close to the window,” I said.

Her pink brow furrowed. “Whyever not, child?”

“Drafts. You don’t want to sit in a draft.”

“Nothing wrong with a good draft!” she assured me heartily. “Some are cold, some are warm, but it’s all just air on the move, circulating so it’s healthy to breathe.”

I left her swabbing up the small puddle of weather.

If something hideous came through the window with the one cracked pane, Sister Clare Marie, wielding the mop like a cudgel, would probably have the moves and the attitude to get the best of the beast.

CHAPTER 17

ON THE WAY TO THE MOTHER SUPERIOR'S office, I passed the large recreation room, where a dozen nuns were supervising the children at play.

Some of the kids have severe physical disabilities combined with mild mental retardation. They like board games, card games, dolls, toy soldiers. They decorate cupcakes themselves and help make fudge, and they enjoy arts and crafts. They like to have stories read to them, and they want to learn to read, and most of them do learn.

The others have either mild or severe physical disabilities but greater mental retardation than the first group. Some of these, like Justine in Room 32, seem not to be much with us, though most of them have an inner life that expresses itself overtly when least expected.

The betweeners—not as detached as Justine, not as involved as those who want to read—like to work with clay, string beads to make their own jewelry, play with stuffed animals, and perform small tasks that help the sisters. They enjoy hearing stories, too; the stories may be simpler, but the magic of stories remains potent for them.

What all of them like, regardless of their limits, is affection. At a touch, a hug, a kiss on the cheek, at any indication that you value them, respect them, believe in them, they shine.

Later in the day, in either of the two rehabilitation rooms, they will take physical therapy to gain strength, improve agility. Those

struggling to communicate will get speech therapy. For some, rehab is actually task instruction, during which they learn to dress themselves, to tell time, to make change and manage small allowances.

Special cases will move on from St. Bart's, be paired with assistance dogs or caregivers, graduate to a supported independence when they are eighteen or older. Because many of these kids are so severely disabled, however, the world will never welcome them, and this place is their home for life.

Fewer of the residents are adults than you might think. These children have been dealt terrible blows, most of them while not yet delivered from their mothers' wombs, others by violence before they were three. They are fragile. For them, twenty years is longevity.

You might think that watching them struggle through various kinds of rehab would be heartbreaking, considering that they are often destined to die young. But there is no heartbreak here. Their small triumphs thrill them as much as winning a marathon might thrill you. They know moments of unadulterated joy, they know wonder, and they have hope. Their spirits won't be chained. In my months among them, I have never heard one child complain.

As medical science has advanced, such institutions as St. Bart's have fewer kids damaged by severe cerebral palsy, by toxoplasmosis, by well-understood chromosomal abnormalities. Their beds are taken these days by the offspring of women who preferred not to give up cocaine or ecstasy, or hallucinogens, for nine boring months, who played dice with the devil. Other children here were badly beaten—skulls cracked, brains damaged—by their drunken fathers, by their mothers' meth-rotted boyfriends.

With so many new cells and lightless pits required, Hell must be going through a construction boom these days.

Some will accuse me of being judgmental. Thank you. And proud of it. You wreck a kid's life, I have no pity for you.

There are doctors who advocate killing these children at birth, with lethal injections, or who would let them die later by declining to treat their infections, allowing simple illnesses to become catastrophic.

More cells. More lightless pits.

Maybe my lack of compassion for these abusers of children—and other failures of mine—means I won't see Stormy on the Other Side, that the fire I face will be consuming rather than purifying. But at least if I wind up in that palpable dark where having no cable TV is the least of the inconveniences, I will have the pleasure of seeking you out if you have beaten a child. I will know just what to do with you, and I will have eternity to do it.

In the recreation room on that snowy morning, perhaps with Hell coming to meet us in the hours ahead, the children laughed and talked and gave themselves to make-believe.

At the piano in the corner sat a ten-year-old boy named Walter. He was a crack baby and a meth baby and a Wild Turkey baby and a God-knows-what baby. He could not speak and rarely made eye contact. He couldn't learn to dress himself. After hearing a melody just once, he could play it note-perfect, with passion and nuance. Although he had lost so much else, this gift of talent had survived.

He played softly, beautifully, lost in the music. I think it was Mozart. I'm too ignorant to know for sure.

While Walter made music, while the children played and laughed, bodachs crawled the room. The three last night had become seven.

CHAPTER 18

SISTER ANGELA, THE MOTHER SUPERIOR, MANAGED the convent and the school from a small office adjacent to the infirmary. The desk, the two visitors' chairs, and the file cabinets were simple but inviting.

On the wall behind her desk hung a crucifix, and on the other walls were three posters: George Washington; Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*; and Flannery O'Connor, the author of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and many other stories.

She admires these people for many reasons, but especially for one quality they all shared. She will not identify that quality. She wishes you to ponder the riddle and arrive at your own answer.

Standing in her office doorway, I said, "I'm sorry about my feet, ma'am."

She looked up from a file she was reviewing. "If they have a fragrance, it's not so intense that I smelled you coming."

"No, ma'am. I'm sorry for my stocking feet. Sister Clare Marie took my boots."

"I'm sure she'll give them back, Oddie. We've had no problem with Sister Clare Marie stealing footwear. Come in, sit down."

I settled into one of the chairs in front of her desk, indicated the posters, and said, "They're all Southerners."

"Southerners have many fine qualities, charm and civility among them, and a sense of the tragic, but that's not why these particular faces are inspiring to me."

I said, "Fame."

"Now you're being intentionally dense," she said.

"No, ma'am, not intentionally."

"If what I admired in these three was their fame, then I'd just as well have put up posters of Al Capone, Bart Simpson, and Tupac Shakur."

"That sure would be something," I said.

Leaning forward, lowering her voice, she said, "What's happened to dear Brother Timothy?"

"Nothing good. That's all I know for sure. Nothing good."

"One thing we can be certain of—he didn't dash off to Reno for some R and R. His disappearance must be related to the thing we spoke of last evening. The event the bodachs have come to witness."

"Yes, ma'am, whatever it is. I just saw seven of them in the recreation room."

"Seven." Her soft grandmotherly features stiffened with steely resolution. "Is the crisis at hand?"

"Not with seven. When I see thirty, forty, then I'll know we're coming to the edge. There's still time, but the clock is ticking."

"I spoke with Abbot Bernard about the discussion you and I had last night. And now with the disappearance of Brother Timothy, we're wondering if the children should be moved."

"Moved? Moved where?"

"We could take them into town."

"Ten miles in this weather?"

"In the garage we have two beefy four-wheel-drive extended SUVs with wheelchair lifts. They're on oversize tires to give more ground clearance, plus chains on the tires. Each is fitted with a plow. We can make our own path."

Moving the kids was not a good idea, but I sure wanted to see nuns in monster trucks plowing their way through a blizzard.

"We can take eight to ten in each van," she continued. "Moving half the sisters and all the children might require four trips, but if we start now we'll be done in a few hours, before nightfall."

Sister Angela is a doer. She likes to be on the move physically and intellectually, always conceiving and implementing projects,

accomplishing things.

Her can-do spirit is endearing. At that moment, she looked like whichever no-nonsense grandmother had passed down to George S. Patton the genes that had made him a great general.

I regretted having to let the air out of her plan after she'd evidently spent some time inflating it.

"Sister, we don't know for sure that the violence, when it happens, will happen here at the school."

She looked puzzled. "But it's already started. Brother Timothy, God rest his soul."

"We *think* it's started with Brother Tim, but we don't have a corpse."

She winced at the word *corpse*.

"We don't have a body," I amended, "so we don't know for sure what's happened. All we know is that the bodachs are drawn to the kids."

"And the children are here."

"But what if you move the kids in town to a hospital, a school, a church, and when we get them settled in, the bodachs show up there because that's where the violence is going to go down, not here at St. Bart's."

She was as good an analyst of strategy and tactics as Patton's grandma might have been. "So we would have been serving the forces of darkness when we thought we'd been thwarting them."

"Yes, ma'am. It's possible."

She studied me so intently that I convinced myself I could feel her periwinkle-blue stare riffling through the contents of my brain as if I had a simple file drawer between my ears.

"I'm so sorry for you, Oddie," she murmured.

I shrugged.

She said, "You know just enough so that, morally, you've got to act...but not enough to be certain exactly what to do."

"In the crunch, it clarifies," I said.

"But only at the penultimate moment, only then?"

"Yes, ma'am. Only then."

“So when the moment comes, the crunch—it’s always a plunge into chaos.”

“Well, ma’am, whatever it is, it’s never not memorable.”

Her right hand touched her pectoral cross, and her gaze traveled across the posters on her walls.

After a moment, I said, “I’m here to be with the kids, to walk the halls, the rooms, see if I can get a better feel for what might be coming. If that’s all right.”

“Yes. Of course.”

I rose from the chair. “Sister Angela, there’s something I want you to do, but I’d rather you didn’t ask me why.”

“What is it?”

“Be sure all the doors are dead-bolted, all the windows locked. And instruct the sisters not to go outside.”

I preferred not to tell her about the creature that I had seen in the storm. For one thing, on that day I stood in her office I did not yet have words to describe the apparition. Also, when nerves are too frayed, clear thinking unravels, so I needed her to be alert to danger without being in a continuous state of alarm.

Most important, I didn’t want her to worry that she had allied herself with someone who might be not merely a fry cook, and not merely a fry cook with a sixth sense, but a *totally insane* fry cook with a sixth sense.

“All right,” she said. “We’ll be sure we’re locked, and there’s no reason to go out in that storm, anyway.”

“Would you call Abbot Bernard and ask him to do the same thing? For the remaining hours of the Divine Office, the brothers shouldn’t go outside to enter the church through the grand cloister. Tell them to use the interior door between the abbey and the church.”

In these solemn circumstances, Sister Angela had been robbed of her most effective instrument of interrogation: that lovely smile sustained in patient and intimidating silence.

The storm drew her attention. As ominous as ashes, clouds of snow smoked across the window.

She looked up at me again. “Who’s out there, Oddie?”

“I don’t know yet,” I replied, which was true to the extent that I could not name what I had seen. “But they mean to do us harm.”

CHAPTER 19

WEARING AN IMAGINARY DOG COLLAR, I LET intuition have my leash, and was led in a circuitous route through the ground-floor rooms and hallways of the school, to a set of stairs, to the second floor, where the Christmas decorations did not inspire in me a merry mood.

When I stopped at the open door to Room 32, I suspected that I had deceived myself. I had not given myself to intuition, after all, but had been guided by an unconscious desire to repeat the experience of the previous night, when it seemed that Stormy had spoken to me through sleeping Annamarie by way of mute Justine.

At the time, as much as I had desired the contact, I had spurned it. I had been right to do so.

Stormy is my past, and she will be my future only after my life in this world is over, when time finishes and eternity begins. What is required of me now is patience and perseverance. The only way back is the way forward.

I told myself to turn away, to wander farther onto the second floor. Instead I crossed the threshold and stood just inside the room.

Drowned by her father at four, left for dead but still alive eight years later, the radiantly beautiful girl sat in bed, leaning against plump pillows, eyes closed.

Her hands lay in her lap, both palms upturned, as though she waited to receive some gift.

The voices of the wind were muffled but legion: chanting, snarling, hissing at the single window.

The collection of plush-toy kittens watched me from the shelves near her bed.

Annamarie and her wheelchair were gone. I had seen her in the recreation room, where behind the laughter of children, quiet Walter, who could not dress himself without assistance, played classical piano.

The air seemed heavy, like the atmosphere between the first flash of lightning and the first peal of thunder, when the rain has formed miles above but has not yet reached the earth, when fat drops are descending by the millions, compressing the air below them as one last warning of their drenching approach.

I stood in light-headed anticipation.

Beyond the window, frenzies of driven snow chased down the day, and though obviously the wind still flogged the morning, its voices faded, and slowly a cone of silence settled upon the room.

Justine opened her eyes. Although usually she looks through everything in this world, now she met my gaze.

I became aware of a familiar fragrance. Peaches.

When I worked as a short-order cook in Pico Mundo, before the world grew as dark as it is now, I washed my hair in a peach-scented shampoo that Stormy had given me. It effectively replaced the aromas of bacon and hamburgers and fried onions that lingered in my locks after a long shift at the griddle and grill.

At first dubious about peach shampoo, I had suggested that a bacon-hamburgers-fried-onions scent ought to be appealing, ought to make the mouth water, and that most people had quasi-erotic reactions to the aromas of fried food.

Stormy had said, "Listen, griddle boy, you're not as suave as Ronald McDonald, but you're cute enough to eat *without* smelling like a sandwich."

As any red-blooded boy would have done, I thereafter used peach-scented shampoo every day.

The fragrance that now rose in Room 32 was not of peaches but, more precisely, was of that particular peach shampoo, which I had

not brought with me to St. Bart's.

This was wrong. I knew that I should leave at once. The scent of peach shampoo immobilized me.

The past cannot be redeemed. What has been and what *might* have been both bring us to what is.

To know grief, we must be in the river of time, because grief thrives in the present and promises to be with us in the future until the end point. Only time conquers time and its burdens. There is no grief before or after time, which is all the consolation we should need.

Nevertheless, I stood there, waiting, full of hope that was the wrong hope.

Stormy is dead and does not belong in this world, and Justine is profoundly brain-damaged from prolonged oxygen deprivation and cannot speak. Yet the girl attempted to communicate, not on her own behalf but for another who had no voice at all this side of the grave.

What came from Justine were not words but thick knots of sound that reflected the wrenched and buckled nature of her brain, eerily bringing to mind a desperate drowner struggling for air underwater, wretched sounds that were sodden and bloated and unbearably sad.

An anguished *no* escaped me, and the girl at once stopped trying to speak.

Justine's usually unexpressive features tightened into a look of frustration. Her gaze slid away from me, tracked left, tracked right, and then to the window.

She suffered from a partial paralysis general in nature, though her left side was more profoundly affected than her right. With some effort, she raised her more useful arm from the bed. Her slender hand reached toward me, as though beseeching me to come closer, but then pointed to the window.

I saw only the bleak shrouded daylight and the falling snow.

Her eyes met mine, more focused than I had ever seen them, as pellucid as always but also with a yearning in those blue depths that I had never glimpsed before, not even when I had been in this room

the previous night and had heard sleeping Annamarie say *Loop me in*.

Her intense stare moved from me to the window, returned to me, slid once more to the window, at which she still pointed. Her hand trembled with the effort to control it.

I moved deeper into Room 32.

The single window provided a view of the cloister below, where the brothers had daily gathered when this had been their first abbey. The open courtyard lay deserted. No one lurked between the columns in the portion of the colonnade that I could see.

Across the courtyard, its stone face softened by veils of snow, rose another wing of the abbey. On the second floor, a few windows shone softly with lamplight in the white gloom of the storm, though most of the children were downstairs at this hour.

The window directly opposite from the panes at which I stood glowed brighter than the others. The longer I gazed at it, the more the light seemed to draw me, as though it were a signal lamp set out by someone in distress.

A figure appeared at that window, a backlighted silhouette, as featureless as a bodach, though it was not one of them.

Justine had lowered her arm to the bed.

Her stare remained demanding.

“All right,” I whispered, turning away from the window, “all right,” but said no more.

I dared not continue, because on my tongue was a name that I longed to speak.

The girl closed her eyes. Her lips parted, and she began to breathe as if, exhausted, she had fallen into sleep.

I went to the open door but did not leave.

Gradually the strange silence lifted, and the wind breathed at the window again, and muttered as if cursing in a brutal language.

If I had properly understood what had happened, I had been given direction in my search for the meaning of the gathering bodachs. The hour of violence approached, perhaps was not imminent, but approached nonetheless, and duty called me elsewhere.

Yet I stood in Room 32 until the fragrance of peach shampoo faded, until I could detect no trace of it, until certain memories would relinquish their grip on me.

CHAPTER 20

ROOM 14 LAY DIRECTLY ACROSS THE COURTYARD from Room 32, in the north corridor. A single plaque had been fixed to the door, bearing one name: JACOB.

A floor lamp beside an armchair, a squat nightstand lamp, and a fluorescent ceiling fixture compensated for daylight so drear that it could press itself inside no farther than the window sill.

Because Room 14 contained only a single bed, the space could accommodate a four-foot-square oak table, at which sat Jacob.

I had seen him a couple of times, but I did not know him. “May I come in?”

He didn’t say yes, but he didn’t say no, either. Deciding to take his silence as an invitation, I sat across from him at the table.

Jacob is one of the few adults housed at the school. He is in his middle twenties.

I didn’t know the name of the condition with which he had been born, but evidently it involved a chromosomal abnormality.

About five feet tall, with a head slightly too small for his body a sloped forehead, low-set ears, and soft heavy features, he exhibited some of the characteristics of Down’s syndrome.

The bridge of his nose was not flat, however, which is an indicator of Down’s, and his eyes did not have the inner epicanthic folds that give the eyes of Down’s people an Asian cast.

More telling, he did not exhibit the quick smile or the sunny and gentle disposition virtually universal among those with Down’s. He

did not look at me, and his expression remained dour.

His head was misshapen as no Down's person's head would ever be. A greater weight of bone accumulated in the left side of his skull than in the right. His features were not symmetrical, but were subtly out of balance, one eye set slightly lower than the other, his left jaw more prominent than his right, his left temple convex and his right temple more than usually concave.

Stocky, with heavy shoulders and a thick neck, he hunched over the table, intent on the task before him. His tongue, which appeared to be thicker than a normal tongue but which didn't usually protrude, was at the moment pinched gently between his teeth.

On the table were two large tablets of drawing paper. One lay to the right of him, closed. The second was propped on a slantboard.

Jacob was drawing on the second tablet. Ordered in an open case, an array of pencils offered lead in many thicknesses and in different degrees of softness.

His current project was a portrait of a strikingly lovely woman, nearly finished. Presented in three-quarter profile, she stared past the artist's left shoulder.

Inevitably, I thought of the hunchback of Nôtre Dame: Quasimodo, his tragic hope, his unrequited love.

"You're very talented," I said, which was true.

He did not reply.

Although his hands were short and broad, his stubby fingers wielded the pencil with dexterity and exquisite precision.

"My name is Odd Thomas."

He took his tongue into his mouth, tucked it into one cheek, and pressed his lips together.

"I'm staying in the guesthouse at the abbey."

Looking around at the room, I saw that the dozen framed pencil portraits decorating the walls were of this woman. Here she smiled; there she laughed; most often she appeared contemplative, serene.

In an especially compelling piece, she had been rendered full-face, eyes brimming bright, cheeks jeweled with tears. Her features had not been melodramatically distorted; instead, you could see that her

anguish was great but also that she strove with some success to conceal the depth of it.

Such a complex emotional state, rendered so subtly, suggested that my praise of Jacob's talent had been inadequate. The woman's emotion was palpable.

The condition of the artist's heart, while he had labored on this portrait, was also evident, somehow infused into the work. Drawing, he had been in torment.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"Do you float away when the dark comes?" He had only a mild speech impediment. His thick tongue apparently wasn't fissured.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, Jacob."

Too shy to look at me, he continued drawing, and after a silence said, "I seen the ocean some days, but not that day."

"What day, Jacob?"

"The day they went and the bell rung."

Although already I sensed a rhythm to his conversation and knew that rhythm was a sign of meaning, I couldn't find the beat.

He was willing to count cadence alone. "Jacob's scared he'll float wrong when the dark comes."

From the pencil case, he selected a new instrument.

"Jacob's gotta float where the bell rung."

As he paused in his work and studied the unfinished portrait, his tragic features were beautified by a look of intense affection.

"Never seen where the bell rung, and the ocean it moves, and it moves, so where the bell rung is gone somewhere new."

Sadness captured his face, but the look of affection did not entirely retreat.

For a while, he chewed worriedly on his lower lip.

When he set to work with the new pencil, he said, "And the dark is gonna come with the dark."

"What do you mean, Jacob—the dark is going to come with the dark?"

He glanced at the snow-scrubbed window. "When there's no light again, the dark is gonna come, too. Maybe. Maybe the dark is gonna come, too."

“When there’s no light again—that means tonight?”

Jacob nodded. “Maybe tonight.”

“And the other dark that’s coming with the night...do you mean death, Jacob?”

He thrust his tongue between his teeth again. After rolling the pencil in his fingers to find the right grip, he set to work once more on the portrait.

I wondered if I had been too straightforward when I had used the word *death*. Perhaps he expressed himself obliquely not because that was the only way his mind worked, but because speaking about some subjects too directly disturbed him.

After a while, he said, “He wants me dead.”

CHAPTER 21

WITH LEAD HE SHADED LOVE INTO THE woman's eyes.

As one who had no talent except for magic at the griddle and grill, I watched with respect as Jacob created her from memory, as he made real on paper what was in his mind and what was evidently lost to him except by the grace of his art.

When I had given him time to proceed but had gotten not another word from him, I said, "Who wants you dead, Jacob?"

"The Neverwas."

"Help me understand."

"The Neverwas came once to see, and Jacob was full of the black, and the Neverwas said, '*Let him die.*'"

"He came here to this room?"

Jacob shook his head. "A long time ago the Neverwas came, before the ocean and the bell and the floating away."

"Why do you call him the Neverwas?"

"That's his name."

"He must have another name."

"No. He's the Neverwas, and we don't care."

"I never heard anyone named the Neverwas before."

Jacob said, "Never heard no one named the Odd Thomas before."

"All right. Fair enough."

Employing an X-Acto knife, Jacob shaved the point on the pencil.

Watching him, I wished that I could whittle my dull brain to a sharper point. If only I could understand something about the

scheme of simple metaphors in which he spoke, I might be able to crack the code of his conversation.

I had made some progress, figuring out that when he said “the dark is gonna come with the dark,” he meant that death was coming tonight or some night soon.

Although his drawing ability made him a savant, that was the extent of his special talent. Jacob wasn’t clairvoyant. His warning of oncoming death was not a presentiment.

He had seen something, heard something, *knew* something that I had not seen, had not heard, did not know. His conviction that death loomed was based on hard evidence, not on supernatural perception.

Now that the pencil wood had been cut away, he put down the X-Acto knife and used a sandpaper block to sharpen the point of the lead.

Brooding about the riddle that was Jacob, I stared at the snow falling thicker and faster than ever past the window, so thick that maybe you could drown out there, trying to breathe but your lungs filling up with snow.

“Jacob’s dumb,” he said, “but not stupid.”

When I shifted my attention from the window, I discovered he was looking at me for the first time.

“That must be another Jacob,” I said. “I don’t see dumb here.”

At once he shifted his eyes to the pencil, and he put aside the sandpaper block. In a different, singsong voice, he said, “Dumb as a duck run down by a truck.”

“Dumb doesn’t draw like Michelangelo.”

“Dumb as a cow knocked flat by a plow.”

“You’re repeating something you heard, aren’t you?”

“Dumb as a mutt with his nose up his butt.”

“No more,” I said softly. “Okay? No more.”

“There’s lots more.”

“I don’t want to hear. It hurts me to hear this.”

He seemed surprised. “Hurts why?”

“Because I like you, Jake. I think you’re special.”

He was silent. His hands trembled, and the pencil ticked against the table. He glanced at me, heartbreaking vulnerability in his eyes. He shyly looked away.

“Who said those things to you?” I asked.

“You know. Kids.”

“Kids here at Saint Bart’s?”

“No. Kids before the ocean and the bell and the floating away.”

In this world where too many are willing to see only the light that is visible, never the Light Invisible, we have a daily darkness that is night, and we encounter another darkness from time to time that is death, the deaths of those we love, but the third and most constant darkness that is with us every day, at all hours of every day, is the darkness of the mind, the pettiness and meanness and hatred, which we have invited into ourselves, and which we pay out with generous interest.

“Before the ocean and the bell and the floating away,” Jacob repeated.

“Those kids were just jealous. Jake, see, you could do something better than anything they could do.”

“Not Jacob.”

“Yes, you.”

He sounded dubious: “What could I do better?”

“Draw. Of all the things they could do that you couldn’t, there wasn’t one thing they could do as well as you can draw. So they were jealous and called you names and made fun of you—to make themselves feel better.”

He stared at his hands until the tremors stopped, until the pencil was steady, and then he continued working on the portrait.

His resiliency was not the resiliency of the dumb but of a lamb who can remember hurt but cannot sustain the anger or the bitterness that brittles the heart.

“Not stupid,” he said. “Jacob knows what he seen.”

I waited, then said, “What did you see, Jake?”

“Them.”

“Who?”

“Not scared of them.”

“Of who?”

“Them and the Neverwas. Not scared of them. Jacob’s only scared he’ll float wrong when the dark comes. Never seen where the bell rung, wasn’t there when the bell rung, and the ocean it moves, it always moves, so where the bell rung is gone somewhere new.”

We had come full circle. In fact I felt as if I had been on a merry-go-round too long.

My wristwatch read 10:16.

I was willing to go around and around some more, in the hope that I would be enlightened instead of dizzied.

Sometimes enlightenment descends upon you when you least expect it: like the time that I and a smiling Japanese chiropractor, who was also an herbalist, were hanging side by side, bound with rope, from a rack in a meat locker.

Some difficult guys with no respect for alternative medicine or human life were intending to return to the meat locker and torture us to get information they wanted. They were not seeking the most effective herbal formula to cure athlete’s foot or anything like that. They wanted to tear from us information regarding the whereabouts of a large sum of cash.

Our situation was made more dire by the fact that the difficult guys were mistaken; we didn’t have the information they wanted. After hours of torturing us, all they would get for their effort would be the fun of hearing us scream, which probably would have been all right with them if they’d also had a case of beer and some chips.

The chiropractor-herbalist spoke maybe forty-seven words of English, and I only spoke two words of Japanese that I could recall under pressure. Although we were highly motivated to escape before our captors returned with an array of pliers, a blowtorch, cattle prods, a CD of the Village People singing Wagner, and other fiendish instruments, I didn’t think we could conspire successfully when my two words of Japanese were *sushi* and *sake*.

For half an hour, our relationship was marked by my sputtering frustration and by his unshakable patience. To my surprise, with a series of ingenious facial expressions, eight words that included *spaghetti* and *linguini* and *Houdini* and *tricky*, he managed to make

me understand that in addition to being a chiropractor and an herbalist, he was a contortionist who had once had a nightclub act when he had been younger.

He was not as limber as in his youth, but with my cooperation, he managed to use various parts of my body as stepping-stones to eel backward and up to the rack from which we were suspended, where he chewed through a knot and freed himself, then freed me.

We stay in touch. From time to time he sends me pictures from Tokyo, mostly of his kids. And I send him little boxes of dried, chocolate-covered California dates, which he adores.

Now, sitting across the table from Jacob, I figured that if I could be even half as patient as the smiling chiropractor-herbalist-contortionist, and if I kept in mind that to my Japanese friend I must have seemed as impenetrable as Jacob seemed to me, I might in time not only puzzle out the meaning of Jacob's oblique conversation but might also tease from him the thing that he seemed to know, the vital detail, that would help me understand what terror was fast approaching St. Bartholomew's.

Unfortunately, Jacob was no longer talking. When I had first sat down at the table, he'd been mum. Now he was mum to twenty powers of ten. Nothing existed for him except the drawing on which he worked.

I tried more conversational gambits than a lonely logomaniac at a singles' bar. Some people like to hear themselves talk, but I like to hear myself silent. After five minutes, I exhausted my tolerance for the sound of my voice.

Although Jacob sat here in the tick of time that bridges past and future, he had cast his mind back to another day before the ocean and the bell and the floating away, whatever that might mean.

Rather than waste time pecking at him until I wore my beak down to a nub, I got to my feet and said, "I'll come back this afternoon, Jacob."

If he looked forward to the pleasure of my company, he did a superb job of concealing his delight.

I scanned the framed portraits on the walls and said, "She was your mother, wasn't she?"

Not even that question drew a reaction from him. Painstakingly, he restored her to life with the power of the pencil.

CHAPTER 22

AT THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF THE SECOND floor, Sister Miriam was on duty at the nurses' station.

If Sister Miriam grips her lower lip with two fingers and pulls it down to reveal the pink inner surface, you will see a tattoo in blue ink, *Deo gratias*, which is Latin for “Thanks be to God.”

This is not a statement of commitment required of nuns. If it were, the world would probably have even fewer nuns than it does now.

Long before she ever considered the life of the convent, Sister Miriam had been a social worker in Los Angeles, an employee of the federal government. She worked with teenage girls from disadvantaged families, striving to rescue them from gang life and other horrors.

Most of this I know from Sister Angela, the mother superior, because Sister Miriam not only doesn't toot her own horn—she does not have a horn to toot.

As a challenge to a girl named Jalissa, an intelligent fourteen-year-old who had great promise but who had been on the gang path and about to acquire a gang tattoo, Miriam had said, *Girl, what do I have to do to make you think how you're trading a full life for a withered one? I talk sense to you, but it doesn't matter. I cry for you, you're amused. Do I have to bleed for you to get your attention?*

She then offered a deal: If Jalissa would promise, for thirty days, to stay away from friends who were in a gang or who hung out with

a gang, and if she would not get a gang tattoo the following day as she intended, Miriam would take her at her word and would have her own inner lip tattooed with what she called “a symbol of *my* gang.”

An audience of twelve at-risk girls, including Jalissa, gathered to watch, wince, and squirm as the tattooist performed his needlework.

Miriam refused topical anesthetics. She had chosen the tender tissue of the inner lip because the cringe factor would impress the girls. She bled. Tears flowed, but she made not one sound of pain.

That level of commitment and the inventive ways she expressed it made Miriam an effective counselor. These years later, Jalissa has two college degrees and is an executive in the hotel industry.

Miriam rescued many other girls from lives of crime, squalor, and depravity. You might expect that one day she would become the subject of a movie with Halle Berry in the title role.

Instead, a parent complained about the spiritual element that was part of Miriam’s counseling strategy. As a government employee, she was sued by an organization of activist attorneys on the grounds of separation of church and state. They wanted her to cut spiritual references from her counseling, and they insisted that *Deo gratias* be either obscured with another tattoo or expunged. They believed that in the privacy of counseling sessions, she would peel down her lip and corrupt untold numbers of young girls.

You might think this case would be laughed out of court, but you would be as wrong as you were about the Halle Berry movie. The court sided with the activists.

Ordinarily, government employees are not easily canned. Their unions will fight ferociously to save the job of an alcoholic clerk who shows up at work only three days a week and then spends a third of his workday in a toilet stall, tipping from a flask or vomiting.

Miriam was an embarrassment to her union and received only token support. Eventually she accepted a modest severance package.

For a few years thereafter, she held less satisfying jobs before she heard the call to the life she now leads.

Standing behind the counter at the nurses' station, reviewing inventory sheets, she looked up as I approached and said, "Well, here comes young Mr. Thomas in his usual clouds of mystery."

Unlike Sister Angela, Abbot Bernard, and Brother Knuckles, she had not been told of my special gift. My universal key and privileges intrigued her, however, and she seemed to intuit something of my true nature.

"I'm afraid you mistake my perpetual state of bafflement for an air of mystery, Sister Miriam."

If they ever did make a movie about her, the producers would hew closer to the truth if they cast Queen Latifah instead of Halle Berry. Sister Miriam has Latifah's size and royal presence, and perhaps even more charisma than the actress.

She regards me always with friendly but gimlet-eyed interest, as though she knows that I'm getting away with something even if it's not something terribly naughty.

"Thomas is an English name," she said, "but there must be Irish blood in your family, considering how you spread blarney as smooth as warm butter on a muffin."

"No Irish blood, I'm afraid. Although if you knew my family, you would agree that I come from *strange* blood."

"You're not looking at a surprised nun, are you, dear?"

"No, Sister. You don't look at all surprised. Could I ask you a few questions about Jacob, in Room Fourteen?"

"The woman he draws is his mother."

From time to time, Sister Miriam seems just a little psychic herself.

"His mother. That's what I figured. When did she die?"

"Twelve years ago, of cancer, when he was thirteen. He was very close to her. She seems to have been a devoted, loving person."

"What about his father?"

Distress puckered her plum-dark face. "I don't believe he was ever in the picture. The mother never married. Before her death, she arranged for Jacob's care at another church facility. When we opened, he was transferred here."

"We were talking for a while, but he's not easy to follow."

Now I was looking at a wimple-framed look of surprise. “Jacob talked with you, dear?”

“Is that unusual?” I asked.

“He doesn’t talk with most people. He’s so shy. I’ve been able to bring him out of his shell...” She leaned across the counter toward me, searching my eyes, as if she had seen a fishy secret swim through them and hoped to hook it. “I shouldn’t be surprised that he’ll speak with you. Not at all surprised. You’ve got something that makes everyone open up, don’t you, dear?”

“Maybe it’s because I’m a good listener,” I said.

“No,” she said. “No, that’s not it. Not that you aren’t a good listener. You’re an exceptionally good listener, dear.”

“Thank you, Sister.”

“Have you ever seen a robin on a lawn, head cocked, listening for worms moving all but silently under the grass? If you were beside the robin, dear, you would get the worm first every time.”

“That’s quite an image. I’ll have to give it a try come spring. Anyway, his conversation is kind of enigmatic. He kept talking about a day when he wasn’t allowed to go to the ocean but, quote, ‘they went and the bell rung.’ ”

“ ‘Never seen where the bell rung,’ ” Sister Miriam quoted, “ ‘and the ocean it moves, so where the bell rung is gone somewhere new.’ ”

“Do you know what he means?” I asked.

“His mother’s ashes were buried at sea. They rang a bell when they scattered them, and Jacob was told about it.”

I heard his voice in memory: *Jacob’s only scared he’ll float wrong when the dark comes.*

“Ah,” I said, feeling just a little Sherlocky, after all. “He worries that he doesn’t know the spot where her ashes were scattered, and he knows the ocean is always moving, so he’s afraid he won’t be able to find her when he dies.”

“The poor boy. I’ve told him a thousand times she’s in Heaven, and they’ll be together again one day, but the mental picture he has of her floating away in the sea is too vivid to dispel.”

I wanted to go back to Room 14 and hug him. You can't fix things with a hug, but you can't make them any worse, either.

"What is the Neverwas?" I asked. "He's afraid of the Neverwas."

Sister Miriam frowned. "I haven't heard him use the term. The Neverwas?"

"Jacob says he was full of the black—"

"The black?"

"I don't know what he means. He said he was full of the black, and the Neverwas came and said, 'Let him die.' This was a long time ago, 'before the ocean and the bell and the floating away.' "

"Before his mother died," she interpreted.

"Yes. That's right. But he's still afraid of the Neverwas."

She trained upon me that gimlet-eyed stare again, as if she hoped she might pierce my cloud of mystery and pop it as if it were a balloon. "Why are you so interested in Jacob, dear?"

I couldn't tell her that my lost girl, my Stormy, had made contact with me from the Other Side and had made known, through the instrument of Justine, another sweet lost girl, that Jacob possessed information concerning the source of the violence that would soon befall the school, perhaps before the next dawn.

Well, I could have told her, I guess, but I didn't want to take a chance that she would pull down my lower lip with the expectation that tattooed on the inside of it would be the word *lunatic*.

Consequently, I said, "His art. The portraits on his wall. I thought they might be pictures of his mother. The drawings are so full of love. I wondered what it must be like to love your mother so much."

"What a peculiar thing to say."

"Isn't it?"

"Don't you love your mother, dear?"

"I guess so. A hard, sharp, thorny kind of love that might be pity more than anything else."

I was leaning against the counter, and she took one of my hands in both of hers, squeezed it gently. "I'm a good listener, too, dear. You want to sit down with me for a while and talk?"

I shook my head. "She doesn't love me or anyone, doesn't believe in love. She's afraid of love, of the obligations that come with it.

Herself is all she needs, the admirer in the mirror. And that's the story. There's really nothing more to sit down and talk about."

The truth is that my mother is a funhouse full of scares, such a twisted spirit and psychological mare's nest that Sister Miriam and I could have talked about her without stop until the spring equinox.

But with the morning almost gone, with seven bodachs in the recreation room, with living boneyards stalking the storm, with Death opening the door to a luge chute and inviting me to go for a bobsled ride, I didn't have time to put on a victim suit and tell the woeful tale of my sorrowful childhood. Neither the time nor the inclination.

"Well, I'm always here," said Sister Miriam. "Think of me as Oprah with a vow of poverty. Anytime you want to pour out your soul, I'm here, and you don't have to hold the emotion through commercial breaks."

I smiled. "You're a credit to the nun profession."

"And you," she said, "are still standing there in clouds of mystery."

As I turned from the nurses' station, my attention was drawn to movement at the farther end of the hall. A hooded figure stood in the open stairwell door, where he had apparently been watching me as I talked with Sister Miriam. Aware that he'd been seen, he retreated, letting the door fall shut.

The hood concealed the face, or at least that was the story I tried to sell myself. Although I was inclined to believe that the observer had been Brother Leopold, the suspicious novice with the sunny Iowa face, I was pretty sure the tunic had been black rather than gray.

I hurried to the end of the hall, stepped into the stairwell, and held my breath. Not a sound.

Although the convent on the third floor was forbidden to me and to everyone but the sisters, I ascended to the landing and peered up the last flight of stairs. They were deserted.

No imminent threat loomed, yet my heart raced. My mouth had gone dry. The back of my neck was stippled with cold sweat.

I was still trying to sell myself on the idea that the hood had concealed the face, but I wasn't buying.

Plunging two steps at a time, wishing I were not in my stocking feet, which slipped on the stone, I went down to the ground floor. I opened the stairwell door, looked out, and did not see anyone.

I descended to the basement, hesitated, opened the door at the foot of the stairs, and halted on the threshold, listening.

A long hallway led the length of the old abbey. A second hall crossed the first at midpoint, but I couldn't see into it from where I stood. Down here were the Kit Kat Katakombs, the garage, electrical vaults, machinery rooms, and storerooms. I would need a lot of time to investigate all those spaces.

Regardless of how long and thoroughly I searched, I doubted that I would find a lurking monk. And if I did find the phantom, I would probably wish that I had not gone looking for him.

When he had been standing in the open stairwell door, a ceiling light had shown down directly on him. The hoods on the monks' tunics are not as dramatic as the hood on a medieval cowl. The fabric does not overhang the forehead sufficiently to cast an identity-concealing shadow, especially not in a direct fall of light.

The figure in the stairwell had been faceless. And worse than faceless. The light spilling into the hood had found nothing there to reflect it, only a terrible black emptiness.

CHAPTER 23

MY IMMEDIATE REACTION TO HAVING SEEN Death himself was to get something to eat.

I had skipped breakfast. If Death had taken me before I'd had something tasty for lunch, I would have been really, really angry with myself.

Besides, I couldn't function properly on an empty stomach. My thinking was probably clouded by plunging blood sugar. Had I eaten breakfast, perhaps Jacob would have made more sense to me.

The convent kitchen is large and institutional. Nevertheless, it's a cozy space, most likely because it is always saturated with mouthwatering aromas.

When I entered, the air was redolent of cinnamon, brown sugar, baked pork chops simmering with sliced apples, and a host of other delicious smells that made me weak in the knees.

The eight sisters on the culinary detail, all with shining faces and smiles, a few with flour smudges on their cheeks, some with their tunic sleeves rolled back a turn or two, all wearing blue aprons over their white habits, were busy at many tasks. Two were singing, and their lilting voices made the most of a charming melody.

I felt as if I had wandered into an old movie and that Julie Andrews, as a nun, might sweep into the room, singing to a sweet little church mouse perched on the back of her hand.

When I asked Sister Regina Marie if I could make a sandwich, she insisted on preparing it for me. Wielding a knife with a dexterity

and pleasure almost unseemly for a nun, she sliced two slabs of bread from a plump loaf, carved a stack of thin slices of beef from a cold roast, lathered one piece of bread with mustard, the other with mayonnaise. She assembled beef, Swiss cheese, lettuce, tomato, chopped olives, and bread into a teetering marvel, pressed it flatter with one hand, quartered it, plated it, added a pickle, and presented it to me in the time it took me to wash my hands at the pot sink.

The kitchen offers stools here and there at counters, where you can have a cup of coffee or eat without being underfoot. I sought one of these—and came across Rodion Romanovich.

The bearish Russian was working at a long counter on which stood ten sheet cakes in long pans. He was icing them.

Near him on the granite counter lay the volume about poisons and famous poisoners in history. I noticed a bookmark inserted at about page fifty.

When he saw me, he glowered and indicated a stool near him.

Because I'm an amiable fellow and loath to insult anyone, I find it awkward to decline an invitation, even if it comes from a possibly homicidal Russian with too much curiosity about my reasons for being a guest of the abbey.

"How is your spiritual revitalization proceeding?" Romanovich asked.

"Slow but sure."

"Since we do not have cactuses here in the Sierra, Mr. Thomas, what will you be shooting?"

"Not all fry cooks meditate to gunfire, sir." I took a bite of the sandwich. Fabulous. "Some prefer to bludgeon things."

With his attention devoted to the application of icing to the first of the ten cakes, he said, "I myself find that baking calms the mind and allows for contemplation."

"So you made the cakes, not just the icing?"

"That is correct. This is my best recipe...orange-and-almond cake with dark-chocolate frosting."

"Sounds delicious. So to date, how many people have you killed with it?"

"I long ago lost count, Mr. Thomas. But they all died happy."

Sister Regina Marie brought a glass of Coca-Cola for me, and I thanked her, and she said she had added two drops of vanilla to the Coke because she knew I preferred it that way.

When the sister departed, Romanovich said, “You are universally liked.”

“No, not really, sir. They’re nuns. They have to be nice to everyone.”

Romanovich’s brow seemed to include a hydraulic mechanism that allowed it to beetle farther over his deep-set eyes when his mood darkened. “I am usually suspicious of people who are universally liked.”

“In addition to being an imposing figure,” I said, “you’re surprisingly solemn for a Hoosier.”

“I am a Russian by birth. We are sometimes a solemn people.”

“I keep forgetting your Russian background. You’ve lost so much of your accent, people might think you’re Jamaican.”

“You may be surprised that I have never been mistaken for one.”

He finished frosting the first cake, slid it aside, and pulled another pan in front of him.

I said, “You do know what a Hoosier is, don’t you?”

“A Hoosier is a person who is a native of or an inhabitant of the state of Indiana.”

“I’ll bet the definition reads that way word for word in the dictionary.”

He said nothing. He just frosted.

“Since you’re a native Russian and not currently an inhabitant of Indiana, you’re not at the moment really a Hoosier.”

“I am an expatriate Hoosier, Mr. Thomas. When in time I return to Indianapolis, I will once more be a full and complete Hoosier.”

“Once a Hoosier, always a Hoosier.”

“That is correct.”

The pickle had a nice crunch. I wondered if Romanovich had added a few drops of anything lethal to the brine in the pickle jar. Well, too late. I took another bite of the dill.

“Indianapolis,” I said, “has a robust public library system.”

“Yes, it does.”

“As well as eight universities or colleges with libraries of their own.”

Without looking up from the cake, he said, “You are in your stocking feet, Mr. Thomas.”

“The better to sneak up on people. With all those libraries, there must be a lot of jobs for librarians in Indianapolis.”

“The competition for our services is positively cut-throat. If you wear zippered rubber boots and enter by the mud room at the back of the convent, off the kitchen, you make less mess for the sisters.”

“I was mortified at the mess I made, sir. I’m afraid I didn’t have the foresight to bring a pair of zippered rubber boots.”

“How peculiar. You strike me as a young man who is usually prepared for anything.”

“Not really, sir. Mostly I make it up as I go along. So at which of those many Indianapolis libraries do you work?”

“The Indiana State Library opposite the Capitol, at one-forty North Senate Avenue. The facility houses over thirty-four thousand volumes about Indiana or by Indiana writers. The library and the genealogy department are open Monday through Friday, eight o’clock until four-thirty, eight-thirty until four on Saturday. Closed Sunday, as well as state and federal holidays. Tours are available by appointment.”

“That’s exactly right, sir.”

“Of course.”

“The third Saturday in May,” I said, “at the Shelby County Fairgrounds—I think that’s the most exciting time of the year in Indianapolis. Don’t you agree, sir?”

“No, I do not agree. The third Saturday in May is the Shelby County Blue River Dulcimer Festival. If you think local and national dulcimer players giving concerts and workshops is exciting, instead of merely charming, then you are an even more peculiar young man than I have heretofore thought.”

I shut up for a while and finished my sandwich.

As I was licking my fingers, Rodion Romanovich said, “You do know what a dulcimer is, do you not, Mr. Thomas?”

“A dulcimer,” I said, “is a trapezoidal zither with metal strings that are struck with light hammers.”

He seemed amused, in spite of his dour expression. “I will wager the definition reads that way word for word in the dictionary.”

I said nothing, just licked the rest of my fingers.

“Mr. Thomas, did you know that in an experiment with a human observer, subatomic particles behave differently from the way they behave when the experiment is unobserved while in progress and the results are examined, instead, only after the fact?”

“Sure. Everybody knows that.”

He raised one bushy eyebrow. “Everybody, you say. Well, then you realize what this signifies.”

I said, “At least on a subatomic level, human will can in part shape reality.”

Romanovich gave me a look that I would have liked to capture in a snapshot.

I said, “But what does any of this have to do with cake?”

“Quantum theory tells us, Mr. Thomas, that every point in the universe is intimately connected to every other point, regardless of apparent distance. In some mysterious way, any point on a planet in a distant galaxy is as close to me as you are.”

“No offense, but I don’t really feel that close to you, sir.”

“This means that information or objects, or even people, should be able to move instantly between here and New York City, or indeed between here and that planet in another galaxy.”

“What about between here and Indianapolis?”

“That, too.”

“Wow.”

“We just do not yet understand the quantum structure of reality sufficiently to achieve such miracles.”

“Most of us can’t figure how to program a video recorder, so we probably have a long way to go on this here-to-another-galaxy thing.”

He finished frosting the second cake. “Quantum theory gives us reason to believe that on a deep structural level, every point in the

universe is in some ineffable way the *same* point. You have a smear of mayonnaise at the corner of your mouth.”

I found it with a finger, licked the finger. “Thank you, sir.”

“The interconnectedness of every point in the universe is so complete that if an enormous flock of birds bursts into flight from a marsh in Spain, the disturbance of the air caused by their wings will contribute to weather changes in Los Angeles. And, yes, Mr. Thomas, in Indianapolis, as well.”

With a sigh, I said, “I still can’t figure out what this has to do with cake.”

“Nor can I,” said Romanovich. “It has to do not with cake but with you and me.”

I puzzled over that statement. When I met his utterly unreadable eyes, I felt as if they were taking me apart on a subatomic level.

Concerned that something was smeared at the other corner of my mouth, I wiped with a finger, found neither mayonnaise nor mustard.

“Well,” I said, “I’m stumped again.”

“Did God bring you here, Mr. Thomas?”

I shrugged. “He didn’t stop me from coming.”

“I believe God brought me here,” Romanovich said. “Whether God brought you here or not is of profound interest to me.”

“I’m pretty sure it wasn’t Satan who brought me here,” I assured him. “The guy who drove me was an old friend, and he doesn’t have horns.”

I got off the stool, reached past the cake pans, and picked up the book that he had taken from the library.

“This isn’t about poisons and famous poisoners,” I said.

The true title of the book did not reassure me—*The Blade of the Assassin: The Role of Daggers, Dirks, and Stiletos in the Deaths of Kings and Clergymen*.

“I have a wide-ranging interest in history,” said Romanovich.

The color of the binding cloth appeared to be identical to that of the book that he had been holding in the library. I had no doubt this was the same volume.

“Would you like a piece of cake?” he asked.

Putting the book down, I said, "Maybe later."

"There may not be any left later. Everyone loves my orange-and-almond cake."

"I get hives from almonds," I claimed, and reminded myself to report this whopper to Sister Angela, to prove that, in spite of what she believed, I could be as despicable a liar as the next guy.

I carried my empty glass and bare plate to the main sink and began to rinse them.

Sister Regina Marie appeared as if from an Arabian lamp. "I'll wash them, Oddie."

As she attacked the dish with a soapy sponge, I said, "So Mr. Romanovich has baked quite a lot of sheet cakes for the lunch dessert."

"For dinner," she said. "They smell so good that I'm afraid they're decadent."

"He doesn't strike me as the kind of person who would enjoy a culinary pastime."

"Perhaps he doesn't strike you that way," she agreed, "but he loves to bake. And he's very talented."

"You mean you've eaten his desserts before?"

"Many times. You have, too."

"I don't believe so."

"The lemon-syrup cake with coconut icing last week. That was by Mr. Romanovich. And the week before, the polenta cake with almonds and pistachios."

I said, "Oh."

"And surely you remember the banana-and-lime cake with the icing made from lime-juice reduction."

I nodded. "Surely. Yes, I remember. Delicious."

A sudden great tolling of bells shook through the old abbey, as though Rodion Romanovich had arranged for this clangorous performance to mock me for being so gullible.

The bells were rung for a variety of services in the new abbey, but seldom here, and never at this hour.

Frowning, Sister Regina Marie looked up at the ceiling, and then in the direction of the convent church and bell tower. "Oh, dear. Do

you think Brother Constantine is back?”

Brother Constantine, the dead monk, the infamous suicide who lingers stubbornly in this world.

“Excuse me, Sister,” I said, and I hurried out of the kitchen, digging in a pocket of my jeans for my universal key.

CHAPTER 24

AFTER THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW ABBEY, the church in the former abbey had not been deconsecrated. Twice every day, a priest came downhill to say Mass; half the sisters attended the first service, half the second.

The late Brother Constantine almost exclusively haunted the new abbey and the new church, though he twice made memorable appearances, sans bells, at the school. He had hanged himself in the new bell tower, and when previously his restless spirit had raised a tolling, the clamor had been in that same structure.

Heeding my warning to Sister Angela, I did not go out into the storm, but followed a ground-floor hallway into the former novitiate wing, and entered the sacristy by the back door.

As loud as the bells had seemed before, they were twice that loud when I stepped out of the sacristy into the church. The vaulted ceiling reverberated not with a celebratory tintinnabulation, not with a glory-of-Christmas sound, not with the joyful ringing that follows a wedding. This was an angry tumult of bronze clappers, a pandemoniacal bong-and-clang.

By the murky stormlight that penetrated the stained-glass windows, I stepped down through the choir stalls. I passed through the sanctuary gate and hurried along the center aisle of the nave, sliding a little in my stocking feet.

My haste did not mean that I looked forward with pleasure to another encounter with the spirit of Brother Constantine. He is

about as much fun as strep throat.

Because this noisy manifestation was occurring here instead of in the tower where he had killed himself, it might be in some way related to the violence that was bearing down on the children of St. Bart's School. I had learned virtually nothing about that impending event thus far, and I hoped that Brother Constantine would have a clue or two for me.

In the narthex, I flicked a light switch, turned right, and came to the bell-tower door, which was kept locked out of concern that one of the more physically able children might slip out of supervision and wander this far. Were a child to get to the top of the tower, he would be at risk of falling out of the belfry or down the stairs.

As I turned my key in the lock, I warned myself that I was as susceptible to a fatal plunge as was a wandering child. I didn't mind dying—and being reunited with Stormy, whether in Heaven or in the unknown great adventure she calls “service”—but not until the threat to the children had been identified and met.

If I failed this time, if some were spared but others died, as at the mall during the shooting spree, I would have no place to flee that could promise more solitude and peace than a mountain monastery. And you already know what a crock *that* promise turned out to be.

The spiral staircase in the tower was not heated. The rubberized treads felt cold under my stocking feet, but they were not slippery.

Here the bedlam of bells caused the walls to resonate like a drum membrane responding to peals of thunder. As I climbed, I slid my hand along the curved wall, and the plaster hummed under my palm.

By the time I reached the top of the stairs, my teeth discretely vibrated like thirty-two tuning forks. The hairs in my nose tickled, and my ears ached. I could feel the boom of the bells in my bones.

This was an auditory experience for which every thrashed-out heavy-metal rhapsodist had been searching all his life: tuned-bronze walls of sound crashing down in deafening avalanches.

I stepped into the belfry, where the air was freezing.

Before me was not a three-bell carillon like the one at the new abbey. This tower was wider, the belfry more spacious than the one

in the building upslope. In earlier decades, the monks clearly had taken more exuberant pleasure in their tolling, for they had constructed a two-level, five-bell carillon, and the bells were enormous, as well.

No ropes or crankwheels were required to swing these bronze behemoths. Brother Constantine rode them as if he were a rodeo cowboy leaping from one back to another among a herd of bucking bulls.

His restless spirit, energized by frustration and fury, had become a raging poltergeist. An immaterial entity, he had no weight or leverage with which to move the heavy bells, but from him throbbed concentric waves of power as invisible to other people as was the dead monk himself, though visible to me.

As these pulses washed through the belfry, the suspended bronze forms swung wildly. The immense clappers hammered out a more violent knelling than their makers had intended or imagined possible.

I could not feel those waves of power as they washed over me. A poltergeist cannot harm a living person either by touch or directly by his emanations.

If one of the bells broke loose of its mountings and fell on me, however, I nonetheless would be squashed.

Brother Constantine had been gentle in life, so he could not have become evil in death. If he unintentionally harmed me, he would be cast into a deeper despair than the one he currently endured.

In spite of his deeply felt remorse, I would remain squashed.

Back and forth along the carillon, up and down and up the two levels, the dead monk capered. Although he didn't appear demonic, I do not feel that I am being unfair to him by using the word *demented*.

Any lingering spirit is irrational, having lost his way in the vertical of sacred order. A poltergeist is irrational *and* pissed.

Warily, I moved along the walkway that encircled the bells. They swung in wider arcs than usual, intruding on the pathway and forcing me to remain near the perimeter of the space.

Columns stood on the waist-high outer wall, supporting the overhanging roof. Between the columns, on a clear day, were views of the new abbey, of the rising and descending slopes of the Sierra, of a pristine vastness of forest.

The blizzard screened from sight the new abbey and the forest. I could see only the slate roofs and the cobblestone courtyards of the old abbey immediately below.

The storm shrieked as before, but it could not be heard above the booming bells. Wind-harried twists of snow chased one another through the belfry, and out again.

As I slowly circled him, Brother Constantine was aware that I had arrived. Like a robed and hooded goblin, he leaped from bell to bell, his attention always on me.

His eyes bulged grotesquely, not as they had in life, but as the strangling noose had caused them to bulge when his neck had snapped and his trachea had collapsed.

I stopped with my back turned to one of the columns and spread my arms wide, both palms turned up, as if to ask, *What's the point of this, Brother? How does this benefit you?*

Although he knew what I meant, he did not want to contemplate the ultimate ineffectiveness of his rage. He looked away from me and flung himself more frenetically through the bells.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and yawned. I assumed a bored expression. When he looked at me again, I yawned exaggeratedly and shook my head as an actor does when playing to the back rows, as though sadly expressing my disappointment in him.

Here was proof that even in its most desperate hours, when the bones are gnawed by a sharp-toothed chill and the nerves fray in fear of what the next circuit of the clock may bring, life retains a comic quality. The clangor had reduced me to a mime.

This swelling of bells proved to be Brother Constantine's final flare of rage. The concentric waves of power stopped radiating from him, and at once the bells swung less violently, their arcs rapidly diminishing.

Although my socks were thick and made for winter sports, an icy cold pressed through them from the stone floor. My teeth began to

chatter as I strove to continue feigning boredom.

Soon the clappers bumped gently against the bronze, producing soft, clear, mellow notes that were the essential theme music for a melancholy mood.

The voice of the wind did not return in a howling rush because my brutalized ears were still thrumming with the memory of the recent cacophony.

Like one of those masters of martial mayhem in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, who could leap gracefully to rooftops and then descend in an aerial ballet, Brother Constantine glided down from the bells and landed near me on the belfry deck.

He no longer chose to be goggle-eyed. His face was as it had been before the cinching noose, though perhaps he had never looked this mournful in life.

As I was about to speak to him, I became aware of movement on the farther side of the belfry, a dark presence glimpsed between the curves of silenced bronze, silhouetted against the stifled light of the snow-choked day.

Brother Constantine followed my gaze and seemed to identify the new arrival from what little could be seen. Although nothing in this world could harm him anymore, the dead monk shrank back as though in dread.

I had moved away from the head of the stairs, and as the figure circled the bells, it came between me and that sole exit from the belfry.

As my temporary deafness faded and as the cry of the wind rose like a chorus of angry voices, the figure emerged from behind the screening bells. Here was the black-habited monk whom I had seen in the open door to the stairwell, as I'd turned away from Sister Miriam at the nurses' station, little more than twenty minutes ago.

I was closer to him now than I had been then, but I could still see only blackness inside his hood, not the merest suggestion of a face. The wind billowed his tunic but revealed no feet, and at the ends of his sleeves, there were no hands to be seen.

Afforded more than a glimpse of him this time, I realized that his tunic was longer than those the brothers wore, that it trailed on the

floor. The fabric was not as common as that from which the monks' habits were fashioned; it had the luster of silk.

He wore a necklace of human teeth strung like pearls, with three fingers, just bleached bones, pendant at the center.

Instead of a cloth cincture at the waist, to gather in the tunic and the scapular, he wore a woven cord of what appeared to be clean, shiny human hair.

He drifted toward me. Although I intended to stand my ground, I stepped back from him as he approached, as reluctant to make contact as was my dead companion, Brother Constantine.

CHAPTER 25

HAD NOT THE SOLES OF MY FEET BEEN STUNG by cold as sharp as needles, had not a burning kind of numbness begun to cramp my toes, I might have thought that I had never awakened to find the red light and the blue light of sheriff's-department vehicles twinkling in the frosted windows of my guesthouse bedroom, that I was still asleep and dreaming.

The great pendular lobes of bronze, to which fevered Freud would have attributed the sleaziest symbolic meaning, and the groin-vaulted ceiling of the belfry, which was also fraught with meaning not solely because of its name but also because of its curves and shadows, made the perfect landscape for a dream, surrounded by the virginal white of the frigid storm.

This minimalist figure of Death, robed and hooded, neither ripe with rot nor squirming with maggots as he would be in comic books and in cheesy slice-and-dice movies, but as clean as a dark polar wind, was as real as the Reaper in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. At the same time, he had the qualities of a threatening phantom in a nightmare, amorphous and unknowable, most sharply seen from the corner of the eye.

Death raised his right arm, and from the sleeve appeared a long pale hand, not skeletal but fully fleshed. Although a void remained within the hood, the hand reached toward me, and the finger pointed.

Now I was reminded of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Here was the last of the three spirits to visit the miserly master of the counting house, the ominous silent spirit that Scrooge named the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. The ghost had been what Scrooge called it but also something worse, because wherever else the future leads, it leads ultimately to death, the end that is present in my beginning and in yours.

From Death's left sleeve, another pale hand appeared, and this one held a rope, the end of which had been fashioned into a noose. The spirit—or whatever it might be—traded the noose from his left hand to his right, and raveled out an unlikely length of rope from within his tunic.

When he withdrew the loose end of the rope from his sleeve, he tossed it over the rocking bar that, when turned by a crankwheel at the bottom of the tower, would set the five-bell carillon to ringing. He fashioned a gallows knot with such ease that it seemed not like the skill of a seasoned executioner but like a good magician's sleight of hand.

All this had the feel of kabuki, that Japanese form of highly stylized theater. The surreal sets, the elaborate costumes, the bold masks, the wigs, the extravagant emotions, and the broad melodramatic gestures of the actors should make Japanese theater as laughable as America's brand of professional wrestling. Yet by some mysterious effect, to the knowledgeable audience, kabuki becomes as real as a razor drawn across a thumb.

In the silence of the bells, with the storm seeming to roar its approval of his performance, Death pointed at me, and I knew that he intended the noose for my neck.

Spirits cannot harm the living. This is our world, not theirs.

Death is not actually a figure that stalks the world in costume, collecting souls.

Both of those things were true, which meant that this menacing Reaper could not do me any harm.

Because my imagination is as rich as my bank account is empty, I could nevertheless imagine the coarse fibers of the rope against my throat, my Adam's apple cinched to sauce.

Taking courage from the fact that he was already dead, Brother Constantine stepped forward, as if to draw Death's attention and give me a chance to make a break for the stairs.

The monk leaped to the bells again, but he no longer could summon the rage required to produce psychokinetic phenomena. He appeared instead to be overcome by fear for me. He wrung his hands, and his mouth wrenched wide in a silent scream.

My confidence that no spirit could harm me was shaken by Brother Constantine's conviction that I was toast.

Although the Reaper was a simpler figure than the kaleidoscope of bones that had stalked me through the storm, I sensed that they were alike in that they were theatrical, mannered, self-conscious in a way that the lingering dead never are. Even a poltergeist at the summit of his wrath does not *design* his rampage for maximum effect on the living, has no intention of spooking anyone, but wants only to work off his frustration, his self-loathing, his rage at being stuck in a kind of purgatory between two worlds.

The dazzling transformations of the bone beast at the window had smacked of vanity: *Behold the wonder of me, stand in awe, and tremble*. Likewise, the Reaper moved as might a conceited dancer on a stage, ostentatious, in expectation of applause.

Vanity is strictly a human weakness. No animal is capable of vanity. People sometimes say cats are vain, but cats are haughty. They are confident of their superiority and do not crave admiration, as do vain men and women.

The lingering dead, though they might have been vain in life, have been stripped of vanity by the discovery of their mortality.

Now this Reaper made a mocking come-to-me gesture, as if I should be so intimidated by his fearsome appearance and his grandeur that I would put the noose around my neck and spare him the struggle to snare me.

The recognition that those two apparitions shared an all-too-human vanity, a conceit unseen in all that is truly otherworldly, was significant. But I didn't know *why*.

In response to his come-to-me gesture, I stepped back from him, and he flew at me with sudden ferocity.

Before I could raise an arm to block him, he got his right hand around my throat and, exhibiting inhuman strength, lifted me off the floor with one hand.

The Reaper's arm was so unnaturally long that I couldn't strike at him or claw at the perfect blackness that pooled within his hood. I was reduced to tearing at the hand that gripped me, trying to pry back his fingers.

Although his hand looked like flesh, flexed like flesh, I could not claw blood from it. My fingernails scraping across his pale skin produced the sound they would have raised from a slate chalkboard.

He slammed me against a column, and the back of my head rapped the stone. For a moment, the blizzard seemed to find its way inside my skull, and a whirl of white behind my eyes almost spun me away into an eternal winter.

When I kicked and kicked, my feet landed without effect in soft billows of black tunic, and his body, if one existed under those silken folds, seemed to have no more solidity than quicksand or than the sucking tar into which Jurassic behemoths had blundered to their destruction.

I gasped for breath and found it. He was holding me, not choking me, perhaps to ensure that, when I was discovered and hauled back into the belfry, the only marks on my throat and under my chin would be those left by the lethal snap of the rope.

As he pulled me away from the column, his left hand rose and tossed the noose, which floated toward me like a ring of dark smoke. I twisted my head away. The rope fell across my face, and back into his hand.

The moment he had succeeded in slipping the noose around my neck and had drawn it tight, he would pitch me out of the belfry, and I would ring the bells to announce my death.

I stopped ripping at his hand, which had me firmly yoked, and grabbed the loop of rope as he tried once more to fit me with that crude necktie.

Struggling to foil the noose, staring down into the emptiness of his hood, I heard myself croak, "I know you, don't I?"

That question, born of intuition, seemed to work magic, as if it were an incantation. Something began to form in the void where a face should have been.

He faltered in the struggle for the noose.

Encouraged, I said more certainly, "I know you."

Within the hood, the basic contours of a face began to take shape, like molten black plastic conforming to a die.

The countenance lacked sufficient detail to spark recognition, glistened darkly as the dim reflection of a face might glimmer and ripple in a night pond where no moonlight brightens the black water.

"Mother of God, I know you," I said, though intuition had still not given me a name.

My third insistence conjured greater dimension in the glossy black face before me, almost as though my words had spawned in him a guilt and an irresistible compulsion to confess his identity.

The Reaper turned his head from me. He threw me aside, and then tossed away the hangman's rope, which raveled down upon me as I collapsed onto the belfry deck.

In a silken black swirl, he sprang onto the parapet between two columns, hesitated there, and then flung himself into the snowstorm.

I thrust up from the floor even as he jumped, and I leaned over the parapet.

His tunic spread like wings, and he sailed down from the tower, landed with balletic grace upon the church roof, and at once flung himself toward the lower roof of the abbey.

Although he seemed to me to have been something other than a spirit, less supernatural than *un* natural, he dematerialized as fully as any ghost might, though in a manner that I had never seen before.

In flight, he seemed to come apart like a clay disk blasted by a skeet-shooter's shotgun. A million flakes of snow and a million fragments of the Reaper laced out into a black-and-white symmetrical pattern, a kaleidoscopic image in midair, which the wind respected only for an instant and then dissolved.

CHAPTER 26

IN THE GROUND-FLOOR RECEPTION LOUNGE, I SAT on the edge of a sofa to pull on my ski boots, which had dried.

My feet were still stiff with cold. I would have liked to slouch deep in an armchair, put my feet on a stool, warm myself with a lap robe, read a good novel, nibble cookies, and be served cup after cup of hot cocoa by my fairy godmother.

If I had a fairy godmother, she would resemble Angela Lansbury, the actress in *Murder, She Wrote*. She would love me unconditionally, would bring me anything my heart desired, and would tuck me into bed each night and put me to sleep with a kiss on the forehead, because she would have been through a training program at Disneyland and would have sworn the godmother's oath while in the presence of Walt Disney's cryogenically preserved corpse.

I stood up in my boots and flexed my half-numb toes.

Beast of bones or no beast of bones, I would have to go outside again into the blizzard, not immediately, but soon.

Whatever forces were at work at St. Bartholomew's, I had never encountered anything like them, had never seen such apparitions, and didn't have much confidence that I would understand their intentions in time to prevent disaster. If I should fail to identify the threat before it was upon us, I needed brave hearts and strong hands to help me protect the children, and I knew where to find them.

Graceful, stately, her footsteps hushed by her flowing white habit, Sister Angela arrived as if she were the avatar of a snow goddess who had stepped down from a celestial palace to assess the effectiveness of the storm spell that she had cast upon the Sierra.

“Sister Clare Marie says you need to speak with me, Oddie.”

Brother Constantine had accompanied me from the bell tower and now joined us. The mother superior, of course, could not see him.

“George Washington was famous for his bad false teeth,” I said, “but I don’t know anything about the dental situations of Flannery O’Connor and Harper Lee.”

“Nor do I,” she said. “And before you ask, it has nothing to do with their hairstyles, either.”

“Brother Constantine did not commit suicide,” I told her. “He was murdered.”

Her eyes widened. “I’ve never heard such glorious news followed by such terrible news in the same sentence.”

“He lingers not because he fears his judgment in the next world but because he despairs for his brothers at the abbey.”

Surveying the reception lounge, she said, “Is he here with us now?”

“Right beside me.” I indicated his position.

“Dear Brother Constantine.” Her voice broke with sentiment. “We’ve prayed every day for you, and have missed you every day.”

Tears shone in the spirit’s eyes.

I said, “He was reluctant to move on from this world while his brothers believed that he’d killed himself.”

“Of course. He’s been worried that his suicide might cause them to doubt their own commitment to a life in faith.”

“Yes. But also I think he worried because they were unaware that a murderer had come among them.”

Sister Angela is a quick study, with a steel-trap mind, but her decades of gentle service in the peaceful environment of one convent or another have not stropped her street smarts to a sharp edge.

“But surely you mean some outsider wandered here one night, like those the news is full of, and Brother Constantine had the

misfortune to cross his path.”

“If that’s the case, then the guy came back for Brother Timothy, and just now in the tower here, he tried to murder me.”

Alarmed, she put one hand on my arm. “Oddie, you’re all right?”

“I’m not dead yet,” I said, “but there’s still the cake after dinner.”

“Cake?”

“Sorry. I’m just being me.”

“Who tried to kill you?”

I said only, “I didn’t see his face. He...wore a mask. And I’m convinced he’s someone I know, not an outsider.”

She looked at where she knew the dead monk to be. “Can’t Brother Constantine identify him?”

“I don’t think he saw his killer’s face, either. Anyway, you’d be surprised how little help I get from the lingering dead. They want me to get justice for them, they want it very bad, but I think they must abide by some proscription against affecting the course of this world, where they no longer belong.”

“And you’ve no theory?” she asked.

“Zip. I’ve been told that Brother Constantine occasionally had insomnia, and when he couldn’t sleep, he sometimes climbed into the bell tower at the new abbey, to study the stars.”

“Yes. That’s what Abbot Bernard told me at the time.”

“I suspect when he was out and about at night, he saw something he was never meant to see, something to which no witness could be tolerated.”

She grimaced. “That makes the abbey sound like a sordid place.”

“I don’t mean to suggest anything of the kind. I’ve lived here seven months, and I know how decent and devout the brothers are. I don’t think Brother Constantine saw anything despicable. He saw something...extraordinary.”

“And recently Brother Timothy also saw something extraordinary to which no witness could be tolerated?”

“I’m afraid so.”

For a moment, she mulled this information and pressed from it the most logical conclusion. “Then you yourself have been witness to something extraordinary.”

“Yes.”

“Which would be—what?”

“I’d rather not say until I have time to *understand* what I saw.”

“Whatever you saw—that’s why we’ve made sure the doors and all the windows are locked.”

“Yes, ma’am. And it’s one of the reasons we’re now going to take additional measures to protect the children.”

“We’ll do whatever must be done. What do you have in mind?”

“Fortify,” I said. “Fortify and defend.”

CHAPTER 27

GEORGE WASHINGTON, HARPER LEE, AND Flannery O'Connor smiled down on me, as if mocking my inability to solve the riddle of their shared quality.

Sister Angela sat at her desk, watching me over the frames of a pair of half-lens reading glasses that had slid down her nose. She held a pen poised above a lined yellow tablet.

Brother Constantine had not accompanied us from the reception lounge. Maybe he had at last moved on from this world, maybe not.

Pacing, I said, "I think most of the brothers are pacifists only as far as reason allows. Most would fight to save an innocent life."

"God requires resistance to evil," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. But willingness to fight isn't enough. I want those who know *how* to fight. Put Brother Knuckles at the head of the list."

"Brother Salvatore," she corrected.

"Yes, ma'am. Brother Knuckles will know what to do when the shit—" My voice failed and my face flushed.

"You could have completed the thought, Oddie. The words *hits the fan* wouldn't have offended me."

"Sorry, Sister."

"I'm a nun, not a naïf."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who in addition to Brother Salvatore?"

"Brother Victor spent twenty-six years in the Marine Corps."

“I think he’s seventy years old.”

“Yes, ma’am, but he *was* a marine.”

“ ‘No better friend, no worse enemy,’ ” she quoted.

“*Semper Fi* sure does seem to be what we need.”

She said, “Brother Gregory was an army corpsman.”

The infirmarian had never spoken of military service.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I thought he had a nursing degree.”

“He does. But he was a corpsman for many years, and in the thick of action.”

Medics on the battlefield are often as courageous as those who carry the guns.

“For sure, we want Brother Gregory,” I said.

“What about Brother Quentin?”

“Wasn’t he a cop, ma’am?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“Put him on the list.”

“How many do you think we need?” she asked.

“Fourteen, sixteen.”

“We’ve got four.”

I paced in silence. I stopped pacing and stood at the window. I started pacing again.

“Brother Fletcher,” I suggested.

This choice baffled her. “The music director?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“In his secular life, he was a musician.”

“That’s a tough business, ma’am.”

She considered. Then: “He does sometimes have an attitude.”

“Saxophone players tend to have attitude,” I said. “I know a saxophonist who tore a guitar out of another musician’s hands and shot the instrument five times. It was a nice Fender.”

“Why would he do a thing like that?” she asked.

“He was upset about inappropriate chord changes.”

Disapproval furrowed her brow. “When this is over, perhaps your saxophonist friend could stay at the abbey for a while. I’m trained to counsel people in techniques of conflict resolution.”

“Well, ma’am, shooting the guitar *was* conflict resolution.”

She looked up at Flannery O'Connor and, after a moment, nodded as if in agreement with something the writer had said. "Okay, Oddie. You think Brother Fletcher could kick butt?"

"Yes, ma'am, for the kids, I think he could."

"Then we've got five."

I sat in one of the two visitors' chairs.

"Five," she repeated.

"Yes, ma'am."

I looked at my wristwatch. We stared at each other.

After a silence, she changed the subject: "If it comes to a fight, what will they fight *with*?"

"For one thing, baseball bats."

The brothers formed three teams every year. Summer evenings, during recreation hours, the teams played one another in rotation.

"They do have a lot of baseball bats," she said.

"Too bad that monks tend not to go in for shooting deer."

"Too bad," she agreed.

"The brothers split all the cordwood for the fireplaces. They have axes."

She winced at the thought of such violence. "Perhaps we should concentrate more on fortification."

"They'll be first-rate at fortification," I agreed.

Most monastic communities believe that contemplative labor is an important part of worship. Some monks make excellent wine to pay the expenses of their abbey. Some make cheese or chocolates, or crumpets and scones. Some breed and sell beautiful dogs.

The brothers of St. Bart's produce fine handcrafted furniture. Because a fraction of the interest from the Heineman endowment will always pay their operating expenses, they do not sell their chairs and tables and sideboards. They give everything to an organization that furnishes homes for the poor.

With their power tools, supplies of lumber, and skills, they would be able to further secure doors and windows.

Tapping her pen against the list of names on the tablet, Sister Angela reminded me: "Five."

“Ma’am, maybe what we should do is—you call the abbot, talk to him about this, then talk to Brother Knuckles.”

“Brother Salvatore.”

“Yes, ma’am. Tell Brother Knuckles what we need here, defense and fortification, and let him consult with the other four we’ve picked. They’ll know their brothers better than we do. They’ll know the best candidates.”

“Yes, that’s good. I wish I could tell them who they’ll be defending against.”

“I wish I could, too, Sister.”

All the vehicles that served the brothers and sisters were garaged in the basement of the school.

I said, “Tell Knuckles—”

“Salvatore.”

“—that I’ll drive one of the school’s monster SUVs up there to bring them here, and tell him—”

“You said hostile people are out there somewhere.”

I had not said *people*. I had said *them* and *they*.

“Hostile. Yes, ma’am.”

“Won’t it be dangerous, to and from the abbey?”

“More dangerous for the kids if we don’t get some muscle here for whatever’s coming.”

“I understand. My point is you’d have to make two trips to bring so many brothers, their baseball bats, and their tools. I’ll drive an SUV, you drive the other, and we’ll get it all done at one time.”

“Ma’am, there’s nothing I’d like better than having a snowplow race with you—tires chocked, engines revved, starter pistol—but I want Rodion Romanovich to drive the second SUV.”

“He’s here?”

“He’s in the kitchen, up to his elbows in icing.”

“I thought you were suspicious of him.”

“If he’s a Hoosier, I’m a radical dulcimer enthusiast. When we’re defending the school, if it comes to that, I don’t think it’s a good idea for Mr. Romanovich to be inside the defenses. I’ll ask him to drive one of the SUVs to the new abbey. When you talk to Brother Knuck...alvatore—”

“Knuckalvatore? I’m not familiar with Brother Knuckalvatore.”

Until meeting Sister Angela, I wouldn’t have thought that nuns and sarcasm could be such an effervescent mix.

“When you talk to Brother Salvatore, ma’am, tell him that Mr. Romanovich will be staying at the new abbey, and Salvatore will be driving that SUV back here.”

“I assume Mr. Romanovich will not know that he’s taking a one-way trip.”

“No, ma’am. I will lie to him. You leave that to me. Regardless of what you think, I am a masterful and prodigious liar.”

“If you played a saxophone, you’d be a double threat.”

CHAPTER 28

AS LUNCHTIME APPROACHED, THE KITCHEN staffers were not only busier than they had been previously but also more exuberant. Now four of the nuns were singing as they worked, not just two, and in English instead of Spanish.

All ten cakes had been frosted with chocolate icing. They looked treacherously delicious.

Having recently finished mixing a large bowl of bright orange buttercream, Rodion Romanovich was using a funnel sack to squeeze an elaborate decorative filigree on top of the first of his orange-almond cakes.

When I appeared at his side, he didn't look up, but said, "There you are, Mr. Thomas. You have put on your ski boots."

"I was so quiet in stocking feet, I was scaring the sisters."

"Have you been off practicing your dulcimer?"

"That was just a phase. These days I'm more interested in the saxophone. Sir, have you ever visited the grave of John Dillinger?"

"As you evidently know, he is buried in Crown Hill Cemetery, in my beloved Indianapolis. I have seen the outlaw's grave, but my primary reason for visiting the cemetery was to pay my respects at the final resting place of the novelist Booth Tarkington."

"Booth Tarkington won the Nobel Prize," I said.

"No, Mr. Thomas. Booth Tarkington won the Pulitzer Prize."

"I guess you would know, being a librarian at the Indiana State Library at one-forty North Senate Avenue, with thirty-four thousand

volumes about Indiana or by Indiana writers.”

“Over thirty-four thousand volumes,” Romanovich corrected. “We are very proud of the number and do not like to hear it minimized. We may by this time next year have thirty-five thousand volumes about Indiana or by Indiana writers.”

“Wow. That’ll be a reason for a big celebration.”

“I will most likely bake many cakes for the event.”

The steadiness of his decorative-icing application and the consistency of details in his filigree design were impressive.

If he’d not had about him an air of deceit equal to that of a chameleon sitting on a tree branch, disguised as bark, waiting for innocent butterflies to approach, I might have begun to doubt his potential for villainy.

“Being a Hoosier, sir, you must have a lot of experience driving in snow.”

“Yes. I have had considerable experience of snow both in my adopted Indiana and in my native Russia.”

“We have two SUVs, fitted with plows, in the garage. We’ve got to drive up to the abbey and bring back some of the brothers.”

“Are you asking me to drive one of these vehicles, Mr. Thomas?”

“Yes, sir. If you would, I’d be most grateful. It’ll save me making two trips.”

“For what purpose are the brothers coming to the school?”

“For the purpose,” I said, “of assisting the sisters with the children if there should be a power failure related to the blizzard.”

He drew a perfect miniature rose to finish off one corner of the cake. “Does not the school have an emergency backup generator?”

“Yes, sir, you bet it does. But it doesn’t crank out the same level of power. Lighting will have to be reduced. They’ll have to turn heating off in some areas, use the fireplaces. And Sister Angela wants to be prepared in case the generator falters, too.”

“Have the main power and the backup generator ever both failed on the same occasion?”

“I don’t know, sir. I don’t think so. But in my experience, nuns are obsessed with detailed planning.”

“Oh, I have no doubt, Mr. Thomas, that if nuns had designed and operated the nuclear plant at Chernobyl, we would not have suffered a radiation disaster.”

This was an interesting turn. “Are you from Chernobyl, sir?”

“Do I have a third eye and a second nose?”

“Not that I can see, sir, but then you’re largely clothed.”

“If we should ever find ourselves sunning on the same beach, you are free to investigate further, Mr. Thomas. May I finish decorating these cakes, or must we rush pell-mell to the abbey?”

Knuckles and the others would need at least forty-five minutes to gather the items they’d be bringing and to assemble for pickup.

I said, “Finish the cakes, sir. They look terrific. How about if you meet me down in the garage at twelve forty-five?”

“You can depend on my assistance. I will have finished the cakes by then.”

“Thank you, sir.” I started to leave, then turned to him again. “Did you know Cole Porter was a Hoosier?”

“Yes. And so are James Dean, David Letterman, Kurt Vonnegut, and Wendell Willkie.”

“Cole Porter, he was perhaps the greatest American songwriter of the century, sir.”

“Yes, I agree.”

“‘Night and Day,’ ‘Anything Goes,’ ‘In the Still of the Night,’ ‘I Get a Kick Out of You,’ ‘You’re the Top.’ He wrote the Indiana state song, too.”

Romanovich said, “The state song is ‘On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away,’ and if Cole Porter heard you crediting it to him, he would no doubt claw his way out of the grave, track you down, and exact a terrible vengeance.”

“Oh. Then I guess I was misinformed.”

He raised his attention from the cake long enough to give me an ironic look heavy enough to weight down a feather in a high wind. “I doubt that you are ever misinformed, Mr. Thomas.”

“No, sir, you’re wrong. I’m the first to admit I don’t know anything about anything—except that I’m something of a nut about all things Indiana.”

“Approximately what time this morning did this Hoosiermania overcome you?”

Man, he was good at this.

“Not this morning, sir,” I lied. “All my life, as long as I can remember.”

“Maybe you were a Hoosier in a previous life.”

“Maybe I was James Dean.”

“I am certain you were not James Dean.”

“Why do you say that, sir?”

“Such an intense craving for adoration and such a capacity for rudeness as Mr. Dean exhibited could not possibly have been expunged so entirely from just one incarnation to the next.”

I thought about that statement from a few different angles. “Sir, I have nothing against the late Mr. Dean, but I don’t see any way to interpret that except as a compliment.”

Glowering, Rodion Romanovich said, “You complimented my cake decorations, did you not? Well, now we are even.”

CHAPTER 29

CARRYING MY JACKET, WHICH I HAD RETRIEVED from the rack in the reception lounge, I went down to the basement, grateful that there were no real catacombs full of moldering corpses. With my luck, one of them would have been Cole Porter.

Those brothers who had wished to be interred on the grounds of the abbey are buried in a shady plot on the perimeter of the forest. It is a peaceful little cemetery. The spirits of those at rest there have all moved on from this world.

I have spent pleasant hours among those headstones, with only Boo for company. He likes to watch the squirrels and rabbits while I stroke his neck and scratch his ears. Sometimes he gambols after them, but they are not frightened by him; even in the days when he was sharp of tooth, he was never a killer.

As if my thoughts had summoned him, I found Boo waiting for me when I turned out of the east-west hallway into the north-south.

“Hey, boy, what’re you doing down here?”

Tail wagging, he approached, settled on the floor, and rolled onto his back, all four paws in the air.

Receiving such an invitation, only the hard-hearted and the uselessly busy can refuse. All that is wanted is affection, while all that is offered is everything, symbolized in the defenseless posture of the exposed tummy.

Dogs invite us not only to share their joy but also to live in the moment, where we are neither proceeding from nor moving toward,

where the enchantment of the past and future cannot distract us, where a freedom from practical desire and a cessation of our usual ceaseless action allows us to recognize the truth of our existence, the reality of our world and purpose—if we dare.

I gave Boo only a two-minute belly rub and then continued with the usual ceaseless action, not because urgent tasks awaited me, but because, as a wise man once wrote, “Humankind cannot bear very much reality,” and I am too human.

The large garage had the feel of a bunker, concrete above and below and on all sides. The fluorescent ceiling fixtures shed a hard light, but they were too widely spaced to dispel every shadow.

Seven vehicles were housed here: four compact sedans, a beefy pickup, two extended SUVs jacked up on big tires with snow chains.

A ramp ascended to a large roll-up door, beyond which the wind howled.

Mounted on a wall was a key box. Inside, fourteen sets of keys, two for each vehicle, hung from seven pegs. Above each peg, a label provided the license number of the vehicle, and a tag on each set of keys carried the same number.

No danger of Chernobyls here.

I pulled on my jacket, got behind the wheel of one of the SUVs, started the engine, and let it idle just long enough to figure how to raise and lower the plow with the simple controls.

When I stepped out of the truck, Boo was there. He looked up, cocked his head, pricked his ears, and seemed to say, *What’s wrong with your nose, buddy? Don’t you smell the same trouble I smell?*

He trotted away, glanced back, saw that I was following, and led me out of the garage, into the northwest hall once more.

This wasn’t Lassie, and I didn’t expect to find anything as easy to deal with as Timmy down a well or Timmy trapped in a burning barn.

Boo stopped in front of a closed door, at the same point in the corridor at which he had offered me the opportunity to rub his tummy.

Perhaps he had originally encouraged me to pause at that point to give my fabled intuition a chance to operate. I had been caught in

the wheels of compulsion, however, bent on getting to the garage, my mind occupied with thoughts of the trip ahead, able to pause briefly but unable to see and feel.

I felt something now, all right. A subtle but persistent pull, as if I were a fisherman, my line cast out into the deep, some catch hooked on the farther end.

Boo went into the suspect room. After a hesitation, I followed, leaving the door open behind me because in situations like this, when psychic magnetism draws me, I cannot be certain I'm the fisherman and not the fish with the hook in its mouth.

We were in a boiler room, full of the hiss of flame rings and the rumble of pumps. Four large, high-efficiency boilers produced the hot water that traveled ceaselessly through pipes in the walls of the building, to the scores of fan-coil units that heated the many rooms.

Here, too, were chillers that produced supercooled water, which also circulated through the school and convent, providing cool air when a room grew too warm.

On three walls were sophisticated air monitors, which would trigger alarms in every farther corner of the big building *and* shut off the incoming gas line that fired the boilers if they detected the merest trace of free propane in the room. This was supposed to be an absolute guarantee against an explosion.

Absolute guarantee. Foolproof. The unsinkable *Titanic*. The uncrashable *Hindenburg*. Peace in our time.

Human beings not only can't bear too much reality, we *flee* from reality when someone doesn't force us close enough to the fire to feel the heat on our faces.

None of the three air monitors indicated the presence of rogue molecules of propane.

I had to depend upon the monitors because propane is colorless and odorless. If I relied on my senses to detect a leak, I would not know a problem existed until I found myself passing out for lack of oxygen or until everything went boom.

Each monitor box was locked and featured a pressed-metal seal bearing the date of the most recent inspection by the service

company responsible for their reliable function. I examined every lock and every seal and discovered no indications of tampering.

Boo had gone to the corner of the room farthest from the door. I found myself drawn there, too.

In its circulation through the building, the supercooled water absorbs heat. It then travels to a large underground vault near the eastern woods, where a cooling tower converts the unwanted heat to steam and blows it into the air to dissipate; thereafter, the water returns to the chillers in this room to be cooled again.

Four eight-inch-diameter PVC pipes disappeared through the wall, near the ceiling, close to the corner where Boo and I had been drawn.

Boo sniffed at a four-foot-square stainless-steel panel set six inches off the floor, and I dropped to my knees before it.

Beside the panel was a light switch. I clicked it, but nothing happened—unless I'd turned lights on in some space beyond the wall.

The access panel was fixed to the concrete wall with four bolts. On a nearby hook hung a tool with which the bolts could be extracted.

After removing the bolts, I set aside the panel and peered into the hole where Boo had already gone. Past the butt-end and tucked tail of the big white dog, I saw a lighted tunnel.

Unafraid of dog farts, but fearful about what else might lie ahead, I crawled through the opening.

Once I had cleared the two-foot width of the poured-in-place concrete wall, I was able to stand. Before me lay a rectangular passageway seven feet high and five feet wide.

The four pipes were suspended side by side from the ceiling and were grouped on the left half of the tunnel. Small center-set lights revealed the pipes dwindling as if to eternity.

Along the floor, on the left, were runs of separated copper pipes, steel pipes, and flexible conduits. They probably carried water, propane, and electrical wires.

Here and there, white patterns of calcification stained the walls, but the place wasn't damp. It had a clean smell of concrete and

lime.

Except for the faint rushing noise of water flowing through the pipes overhead, the passageway lay silent.

I consulted my wristwatch. In thirty-four minutes, I would need to be in the garage to meet the Hoosier's Hoosier.

With purpose, Boo trotted forward, and I followed with no clear purpose at all.

I proceeded as silently as possible in ski boots, and when my shiny quilted thermal jacket whistled as I moved my arms, I took it off and left it behind. Boo made no sound whatsoever.

A boy and his dog are the best of all companions, celebrated in songs and books and movies. When the boy is in the grip of a psychic compulsion, however, and when the dog is fearless, the chance that all will turn out well is about as likely as a Scorsese gangster movie ending in sweetness, light, and the happy singing of cherubic children.

CHAPTER 30

I DISLIKE SUBTERRANEAN PASSAGEWAYS. I ONCE died in such a place. At least I'm pretty sure I died, and was dead for a while, and even haunted a few of my friends, though they didn't know I was with them in a spook state.

If I didn't die, something stranger than death happened to me. I wrote about the experience in my second manuscript, but writing about it didn't help me to understand it.

At intervals of forty or fifty feet, air monitors were mounted on the right-hand wall. I found no signs of tampering.

If the passageway led to the cooling-tower vault, as I was sure that it must, then it would be about four hundred feet long.

Twice I thought I heard something behind me. When I looked over my shoulder, nothing loomed.

The third time, I refused to succumb to the urge to glance back. Irrational fear feeds on itself and grows. You must deny it.

The trick is to be able to differentiate irrational fear from justifiable fear. If you squelch justifiable fear and soldier on, dauntless and determined, that's when Santa Claus will squeeze down the chimney, after all, and add your peepee to his collection.

Boo and I had gone two hundred feet when another passageway opened on the right. This one sloped uphill and curved out of sight.

Four additional PVC pipes were suspended from the ceiling of the intersecting corridor. They turned the corner into our passageway

and paralleled the first set of pipes, heading toward the cooling tower.

The second serviceway must have originated in the new abbey.

Instead of bringing the brothers back to the school in the two SUVs, risking attack by whatever might be waiting in the blizzard, we could lead them along this easier route.

I needed to explore the new passageway, though not immediately.

Boo had proceeded toward the cooling tower. Although the dog would not be of help when I was attacked by the creeping thing behind me, I felt better when we kept together, and I hurried after him.

In my mind's eye, the creature at my back had three necks but only two heads. The body was human, but the heads were those of coyotes. It wanted to plant my head on its center neck.

You might wonder where such a baroque irrational fear could have come from. After all, as you know, I'm droll, but I'm not grotesque.

A casual friend of mine in Pico Mundo, a fiftyish Panamint Indian who calls himself Tommy Cloudwalker, told me of an encounter he had with such a three-headed creature.

Tommy had gone hiking and camping in the Mojave, when winter's tarnished-silver sun, the Ancient Squaw, had relented to spring's golden sun, the Young Bride, but before summer's fierce platinum sun, the Ugly Wife, could with her sharp tongue sear the desert so cruelly that a sweat of scorpions and beetles would be wrung from the sand in a desperate search for better shade and a drop of water.

Maybe Tommy's names for the seasonal suns arise from the legends of his tribe. Maybe he just makes them up. I'm not sure if Tommy is partly genuine or entirely a master of hokum.

In the center of his forehead is a stylized image of a hawk two inches wide and one inch high. Tommy says the hawk is a birth-mark.

Truck Boheen, a one-legged former biker and tattooist who lives in a rusting trailer on the edge of Pico Mundo, says he applied the hawk to Tommy's forehead twenty-five years ago, for fifty bucks.

Reason tips the scale toward Truck's version. The problem is, Truck also claims that the most recent five presidents of the United States have come secretly to his trailer in the dead of night to receive his tattoos. I might believe one or two, but not five.

Anyway, Tommy was sitting in the Mojave on a spring night, the sky winking with the Wise Eyes of Ancestors—or stars, if scientists are correct—when the creature with three heads appeared on the farther side of the campfire.

The human head never said a word, but the flanking coyote heads spoke English. They debated each other about whether Tommy's head was more desirable than the head already occupying the neck between them.

Coyote One liked Tommy's head, especially the proud nose. Coyote Two was insulting; he said Tommy was "more Italian than Indian."

Being something of a shaman, Tommy recognized that this creature was an unusual manifestation of the Trickster, a spirit common to the folklore of many Indian nations. As an offering, he produced three cigarettes of whatever he was smoking, and these were accepted.

With solemn satisfaction, the three heads smoked in silence. After tossing the butts in the campfire, the creature departed, allowing Tommy to keep his head.

Two words might explain Tommy's story: *peyote buttons*.

The following day, however, after resuming his hike, Tommy came across the headless corpse of another hiker. The driver's license in the guy's wallet identified him as Curtis Hobart.

Nearby was a severed head, but it was the one that had been on the center neck between the coyotes. It looked nothing like Curtis Hobart in the driver's-license photo.

Using his satellite phone, Tommy Cloudwalker called the sheriff. Shimmering like mirages in the spring heat, the authorities arrived both overland and by helicopter.

Later, the coroner declared that the head and the body did not belong together. They never located Curtis Hobart's head, and no

body was ever found to go with the discarded head that had been dropped on the sand near Hobart's corpse.

As I hurried after Boo, along the passageway toward the cooling tower, I did not know why Tommy's unlikely story should rise out of my memory swamp at this time. It didn't seem germane to my current situation.

Later, all would clarify. Even on those occasions when I am as dumb as a duck run down by a truck, my busy *sub* conscious is laboring overtime to save my butt.

Boo went to the cooling tower, and after unlocking the fire door with my universal key, I followed him inside, where the fluorescent lights were on.

We were at the bottom of the structure. It looked like a movie set through which James Bond would pursue a villain who had steel teeth and wore a double-barreled 12-gauge hat.

A pair of thirty-foot-high sheet-metal towers rose above us. They were linked by horizontal ducts, accessed at different levels by a series of red catwalks.

Inside the towers and perhaps in some of the smaller ducts, things were turning with loud thrumming and whisking noises, perhaps huge fan blades. Driven air hissed like peevish cats and whistled like catcalls.

The walls were lined with at least forty large gray metal boxes, similar to junction boxes, except that each featured a large ON/OFF lever and two signal lights, one red and one green. Only green lights glowed at the moment.

All green. A-OK. Good to go. Hunky-dory.

The machinery offered numerous places where someone could hide; and the noise would make even the most lumbering assailant difficult to hear until he was on top of me; but I chose to take the green lights as a good omen.

Had I been aboard the *Titanic*, I would have been standing on the listing deck, leaning against a railing, gazing at a falling star and wishing for a puppy for Christmas even as the band played "Nearer My God to Thee."

Although much that was precious has been taken from me in this life, I have reason to remain an optimist. After the numerous tight scrapes I've been through, by now I should have lost one leg, three fingers, one buttock, most of my teeth, an ear, my spleen, and my sense of fun. But here I am.

Both Boo and psychic magnetism had drawn me here, and when I proceeded warily into the big room, I discovered the attractant.

Between two more banks of gray metal boxes, on a clear section of wall, hung Brother Timothy.

CHAPTER 31

BROTHER TIM'S SHOD FEET DANGLED EIGHTEEN inches off the floor. Six feet above him at its apex, a 180-degree arc of thirteen peculiar white pegs had been driven into the concrete wall. From these pegs stretched white fibrous bands, like inch-wide lengths of cloth, by which he was suspended.

One of the thirteen lines ended in his mussed hair. Two others terminated in the rolled-down hood bunched at the back of his neck, and the remaining ten disappeared into small rents in the shoulders, sleeves, and flanks of his tunic.

The manner in which those lines had been fixed to him remained at every point concealed.

With his head hung forward, with his arms spread out and angled up from his body, the intention to mock the crucifixion could not have been clearer.

Although lacking visible wounds, he appeared to be dead. Famous for his blush, he was now whiter than pale, gray under the eyes. His slack facial muscles responded to no emotion, only to gravity.

Nevertheless, all of the indicator lights on the surrounding breaker boxes—or whatever they were—remained green, so in a spirit of optimism bordering on lunacy, I said, “Brother Timothy,” dismayed to hear my voice so whispery and thin.

The whoosh-whirr-thrum-throb of machinery covered the breathing of the three-headed cigarette fiend behind me, but I refused to turn and confront it. Irrational fear. Nothing loomed at

my back. Not a coyote-human Indian demigod, not my mother with her gun.

Raising my voice, I repeated, "Brother Tim?"

Although smooth, his skin appeared to be as juiceless as dust, grainy like paper, as if life had not merely been taken from him but had been sucked out to the last drop.

An open spiral staircase led to the catwalks above and to the high door in the portion of the cooling tower that rose above ground. The police would have entered by that door to search the vault below.

Either they had overlooked this place or the dead monk had not been here when they had swept through.

He had been a good man, and kind to me. He should not be left to hang there, his cadaver employed to mock the God to whom he had devoted his life.

Maybe I could cut him down.

I lightly pinched one of the fibrous white bands, slid my thumb and forefinger up and down that taut ribbon. Not ribbon, though, nor cotton cloth, nor anything that I had felt before.

Glass-smooth, as dry as talcum, yet flexible. And remarkably cold for such a thin filament, so icy that my fingers began to grow numb from even a brief inspection.

The thirteen white pins were wedges, somehow driven into the concrete as a rock climber drives pitons into cracks with a hammer. Yet the concrete presented not one crack.

The nearest of the thirteen bristled from the wall perhaps eighteen inches above my head. It resembled bleached bone.

I couldn't see how the point of the piton had been embedded in the wall. It seemed to grow from—or to be fused with—the concrete.

Likewise, I wasn't able to discern how the fibrous band had been fixed to the piton. Each suspending line and its anchor appeared to be part of a single unit.

Because he was a thief of heads, the Trickster behind me would have a formidable knife of some kind, perhaps a machete, with which I could cut down Brother Timothy. He wouldn't harm me if I explained that Tommy Cloudwalker and I were friends. I didn't have

cigarettes to offer him, but I did have gum, a few sticks of Black Jack.

When I plucked one of the lines from which the dead monk hung, to determine its toughness, it proved more taut than I expected, as tight with tension as a violin string.

The fibrous material produced an ugly note. I had plucked only one, but after a beat, the other twelve lines vibrated, too, and from them arose eerie music reminiscent of a theremin.

My scalp crawled, I felt a hot breath on the nape of my neck, I detected a foul smell, I knew this was irrational fear, a reaction to the creepy condition of Brother Timothy and to the disturbing strains of theremin-like sound, but I turned anyway, I turned, chagrined that I was so easily suckered by my imagination, I turned boldly to the looming Trickster.

He wasn't behind me. Nothing waited behind me except Boo, who regarded me with a baffled expression that hardened my embarrassment into a diamond-bright luster.

As the cold sound from the thirteen tethers faded, I returned my attention to Brother Timothy, and looked up into his face just as his eyes opened.

CHAPTER 32

MORE ACCURATELY: BROTHER TIMOTHY'S EYE-LIDS lifted, but he could not open his eyes because he didn't possess eyes any longer. In his sockets were matching kaleidoscopic patterns of tiny bonelike forms. The pattern in the left socket irised into new shapes; the pattern in the right did likewise; then both changed in perfect synchronization.

I felt well advised to take a step back from him.

Tongueless and toothless, his mouth sagged open. In the wideness of his silent scream, a layered construct of bony forms, jointed in ways that defied analysis and description, flexed and rotated and thrust forward only to fold inward, as if he were trying to swallow a colony of hard-shelled arachnids that were alive and reluctant to be consumed.

The skin split from the corners of his mouth to his ears. With not one bead of blood, his upper lip peeled toward his scalp, the way the lid of a sardine can rolls back with the twist of a key, and the lower part of his face peeled down over his chin.

While the intention had been to mock the crucifixion of Christ, Brother Timothy's body had also been a chrysalis from which something less charming than a butterfly strove to emerge.

Beneath the veneer of a face lay the fullness of what I had only glimpsed in the eye sockets, in the yawning mouth: a phantasmagoria of bony forms linked by hinge joints, by pivot joints, by ellipsoidal joints, by ball-and-socket joints, and by joints

for which no names existed, and which were not natural to this world.

The apparition appeared to be a solid mass of bones combined so intimately that they must be fused, compacted so completely that they could have no room to rotate or flex. Yet they *did* rotate and flex and pivot and more, seemed to move not merely in three dimensions but in four, in an unceasing exhibition of dexterity that astonished and amazed.

Imagine that all the universe and all of time are together kept in right motion and in perfect balance by an infinite gearbox, and in your mind look down into that intricate mechanism, and you will have a sense of my incomprehension, awe, and terror as I stood before the uberskeleton that churned and ticked and flexed and clicked, peeling the gossamer remnants of Brother Tim away from itself.

Something moved vigorously under the dead monk's tunic.

If popcorn, Pepsi, and a comfortable chair had been available, I might have stayed. But the cooling tower was an inhospitable place, dusty and drafty, offering no refreshments.

Besides, I had an appointment with the Hoosier librarian cake-baker in the school garage. I am loath to be late for an engagement. Tardiness is rude.

A piton popped out of the wall. The fibrous tether reeled that wedge into the kaleidoscopic boneworks, incorporating it in a wink. Another piton came loose, raveled back to Papa.

This rough beast, its hour come 'round at last, didn't need to slouch to Bethlehem to be born. Sharp white blades slashed through the tunic from within, shredding it. No need for Rosemary; no need to waste years as a baby.

The time had come either to light the black candles and start chanting in admiration—or blow this dump.

Boo had already scrambled. I vamoosed.

I pulled the door shut between the cooling tower and the service passage and fumbled with my key for a moment before I realized that the lock only kept people out; I couldn't lock anyone inside.

The four hundred feet to the school appeared to be immeasurable miles, the ceiling lights receding to Pittsburgh and beyond.

Boo was already out of sight. Maybe he had taken a shortcut through another dimension to the school boiler room.

I wished I'd been hanging on to his tail.

CHAPTER 33

WHEN I HAD SPRINTED ABOUT A HUNDRED feet, I heard the cooling-tower door slam open. The crash boomed like a shotgun blast through the service passageway.

Tommy Cloudwalker's Mojave pal, the three-headed poster boy for the evils of smoking, seemed more likely to exist than did the skeletonized boogeyman that now coveted my bones. But fear of this thing was a *rational* fear.

Brother Timothy had been sweet, kind, and devout; yet look what happened to *him*. A shiftless, unemployed, smart-ass specimen like me, who had never exercised his precious American right to vote, who had accepted a compliment at the expense of the late James Dean, ought to expect a fate even more gruesome than Tim's, though I couldn't imagine one.

I glanced over my shoulder.

As it advanced through alternating pools of shadow and light, my pursuer's method of locomotion could not clearly be discerned, though these were not steps that it had learned at a dance studio. It seemed to be marshaling some of its numerous bones into stubby legs, but not all were legs of the same design, and they moved independently of one another, foiling one another and causing the eager creature to lurch.

I was still moving, repeatedly glancing back, not standing in thoughtful contemplation and making notes of my impressions of the beast, but in retrospect I think that I was most alarmed to see it

progressing not on the floor but along the junction of the ceiling and the right-hand wall. It was a climber, which meant the children's quarters on the second floor would be more difficult to defend than I had hoped.

Furthermore, as it came, the entire structure of it appeared to turn ceaselessly, as if it were drilling forward like an auger boring through wood. The word *machine* came to mind, as it had when I watched another of these things flexing itself into one elaborate new pattern after another, against the reception-lounge window.

Tripping again, my pursuer lost its perch and clattered down the wall to the floor. Scissoring jacks of bone cranked it erect, and it came forward, eager but uncertain.

Perhaps it was learning its capabilities, as does any newborn. Maybe this was a Kodak moment, baby's first steps.

By the time I reached the intersection with the passageway that evidently led to the new abbey, I felt confident that I would be able to outrun the thing—unless its learning curve was very steep.

Glancing back again, I saw that it was not just clumsy but also had become translucent. The light from the overhead fixtures did not play across its contours any longer, but seemed to pass through it, as if it were made of milky glass.

For a moment, as it faltered to a halt, I thought it was going to dematerialize, not at all like a machine but like a spirit. Then the translucency passed from it, and it became solid again, and it surged forward.

A familiar keening drew my attention toward the intersecting passage. Far uphill, in the voice that I had heard earlier in the storm, another of these things expressed its sincere desire to have a tête-à-tête with me.

From this distance, I couldn't be certain of its size, but I suspected that it was considerably larger than the lovely that had come out of the chrysalis. It moved with confidence, too, with grace, glissading without benefit of snow, legs churning in a faultless rhythm, with centipede swiftness.

So I did one of the things that I do best: I ran like a sonofabitch.

I only had two legs instead of a hundred, and I was wearing ski boots when I should have been in athletic shoes with air-cushioned insoles, but I had the benefit of wild desperation and the energy provided by Sister Regina Marie's superb beef sandwich. I almost made it to the boiler room safely ahead of Satan and Satan Junior, or whatever they were.

Then something tangled around my feet. I cried out, fell, and scrambled up at once, flailing at my assailant until I realized that it was the quilted thermal jacket I had shucked off earlier because of the whistling noise it made.

As if a chorus line of frenzied skeletons were tapping out the final bars of the show's big number, the clickety-clack of my pursuer rose to a crescendo.

I turned, and it was *right there*.

As one, the regimented legs, different from but as hideous as those of a Jerusalem cricket, clattered to a halt. Although knuckled, knobbed, ribbed, and bristling, the forward half of the twelve-foot apparition rose off the floor with serpentine elegance.

We were face to face, or would have been if I hadn't been the only one of us with a face.

Across the whole of it, patterns of elaborately integrated bones blossomed, withered, were replaced by new forms and patterns, but in a tickless, clickless quicksilver hush.

This silent exhibition was intended to display its absolute and otherworldly control of its physiology, and to leave me terrified and abashed at my comparative weakness. As when I had watched it at the window, I sensed an overweening vanity in its display of itself, an arrogance that was eerily human, a pompousness and boastfulness that exceeded mere vanity and that might be called vainglory.

I backed up a step, another. "Kiss my ass, you ugly bastard."

In a rending fury, it fell upon me, ice-cold and merciless. Uncountable maxillas and mandibles chewed, spurred heelbones ripped, stiletto-sharp phalanges gouged, a whiplike spine with hooked and razored vertebrae slashed me open from abdomen to throat, and my heart was found and torn apart, and thereafter what

I could do for the children of St. Bartholomew's School was limited to what power I might have as one of the lingering dead.

Yes, it could have gone as badly as that, but in fact I just lied to you. The truth is stranger than the lie, though considerably less traumatic.

Everything in my account is true through the point at which I told the bag of bones to kiss my posterior. After issuing that heartfelt vulgarity, I did take one step backward, and then one more.

Because I believed that I had nothing to lose, that my life was already forfeited, I turned boldly from the apparition. I dropped to my hands and knees, and crawled through the four-foot-square aperture between the service passageway and the boiler room.

I expected the thing to snare my feet and to haul me back into its realm. When I reached the boiler room unharmed, I rolled onto my back and scooted away from the open service access, anticipating the intrusion of a questing, pincerred, bony appendage.

No keening arose from beyond the wall, but no clitterclatter of retreat, either, though the rumble of the boiler-room pumps might have masked all but the loudest of those noises.

I listened to my thundering heart, delighted to still have it. And all my fingers, and all my teeth, my precious little spleen, and both buttocks.

Considering the walking boneyard's ability to manifest in infinite iterations, I saw no reason why it wouldn't follow me into the boiler room. Even in its current configuration, it would have no trouble passing through the four-foot-square opening.

If the creature entered, I had no weapon with which to drive it back. But if I failed to make a stand, I'd be conceding it access to the school, where at this moment most of the children were at lunch in the ground-floor refectory, others in their rooms on the second floor.

Feeling foolish and inadequate, I erupted to my feet, snatched a fire extinguisher from its wall rack, and held it ready, as though I might be able to kill those bundled bones of contention with a fog of ammonium phosphate, as in bad early sci-fi movies where the heroes are apt to discover, in the penultimate scene, that the rampaging and apparently indestructible monster can be dissolved

by something as mundane as salt or laundry bleach, or lavender-scented hairspray.

I could not even be sure that this thing was alive in the sense that people and animals and insects are alive, or even in the sense that plants are alive. I could not explain how a three-dimensional collage of bones, regardless of how astoundingly intricate it might appear, could be alive when it lacked flesh, blood, and visible sense organs. And if it wasn't alive, it couldn't be killed.

A supernatural explanation eluded me, too. Nothing in the theology of any major religion proposed the existence of an entity like this, nor anything in any body of folklore with which I was familiar.

Boo appeared from among the boilers. He studied me and my ammonium-phosphate-fog weapon. He sat, cocked his head, and grinned. He seemed to find me amusing.

Armed with the fire extinguisher and, if that failed, with only Black Jack chewing gum, I stood my ground for a minute, two minutes, three.

Nothing came from beyond the wall. Nothing waited at the threshold, tapping its fleshless toes impatiently.

I set aside the fire extinguisher.

Staying ten feet back from the low opening, I got on my hands and knees to peer into the passageway. I saw the lighted concrete corridor dwindling toward the cooling tower, but nothing that would make me want to call Ghostbusters.

Boo went closer to the service aperture than I dared, peered in, then glanced at me, perplexed.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't get it."

I replaced the stainless-steel panel. As I inserted the first bolt and tightened it with the special tool, I expected something to slam against the farther side, rip the panel away, and drag me out of the boiler room. Didn't happen.

Whatever had prevented the beast of bones from doing to me what it had done to Brother Timothy, I do not know, though I am certain it had wanted me and had intended to take me. I'm pretty

sure that my insult—*Kiss my ass, you ugly bastard*—did not cause it to sulk away with hurt feelings.

CHAPTER 34

RODION ROMANOVICH ARRIVED IN THE GARAGE wearing a handsome bearskin hat, a white silk neck scarf, a black three-quarter-length lined leather coat with fur collar and fur cuffs, and—no surprise—zippered rubber boots that rose to his knees. He looked as if he had dressed for a horse-drawn sleigh-ride with the czar.

After my experience with the galloping boneyard, I was lying on my back on the floor, staring at the ceiling, trying to calm myself, waiting for my legs to stop trembling and regain some strength.

Standing over me, peering down, he said, “You are a peculiar young man, Mr. Thomas.”

“Yes, sir. I am aware.”

“What are you doing down there?”

“Recovering from a bad scare.”

“What scared you?”

“A sudden recognition of my mortality.”

“Have you not previously realized you are mortal?”

“Yes, sir, I’ve been aware of it for a while. I was just, you know, overcome by a sense of the unknown.”

“What unknown, Mr. Thomas?”

“The great unknown, sir. I’m not a particularly vulnerable person. Little unknowns don’t disconcert me.”

“How does lying on a garage floor console you?”

“The water stains on the ceiling are lovely. They relax me.”

Looking at the concrete overhead, he said, “I find them ugly.”

“No, no. All the soft shadings of gray and black and rust, just a hint of green, gently blending together, all free-form shapes, not anything that looks as defined and rigid as a bone.”

“Bone, did you say?”

“Yes, sir, I did. Is that a bearskin hat, sir?”

“Yes. I know it is not politically correct to wear fur, but I refuse to apologize for it to anyone.”

“Good for you, sir. I’ll bet you killed the bear yourself.”

“Are you an animal activist, Mr. Thomas?”

“I have nothing against animals, but I’m usually too busy to march on their behalf.”

“Then I will tell you that I did, indeed, kill the bear from which this hat was fashioned and from which the fur came for the collar and cuffs of this coat.”

“That isn’t much to have gotten from a whole bear.”

“I have other fur items in my wardrobe, Mr. Thomas. I wonder how you knew that I killed the bear.”

“I mean no offense by this, sir, but in addition to the fur for various garments, you received into yourself something of the spirit of the bear when you killed it.”

From my extreme perspective, his many frown lines looked like terrible dark saber scars. “That sounds New Age and not Catholic.”

“I’m speaking metaphorically, not literally, and with some irony, sir.”

“When I was your age, I did not have the luxury of irony. Will you get up from there?”

“In a minute, sir. Eagle Creek Park, Garfield Park, White River State Park—Indianapolis has some very nice parks, but I didn’t know there were bears in them.”

“As I am sure you realize, I hunted the bear and shot it when I was a young man in Russia.”

“I keep forgetting you’re Russian. Wow, librarians are a tougher bunch in Russia than here, hunting bear and all.”

“Everyone had it tough. It was the Soviet era. But I was not a librarian in Russia.”

“I’m in the middle of a career change myself. What were you in Russia?”

“A mortician.”

“Is that right? You embalmed people and stuff.”

“I prepared people for death, Mr. Thomas.”

“That’s a peculiar way of putting it.”

“Not at all. That’s how we said it in my former country.” He spoke a few words in Russian and then translated: “ ‘I am a mortician. I prepare people for death.’ Now, of course, I am a librarian at the Indiana State Library opposite the Capitol, at one-forty North Senate Avenue.”

I lay in silence for a moment. Then I said, “You’re quite droll, Mr. Romanovich.”

“But I hope not grotesque.”

“I’m still thinking about that.” I pointed to the second SUV. “You’re driving that one. You’ll find the keys tagged with the license number in a wall box over there.”

“Has your meditation on the ceiling stains ameliorated your fear of the great unknown?”

“As much as could be expected, sir. Would you like to take a few minutes to meditate on them?”

“No thank you, Mr. Thomas. The great unknown does not trouble me.” He went to get the keys.

When I rose to my feet, my legs were steadier than they had been recently.

Ozzie Boone, a four-hundred-pound best-selling mystery writer who is my friend and mentor in Pico Mundo, insists that I keep the tone light in these biographical manuscripts. He believes that pessimism is strictly for people who are over-educated and unimaginative. Ozzie counsels me that melancholy is a self-indulgent form of sorrow. By writing in an unrelievedly dark mode, he warns, the writer risks culturing darkness in his heart, becoming the very thing that he decries.

Considering the gruesome death of Brother Timothy, the awful discoveries yet to be revealed in this account, and the grievous losses forthcoming, I doubt that the tone of this narrative would be

half as light as it is if Rodion Romanovich had not been part of it. I do not mean that he turned out to be a swell guy. I mean only that he had wit.

These days, all I ask of Fate is that the people she hurls into my life, whether they are evil or good, or morally bipolar, should be amusing to one degree or another. This is a big request to make of busy Fate, who has billions of lives to keep in constant turmoil. Most good people have a sense of humor. The problem is finding smile-inducing evil people, because the evil are mostly humorless, though in the movies they frequently get some of the best lines. With few exceptions, the morally bipolar are too preoccupied with justifying their contradictory behaviors to learn to laugh at themselves, and I've noticed they laugh *at* other people more than *with* them.

Burly, fur-hatted, and looking as solemn as a man should who prepares people for death, Rodion Romanovich returned with the keys to the second SUV.

"Mr. Thomas, any scientist will tell you that in nature many systems appear to be chaotic, but when you study them long enough and closely enough, strange order always underlies the appearance of chaos."

I said, "How about that."

"The winter storm into which we are going will seem chaotic—the shifting winds and the churning snow and the brightness that obscures more than it reveals—but if you could view it not at the level of a meteorological event, view it instead at the micro scale of fluid and particle and energy flux, you would see a warp and woof suggestive of a well-woven fabric."

"I left my micro-scale eyeglasses in my room."

"If you were to view it at the atomic level, the event might seem chaotic again, but proceeding into the subatomic, strange order appears once more, an even more intricate design than warp and woof. Always, beneath every apparent chaos, order waits to be revealed."

"You haven't seen my sock drawer."

“The two of us might seem to be in this place, at this time, only by coincidence, but both an honest scientist and a true man of faith will tell you there are no coincidences.”

I shook my head. “They sure did make you do some pretty deep thinking at that mortician’s school.”

Neither a spot nor a wrinkle marred his clothes, and his rubber boots gleamed like patent leather.

Stoic, seamed, and solid, his face was a mask of perfect order.

He said, “Do not bother to ask for the name of the mortician’s school, Mr. Thomas. I never attended one.”

“This is the first time I’ve known anyone,” I said, “who embalmed without a license.”

His eyes revealed an order even more rigorous than that exemplified by his wardrobe and his face.

He said, “I obtained a license without the need for schooling. I had a natural-born talent for the trade.”

“Some kids are born with perfect pitch, with a genius for math, and you were born knowing how to prepare people for death.”

“That is exactly correct, Mr. Thomas.”

“You must have come from interesting genetic stock.”

“I suspect,” he said, “that your family and mine were equally unconventional.”

“I’ve never met my mother’s sister, Aunt Cymry, but my father says she’s a dangerous mutant they’ve locked away somewhere.”

The Russian shrugged. “I would nevertheless wager heavily on the equivalency of our families. Should I lead the way or follow you?”

If he contained chaos on some level below wardrobe and face and eyes, it must be in his mind. I wondered what kind of strange order might underlie it.

“Sir, I’ve never driven in snow before. I’m not sure how I’ll be able to tell, under all the drifts, exactly where the driveway runs between here and the abbey. I’d have to plow by intuition—though I usually do all right that way.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Thomas, I believe that experience trumps intuition. Russia is a world of snow, and in fact I was born during a blizzard.”

“During a blizzard, in a mortuary?”

“Actually, in a library.”

“Was your mother a librarian?”

“No,” he said. “She was an assassin.”

“An assassin.”

“That is correct.”

“Do you mean *assassin* figuratively or literally, sir?”

“Both, Mr. Thomas. When driving behind me, please remain at a safe distance. Even with four-wheel drive and chains, there is some danger of sliding.”

“I feel like I’ve been sliding all day. I’ll be careful, sir.”

“If you do start to slide, turn the wheel into the direction of the slide. Do not try to pull out of it. And use the brakes gently.” He walked to the other SUV and opened the driver’s door.

Before he climbed behind the wheel, I said, “Sir, lock your doors. And if you see anything unusual in the storm, don’t get out of the truck to have a closer look at it. Keep driving.”

“Unusual? Such as?”

“Oh, you know, anything unusual. Say like a snowman with three heads or someone who looks like she might be my Aunt Cymry.”

Romanovich could peel an apple with his stare.

With a little good-luck wave, I got into my truck, and after a moment, he got into his.

After he drove around me to the foot of the ramp, I pulled in behind him.

He used his remote opener, and at the top of the incline, the big door began to roll up.

Beyond the garage lay a chaos of bleak light, shrieking wind, and a perpetual avalanche of falling snow.

CHAPTER 35

IN FRONT OF ME, RODION ROMANOVICH DROVE out of the garage into hammers of wind and shatters of snow, and I switched on my headlamps. The drowned daylight required them in this feathered rain.

Even as those beams brought sparkle to the dull white curtains of snow, Elvis materialized in the passenger seat as though I had switched him on, as well.

He was dressed in his navy-frogman scuba suit from *Easy Come, Easy Go*, possibly because he thought I needed a laugh.

The black neoprene hood fitted tightly to his head, covering his hair, his ears, and his forehead to the eyebrows. With his face thus isolated, the sensuous quality of his features was weirdly enhanced, but not to good effect. He looked not like a navy frogman but rather like a sweet little bow-lipped Kewpie doll that some pervert had dressed in a bondage costume.

“Oh, man, that movie,” I said. “With that one, you gave new meaning to the word *ridiculous*.”

He laughed soundlessly, pretended to shoot me with a spear gun, and phased from the scuba suit into the Arabian costume he had worn in *Harum Scarum*.

“You’re right,” I agreed, “that one was even worse.”

When making his music, he had been the essence of cool, but in his movies he was often a self-parody embarrassing to watch. Colonel Parker, his manager, who had picked movie scripts for him,

had served Elvis less well than the monk Rasputin had served Czar Nicholas and Alexandra.

I drove out of the garage, stopped, and thumbed the remote to put down the door behind me.

Using the rearview mirror, I watched until the door had closed entirely, prepared to shift into reverse and run down any fugitive from a nightmare that tried to enter the garage.

Apparently calculating the correct path of the driveway by a logical analysis of the topography, Romanovich plowed without error north-by-northwest, exposing blacktop as he ascended in a gentle curve.

Some of the scooped-away snow spilled back onto the pavement in his wake. I lowered my plow until it barely skimmed the blacktop, and cleaned up after him. I remained at the requested safe distance, both out of respect for his experience and because I didn't want him to report me to his mother, the assassin.

Wind skirled as though a dozen Scottish funerals were under way. Concussive blasts rocked the SUV, and I was grateful that it was an extended model with a lower point of gravity, further anchored by the heavy plow.

The snow was so dry and the blow so relentlessly scolding that nothing stuck to the windshield. I didn't turn on the wipers.

Scanning the slope ahead, left and right, checking the mirrors, I expected to see one or more of the bone beasts out for a lark in the blizzard. The white torrents foiled vision almost as effectively as a sandstorm in the Mojave, but the stark geometric lines of the creatures, by contrast, ought to draw the eye in this comparatively soft sweep of stormscape.

Except for the SUVs, nothing moved other than what the wind harried. Even a few big trees along the route, pines and firs, were so heavily weighed down by the snow already plastered on them that their boughs barely shivered in deference to the gale.

In the passenger seat, Elvis, having gone blond, had also phased into the work boots, peg-legged jeans, and plaid shirt he had worn in *Kissin' Cousins*. He played two roles in that one: a dark-haired air-force officer and a yellow-haired hillbilly.

“You don’t see many blond hillbillies in real life,” I said, “especially not with perfect teeth, black eyebrows, and teased hair.”

He pretended to have a buck-toothed overbite and crossed his eyes to try to give the role more of a *Deliverance* edge.

I laughed. “Son, you’ve been going through some changes lately. You were never able to laugh this easily about your bad choices.”

For a moment he seemed to consider what I had said, and then he pointed at me.

“What?”

He grinned and nodded.

“You think I’m funny?”

He nodded again, then shook his head no, as if to say he thought I was funny but that wasn’t what he had meant. He pulled on a serious expression and pointed at me again, then at himself.

If he meant what I thought he did, I was flattered. “The one who taught *me* how to laugh at my foolishness was Stormy.”

He looked at his blond hair in the rearview mirror, shook his head, laughed silently again.

“When you laugh at yourself, you gain perspective. Then you realize that the mistakes you made, as long as they didn’t hurt anyone but yourself—well, you can forgive yourself for those.”

After thinking about that for a moment, he gave me one thumb up as a sign of agreement.

“You know what? Everyone who crosses over to the Other Side, if he didn’t know it before he went, suddenly understands the thousand ways he was a fool in this world. So everyone over there understands everyone over here better than we understand ourselves—and forgives us our foolishness.”

He knew that I meant his beloved mother would greet him with delighted laughter, not with disappointment and certainly not with shame. Tears welled in his eyes.

“Just think about it,” I said.

He bit his lower lip and nodded.

Peripherally, I glimpsed a swift presence in the storm. My heart jumped, and I turned toward the movement, but it was only Boo.

With canine exuberance, he appeared almost to skate up the hill, glorying in the winter spectacle, neither troubled by nor troubling the hostile landscape, a white dog racing through a white world.

After rounding the back of the church, we drove toward the entrance to the guesthouse, where the brothers would meet us.

Elvis had phased from carefully coiffed hillbilly to physician. He wore a white lab coat, and a stethoscope hung around his neck.

“Hey, that’s right. You were in a movie with nuns. You played a doctor. *Change of Habit*. Mary Tyler Moore was a nun. Not immortal cinema, maybe not up there with the Ben Affleck-Jennifer Lopez oeuvre, but not egregiously silly.”

He put his right hand over his heart and made a patting motion to suggest a rapid beat.

“You loved Mary Tyler Moore?” When he nodded, I said, “Everybody loved Mary Tyler Moore. But you were just friends with her in real life, right?”

He nodded. Just friends. He made the patting motion again. Just friends, but he loved her.

Rodion Romanovich braked to a stop in front of the guesthouse entrance.

As I pulled up slowly behind the Russian, Elvis put the ear tips of the stethoscope in his ears and pressed the diaphragm to my chest, as though listening to my heart. His stare was meaningful and colored with sorrow.

I shifted into park, tramped the emergency brake, and said, “Son, don’t you worry about me. You hear? No matter what happens, I’ll be all right. When my day comes, I’ll be even better, but in the meantime, I’ll be all right. You do what you need to do, and don’t you worry about me.”

He kept the stethoscope to my chest.

“You’ve been a blessing to me in a hard time,” I told him, “and nothing would please me more than if I proved to be a blessing to you.”

He put one hand on the back of my neck and squeezed, the way a brother might express himself when he has no adequate words.

I opened the door and got out of the SUV, and the wind was so cold.

CHAPTER 36

BAKED BY BITTER COLD, HALF THE FLUFF OF THE falling snow had been seared away. The flakes were almost grains now, and they stung my face as I waded through twenty inches of powder to meet Rodion Romanovich when he got out of his SUV. He had left the engine running and the lights on, as I had done.

I raised my voice above the wind: “The brothers will need help with their gear. Let them know we’re here. The back row of seats in my truck are folded down. I’ll come in as soon as I’ve put them up.”

In the school garage, this son of an assassin had looked a bit theatrical in his bearskin hat and fur-trimmed leather coat, but in the storm he appeared imperial and in his element, as if he were the king of winter and could halt the falling snow with a gesture if he chose to do so.

He did not hunch forward and tuck his head to escape the bite of the wind, but stood tall and straight, and strode into the guesthouse with all the swagger you would expect of a man who had once prepared people for death.

The moment he had gone inside, I opened the driver’s door of his SUV, killed the headlights, switched off the engine, and pocketed the keys.

I hurried back to the second vehicle to shut off its lights and engine as well. I pocketed those keys, too, assuring that Romanovich could not drive either SUV back to the school.

When I followed my favorite Hoosier into the guesthouse, I found sixteen brothers ready to rumble.

Practicality had required them to trade their usual habits for storm suits. These were not, however, the flashy kind of storm suits you would see on the slopes of Aspen and Vail. They did not hug the contours of the body to enhance aerodynamics and après-ski seduction, or feature vivid colors in bold designs.

The habits and ceremonial garments worn by the monks were cut and sewn by four brothers who had learned tailoring. These four had also created the storm suits.

Every suit was a dull blue-gray, without ornamentation. They were finely crafted, with foldaway hoods, ballistic-nylon scuff guards, and insulated snowcuffs with rubberized strippers: perfect gear for shoveling sidewalks and other foul-weather tasks.

Upon Romanovich's arrival, the brothers had begun to put on Thermoloft-insulated vests over their storm suits. The vests had elasticized gussets and reinforced shoulders, and like the storm suits, they offered a number of zippered pockets.

In this uniform, with their kind faces framed in snugly fitted hoods, they looked like sixteen spacemen who had just arrived from a planet so benign that its anthem must be "Teddy Bears on Parade."

Brother Victor, the former marine, moved among his troops, making sure that all the needed tools had been brought to this staging area.

Two steps inside the door, I spotted Brother Knuckles, and he nodded conspiratorially, and we rendezvoused immediately at the end of the reception lounge that was farthest from the marshaled forces of righteousness.

As I handed him the keys to the SUV that Romanovich had driven, Knuckles said, "Fortify and defend against who, son? When you gotta go to the mattresses, it's kinda traditional to know who's the mugs you're at war with."

"These are some epic bad mugs, sir. I don't have time to explain here. I'll lay it out when we get to the school. My biggest problem is how to explain it to the brothers, because it is mondo weird."

“I’ll vouch for you, kid. When Knuckles says a guy’s word is gold, there ain’t no doubters.”

“There’s going to be some doubters this time.”

“Better not be.” His block-and-slab features fell into a hard expression suitable for a stone-temple god who didn’t lightly suffer disbelievers. “There better be no doubters of you. Besides, maybe they don’t know God’s got a hand on your head, but they like you and they got a hunch somethin’s special about you.”

“And they’re crazy about my pancakes.”

“That don’t hurt.”

“I found Brother Timothy,” I said.

The stone face broke a little. “Found poor Tim just the way I said he’d be, didn’t you?”

“Not just the way, sir. But, yeah, he’s with God now.”

Making the sign of the cross, he murmured a prayer for Brother Timothy, and then said, “We got proof now—Tim, he didn’t slip around to Reno for some R and R. The sheriff’s gonna have to get real, give the kids the protection you want.”

“Wish he would, but he won’t. We still don’t have a body.”

“Maybe all those times I got my ears boxed is catchin’ up with me, ’cause what I thought you said was you found his body.”

“Yes, sir, I did, I found his body, but all that’s left now is maybe the first couple centimeters of his face rolled up like on a sardine-can key.”

Intensely eye to eye, he considered my words. Then: “That don’t make no sense of no kind, son.”

“No, sir, no sense. I’ll tell you the whole thing when we get to the school, and when you hear it all, it’ll make even less sense.”

“And you think this Russian guy, he’s in it somehow?”

“He’s no librarian, and if he was ever a mortician, he didn’t wait for business, he went out and made it.”

“I can’t puzzle the full sense of that one, neither. How’s your shoulder from last night?”

“Still a little sore, but not bad. My head’s okay, sir, I’m not concussed, I assure you.”

Half the storm-suited monks had taken their gear outside to the SUVs and others were filing out of the door when Brother Saul, who was not going to the school, came to inform us that the abbey phones had gone dead.

“Do you usually lose the phones in a big storm?” I asked.

Brother Knuckles shook his head. “Maybe once in all the years I remember.”

“There’s still cell phones,” I said.

“Somethin’ tells me no, son.”

Even in good weather, cell service wasn’t reliable in this area. I fished my phone from a jacket pocket, switched it on, and we waited for the screen to give us bad news, which it did.

Whenever the crisis arrived, we wouldn’t have easy communication between the abbey and the school.

“Back when I worked for the Eggbeater, we had a thing we said when there was too many funny coincidences.”

“ ‘There are no coincidences,’ ” I quoted.

“No, that ain’t it. We said, ‘Somebody amongst us musta let the FBI put a bug up his rectum.’ ”

“That’s colorful, sir, but I’d be happy if this were the FBI.”

“Well, I was on the dark side back then. You better tell the Russian he don’t have a round-trip ticket.”

“You’ve got his keys.”

Carrying a toolbox in one hand and a baseball bat in the other, the last of the storm-suited brothers shouldered through the front door. The Russian wasn’t in the room.

As Brother Knuckles and I stepped out into the snow, Rodion Romanovich drove away in the first SUV, which was fully loaded with monks.

“I’ll be damned.”

“Whoa. Careful with that, son.”

“He took both sets of keys off the peg,” I said.

Romanovich drove halfway back along the side of the church and then stopped, as though waiting for me to follow.

“This is bad,” I said.

“Maybe this is God at work, son, and you just can’t see the good in it yet.”

“Is that confident faith talking, or is it the warm-and-fuzzy optimism of the mouse who saved the princess?”

“They’re sort of one and the same, son. You want to drive?”

I handed him the keys to the second SUV. “No. I just want to sit quietly and stew in my stupidity.”

CHAPTER 37

THE LINT-WHITE SKY SEEMED TO BRIGHTEN THE day less than did the blanketed land, as if the sun were dying and the earth were evolving into a new sun, though a cold one, that would illuminate little and warm nothing.

Brother Knuckles drove, following the devious faux librarian at a safe distance, and I rode shotgun without a shotgun. Eight brothers and their gear occupied the second, third, and fourth rows of seats in the extended SUV.

You might expect that a truckful of monks would be quiet, all the passengers in silent prayer or meditating on the state of their souls, or scheming each in his own way to conceal from humankind that the Church is an organization of extraterrestrials determined to rule the world through mind control, a dark truth known to Mr. Leonardo da Vinci, which we can prove by citing his most famous self-portrait, in which he depicted himself wearing a pyramid-shaped tinfoil hat.

Here in the early afternoon, the Lesser Silence should have been observed to the extent that work allowed, but the monks were voluble. They worried about their missing brother, Timothy, and were alarmed by the possibility that persons unknown intended to harm the children at the school. They sounded fearful, humbled, yet exhilarated that they might be called upon to be brave defenders of the innocent.

Brother Alfonse asked, “Odd, are all of us going to die?”

“I hope none of us is going to die,” I replied.

“If all of us died, the sheriff would be disgraced.”

“I fail to understand,” said Brother Rupert, “the moral calculus that all of us dying would be balanced by the sheriff’s disgrace.”

“I assure you, Brother,” Alfonse said, “I didn’t mean to imply that mass death would be an acceptable price for the sheriff’s defeat in the next election.”

Brother Quentin, who had been a police officer at one time, first a beat patrolman and then a robbery-and-homicide detective, said, “Odd, who are these kid-killer wannabes?”

“We don’t know for sure,” I said, turning in my seat to look back at him. “But we know something’s coming.”

“What’s the evidence? Obviously something that’s not concrete enough to impress the sheriff. Threatening phone calls, like that?”

“The phones have gone down,” I said evasively, “so there won’t be any threatening calls now.”

“Are you being evasive?” Brother Quentin asked.

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“You’re terrible at being evasive.”

“Well, I do my best, sir.”

“We need to know the name of our enemy,” said Brother Quentin.

Brother Alfonse said, “We know the name. His name is legion.”

“I don’t mean our *ultimate* enemy,” said Quentin. “Odd, we aren’t going up against Satan with baseball bats, are we?”

“If it’s Satan, I haven’t noticed a sulfurous smell.”

“You’re being evasive again.”

“Yes, sir.”

From the third row, Brother Augustine said, “Why would you have to be evasive about whether or not it’s Satan? We all know it’s not Satan himself, it’s got to be some anti-faith zealots or something, doesn’t it?”

“Militant atheists,” said someone at the back of the vehicle.

Another fourth-row passenger chimed in: “Islamofascists. The president of Iran said, ‘The world will be cleaner when there’s no one whose day of worship is Saturday. When they’re all dead, we’ll kill the Sunday crowd.’ ”

Brother Knuckles, behind the wheel, said, “No reason to work yourselves up about it. We get to the school—Abbot Bernard, he’s gonna give you the straight poop, as far as we know it.”

Surprised, indicating the SUV ahead of us, I said, “Is the abbot with them?”

Knuckles shrugged. “He insisted, son. Maybe he don’t weigh more than a wet cat, but he’s a plus to the team. There’s not a thing in this world could scare the abbot.”

I said, “There might be a thing.”

From the second row, Brother Quentin put a hand on my shoulder, returning to his main issue with the persistence of a cop skilled at interrogation. “All I’m saying, Odd, is we need to know the name of our enemy. We don’t exactly have a crew of trained warriors here. When push comes to shove, if they don’t know who they’re supposed to be defending against, they’ll get so jittery, they’ll start swinging baseball bats at one another.”

Brother Augustine gently admonished, “Do not underestimate us, Brother Quentin.”

“Maybe the abbot will bless the baseball bats,” said Brother Kevin from the third row.

Brother Rupert said, “I doubt the abbot would think it proper to bless a baseball bat to ensure a game-winning home run, let alone to make it a more effective weapon for braining someone.”

“I certainly hope,” said Brother Kevin, “we don’t have to brain anyone. The thought sickens me.”

“Swing low,” Brother Knuckles advised, “and take ’em out at the knees. Some guy with his knees all busted ain’t an immediate threat, but the damage ain’t permanent, neither. He’s gonna heal back to normal. Mostly.”

“We have a profound moral dilemma here,” Brother Kevin said. “We must, of course, protect the children, but busting knees is not by any stretch of theology a Christian response.”

“Christ,” Brother Augustine reminded him, “physically threw the money changers out of the temple.”

“Indeed, but I’ve seen nowhere in Scripture where our Lord busted their knees in the process.”

Brother Alfonse said, “Perhaps we really are all going to die.”

His hand still on my shoulder, Brother Quentin said, “Something more than a threatening call has you alarmed. Maybe...did you find Brother Timothy? Did you, Odd? Dead or alive?”

At this point, I wasn’t going to say that I had found him dead *and* alive, and that he had suddenly transformed from Tim to something not Tim. Instead, I replied, “No, sir, not dead or alive.”

Quentin’s eyes narrowed. “You’re being evasive again.”

“How could you possibly know, sir?”

“You’ve got a tell.”

“A what?”

“Every time you’re being evasive, your left eye twitches ever so slightly. You have an eye-twitch tell that betrays your intention to be evasive.”

As I turned front to deny Brother Quentin a view of my twitchy eye, I saw Boo bounding gleefully downhill through the snow.

Behind the grinning dog came Elvis, capering as if he were a child, leaving no prints behind himself, arms raised above his head, waving both hands high as some inspired evangelicals do when they shout *Hallelujah*.

Boo turned away from the plowed pavement and sprinted friskily across the meadow. Laughing and jubilant, Elvis ran after him. The rocker and the rollicking dog receded from view, neither troubled by the stormscape nor troubling it.

Most days, I wish that my special powers of vision and intuition had never been bestowed on me, that the grief they have brought to me could be lifted from my heart, that everything I have seen of the supernatural could be expunged from memory, and that I could be what, but for this gift, I otherwise am—no one special, just one soul in a sea of souls, swimming through the days toward a hope of that final sanctuary beyond all fear and pain.

Once in a while, however, there are moments for which the burden seems worth carrying: moments of transcendent joy, of inexpressible beauty, of wonder that overwhelms the mind with awe, or in this case a moment of such piercing charm that the world

seems more right than it really is and offers a glimpse of what Eden might have been before we pulled it down.

Although Boo would remain at my side for days to come, Elvis would not be with me much longer. But I know that the image of them racing through the storm in rapturous delight will be with me vividly through all my days in this world, and forever after.

“Son?” Knuckles said, curious.

I realized that, although a smile was not appropriate to the moment, I was smiling.

“Sir, I think the King is about ready to move out of that place down at the end of Lonely Street.”

“Heartbreak Hotel,” said Knuckles.

“Yeah. It was never the five-star kind of joint where he should be booked to play.”

Knuckles brightened. “Hey, that’s swell, ain’t it.”

“It’s swell,” I agreed.

“Must feel good that you opened the big door for him.”

“I didn’t open the door,” I said. “I just showed him where the knob was and which way it turned.”

Behind me, Brother Quentin said, “What’re you two talking about? I don’t follow.”

Without turning in my seat, I said, “In time, sir. You’ll follow him in time. We’ll all follow him in time.”

“Him who?”

“Elvis Presley, sir.”

“I’ll bet your left eye is twitching like crazy,” said Brother Quentin.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

Knuckles shook his head. “No twitch.”

We had covered two-thirds of the distance between the new abbey and the school when out of the storm came a scissoring, scuttling, serpentine bewilderment of bones.

CHAPTER 38

ALTHOUGH BROTHER TIMOTHY HAD BEEN KILLED— and worse than killed—by one of these creatures, a part of me, the Pollyanna part I can't entirely wring out of myself, had wanted to believe that the ever-moving mosaic of bones at the school window and my pursuers in the cooling-tower service tunnel had been apparitions, fearsome but, in the end, less real than such threats as a man with a gun, a woman with a knife, or a U.S. senator with an idea.

Pollyanna Odd half expected, as with the lingering dead and the bodachs, that these entities would prove to be invisible to anyone but me, and that what happened to Timothy was somehow a singularity, because supernatural presences, after all, do not have the power to harm the living.

That hopeful possibility was flushed down the wishful-thinking drain with the appearance of the keening banshee of bones and the immediate reactions of Knuckles and his brothers.

As tall and long as two horses running nose to tail, ceaselessly kaleidoscopic even when traversing the meadow, the thing came out of the white wind and crossed the pavement in front of the first SUV.

In Dante's *Inferno*, in the ice and snowy mist of the frozen lowest level of Hell, the imprisoned Satan had appeared to the poet out of the winds made by his three sets of great leathery wings. The fallen angel, once beautiful but now hideous, had reeked of despair and misery and evil.

Likewise, here was misery and despair embodied in the calcium and phosphate of bone, and evil in the marrow. Its intentions were evident in its design, in its swift motion, and its every intention was pernicious.

Not one brother reacted to this manifestation with wonder or even with mere fear of the unknown, and none with disbelief. Without exception they regarded it at once as an abomination, and viewed it with as much disgust as terror, with loathing and with a righteous kind of hatred, as though upon seeing it for the first time they recognized it as an ancient and enduring beast.

If any was stunned to silence, he found his voice quickly, and the SUV was filled with exclamations. There were appeals to Christ and to the Holy Mother, and I heard no hesitation or embarrassment about labeling the thing before us with the names of demons or with the name of the father of all demons, though I'm reasonably sure the first words from Brother Knuckles were *Mamma mia*.

Rodion Romanovich brought his SUV to a full stop as the white demon passed in front of him.

When Knuckles braked, the chain-wrapped tires stuttered on the icy pavement but didn't slide, and we, too, shuddered to a halt.

The pistoning bony legs cast up plumes of snow from the meadow as the thing crossed the road and kept going, as though it was not aware of us. The trail it left in the fresh powder and the way the falling snow whirled in the currents of its wake dispelled any doubt about its reality.

Certain that the beast's disinterest in us was pretense and that it would return, I said to Knuckles, "Let's go. Don't just sit here. Go, go, get us inside."

"I can't go till he does," Knuckles said, indicating the SUV that blocked the road in front of us.

To the right, south, rose a steep bank, which the uberskeleton had descended in a centipedal scurry. We might not bog down in the deep drift, but the angle of incline would surely roll us.

In the northern meadow, the dismal light of the sunless day and shrouds of snow folded around the fantastic architecture of restless bones, but we had not seen the last of it.

Rodion Romanovich still stood on his brake pedal, and in the red taillights, snow came down in bloody showers.

To the left, the meadow dropped two feet from the driveway. We could probably have driven around Romanovich; but that was a needless risk.

“He’s waiting for another look at it,” I said. “Is he nuts? Give him the horn.”

Knuckles pumped the horn, and the brake lights on Romanovich’s SUV fluttered, and Knuckles used the horn again, and the Russian began to coast forward, but then braked once more.

Out of the north came the monster, harrowing the field of snow, moving less quickly than before, a sense of ominous intention in its more measured approach.

Amazement, fear, curiosity, disbelief: Whatever had immobilized Romanovich, he broke free of its hold. The SUV rolled forward.

Before Romanovich could build any speed, the creature arrived, reared up, extruded intricately pincerred arms, seized its prey, and tipped the vehicle on its side.

CHAPTER 39

THE SUV LAY ON ITS STARBOARD SIDE. THE slowly turning tires on the port side uselessly sought traction in the snow-shot air.

The Russian and the eight monks could exit only by the back hatch or by the doors turned to the sky, but not with ease and not with haste.

I assumed the beast would either pry open the doors and reach inside for the nine men or pluck them as they tried to escape. How it would do to them what it had done to Brother Timothy, I didn't know, but I was certain that it would methodically gather them to itself, one by one.

When they were harvested, it would carry them away to crucify them on a wall as it had done with Timothy, transforming their mortal forms into nine chrysalises. Or it would then come after us, here in the second truck, and later in the day, the cooling tower would be crowded with eighteen chrysalises.

Instead of proceeding with its usual mechanical insistence, the thing retreated from the overturned SUV and waited, retaining its basic form but continuously folding in upon itself and blooming out new vaned and petaled patterns.

With the nerveless aplomb of an experienced getaway driver, Brother Knuckles engaged his safety harness, raised the steel plow off the pavement, shifted gears, and reversed up the driveway.

"We can't leave them trapped," I said, and the brothers behind me were in vociferous agreement.

“We ain’t leavin’ nobody,” Knuckles assured me. “I just hope they’re scared enough to stay put.”

Like a macabre motorized sculpture crafted by graverobbers, the bone heap stood sentinel by the side of the road, perhaps waiting for the doors on the overturned SUV to open.

When we had reversed fifty yards, the tipped truck became a blur on the road below, and the sheeting snow almost entirely camouflaged the bony specter.

I strapped myself into the shoulder harness—and heard the brothers buckling up behind me. Even when God is your co-pilot, it pays to pack a parachute.

Brother Knuckles slowed to a stop. With one foot on the brake, he shifted into drive.

Except for the sound of their breathing, the monks had fallen silent.

Then Brother Alfonse said, “*Libera nos a malo.*”

Deliver us from evil.

Knuckles traded the brake pedal for the accelerator. The engine growled, the tire chains rang rhythms from the pavement, and we raced downhill, aiming to sweep past the overturned SUV and take out the fiend.

Our target seemed oblivious of us until the penultimate moment, or perhaps it had no fear.

Plow-first we slammed into the thing and instantly lost most of our forward momentum.

A furious hail crashed down. The windshield crazed, dissolved, fell in upon us, and with it came both loose bones and articulated structures.

An elaborately jointed array of bones landed in my lap, spasming like a broken crab. My cry was every bit as manly as that of a young schoolgirl surprised by a hairy spider. I knocked the thing off me, onto the floor.

It felt cold and slick, yet not greasy or wet, had seemed to harbor no warmth of life.

The castoff scabbled at my feet, not with intent to harm but as the decapitated body of a snake lashes mindlessly. Nevertheless, I

quickly pulled my feet onto the seat and would have gathered my petticoats tightly around me if I had been wearing any.

After coming to a stop ten yards past the overturned vehicle, we reversed until we were beside it once more, things snapping and crunching loudly under the tires.

When I got out of the truck, I found the pavement littered with twitching constructs of bones, splintered remnants of the beast's fragmented anatomy. Some were as large as vacuum cleaners, many the size of kitchen appliances—flexing, irising, folding, unfolding as if striving to obey the conjuring call of a sorcerer.

Thousands of single bones of all shapes and sizes were also scattered on the roadway. These rattled in place as if the ground were shaking under them, but I could not feel any earth tremors through the soles of my ski boots.

Kicking the debris aside, I cleared a path to the overturned SUV and climbed onto the flank of it. Inside, tumbled brothers looked up at me, wide-eyed and blinking, through the side windows.

I pulled open a door, and Brother Rupert clambered up to assist. Soon we had pulled the Russian and the monks from the vehicle.

Some were bruised and all were shaken; but none of them had sustained a serious injury.

Every tire on the second SUV had been punctured by broken shafts of bone. The vehicle sat on flat rubber. We would have to walk the remaining hundred yards to the school.

No one needed to express the opinion that if one impossible ambulatory kaleidoscope of bones could exist, others might follow. In fact, whether because of shock or fear, few words were exchanged, and those were spoken in the softest voices.

Everyone worked urgently to unload all the tools and the other gear that had been brought to defend and fortify the school.

The rattling skeletal debris slowly grew quieter, and some bones began to break down into cubes in a variety of sizes, as though they had not been bones, after all, but structures formed from smaller interlocking pieces.

As we were setting out for the school, Rodion Romanovich took off his hat, stooped, and with one gloved hand scooped some of the

cubes into that bearskin sack.

He looked up and saw me watching him. Clutching the hat in one hand as if it were a purse filled with treasure, he picked up what appeared to be a large attaché case, rather than a toolbox, and turned toward the school.

Around us, the wind seemed to be full of words, all angry and growing rapidly angrier, in a brutal language ideal for imprecation, malediction, blasphemy, and threat.

The veiled sky folded down to meet the hidden land, and the vanishment of the horizon was swiftly followed by the disappearance of every structure of man and nature. A perfect consistency of light throughout the bleak day, allowing no shadow, did not illuminate but blinded. In that white obscurity, all contours of the land faded from sight, except those directly underfoot, and we were plunged into a total whiteout.

With psychic magnetism, I am never lost. But at least a couple of the brothers might have wandered off forever, within mere yards of the school, if they had not stayed close to one another and had not received some guidance from the rapidly vanishing patches of blacktop exposed earlier by the plows.

More walking boneyards might be near, and I suspected that they would not be blinded by the whiteout, as we were. Whatever senses they possessed were not analogous—but perhaps superior—to ours.

Two steps before blundering into the segmented roll-up garage door, I saw it and halted. When the others had gathered around me, I did a count to be sure that all sixteen monks were present. They numbered seventeen. The Russian was there, but I had not mistakenly included him in the count.

I led them past the large door to a smaller, man-size entrance. With my universal key, I let us into the garage.

When everyone had passed safely inside, I closed and dead-bolted the door.

The brothers dropped their burdens on the floor, brushed snow from themselves, and pulled back their hoods.

The seventeenth monk proved to be Brother Leopold, the novice who often came and went with the stealth of a ghost. His freckled

face looked less wholesome than it had always been before, and his usual sunny smile was not in evidence.

Leopold stood next to the Russian, and there was an ineffable quality to their attitudes and postures that suggested they were in some way allied.

CHAPTER 40

ROMANOVICH WENT TO ONE KNEE ON THE garage floor, and from his bearskin hat, he spilled a collection of the white cubes onto the concrete.

The larger specimens were about an inch and a half square, the smaller perhaps half an inch. They were so polished and smooth that they might have been dice without spots, and looked not like natural objects but like manufactured items.

They twitched and rattled against one another, as though life yet existed in them. Perhaps they were agitated by the memory of the bone they had been, were programmed to reconstitute that structure but lacked the power.

I was reminded of jumping beans, those seeds of Mexican spurge that are animated by the movements of the moth larvae living in them.

Although I didn't believe that the agitation of these cubes was caused by the equivalent of moth larvae, I wasn't going to try to bite one open to confirm my opinion.

As the brothers gathered around to observe the blank dice, one of the larger specimens shook more violently—and rattled into four smaller, identical cubes.

Perhaps triggered by that action, a smaller cube turned end over end and rendered itself into four diminished replicas.

Glancing up from the self-dividing geometrics, Romanovich locked eyes with Brother Leopold.

“Quantumizing,” the novice said.

The Russian nodded in agreement.

I said, “What’s going on here?”

Instead of answering me, Romanovich returned his attention to the dice and said, almost to himself, “Incredible. But where’s the heat?”

As if this question alarmed him, Leopold took two steps back.

“You would want to be twenty miles from here,” Romanovich told the novice. “A bit late for that.”

“You knew each other before coming here,” I said.

With increasing rapidity, the cubes were breaking down into ever-smaller units.

Turning my attention to the brothers, expecting them to support my demand for answers from the Russian, I discovered their attention fixed not on Romanovich or Leopold, but instead half on me and half on the strange—and ever-tinier—objects on the floor.

Brother Alfonse said, “Odd, in the SUV, when we saw that thing come out of the snow, you didn’t seem stunned by the sight of it like the rest of us were.”

“I was...just speechless,” I said.

“There’s that eye-twitch tell,” said Brother Quentin, pointing at me, frowning as he must have frowned at numerous suspects in the homicide-division interrogation room.

As the cubes continued dividing, growing dramatically in number, the collective mass of them should have remained the same. Cube an apple, and the pieces will weigh as much as the whole fruit. But mass was disappearing here.

This suggested that, after all, the beast had been supernatural, manifesting in a material with more apparent substance—but no more real physical existence—than ectoplasm.

The problems with that theory were many. For one thing, Brother Timothy was dead, and no mere spirit had killed him. The SUV had not been overturned by the anger of a poltergeist.

Judging by the ghastly expression that had drained all the sunny Iowan charm from his boyish face, Brother Leopold was clearly

focused on an explanation different from—and far more terrifying than—any supernatural manifestation.

On the floor, the cubes had become so numerous and tiny that they appeared to be only a spill of salt. And then...the concrete was bare again, as though the Russian had never emptied anything out of his hat.

Color began to seep back into Brother Leopold's face, and he shuddered with relief.

Masterfully deflecting curiosity that might have been directed at him, Romanovich rose to his feet and, to reinforce the brothers' intuitive belief that I knew more about this situation than they did, he said, "Mr. Thomas, what *was* that thing out there?"

All the brothers were staring at me, and I realized that I—with my universal key and sometimes enigmatic behavior—had always been a more mysterious figure to them than was either the Russian or Brother Leopold.

"I don't know what it was," I said. "I wish I did."

Brother Quentin said, "No eye-twitch tell. Have you learned to suppress it or are you really not being evasive?"

Before I could respond, Abbot Bernard said, "Odd, I would like you to tell these brothers about your exceptional abilities."

Surveying the faces of the monks, each shining with curiosity, I said, "In all the world, sir, there aren't half this many people who know my secret. It feels like...going public."

"I am instructing them herewith," the abbot said, "to regard your revelations as a confession. As your confessors, your secrets are to them a sacred trust."

"Not to all of them," I said, not bothering to accuse Brother Leopold of being insincere in his postulancy and in the profession of his vows as a novice, but addressing myself solely to Romanovich.

"I am not leaving," the Russian said, returning the bearskin hat to his head as if to punctuate his declaration.

I had known that he would insist on hearing what I had to tell the others, but I said, "Don't you have a couple of poisoned cakes to decorate?"

"No, Mr. Thomas, I have finished all ten."

After once more surveying the earnest faces of the monks, I said, “I see the lingering dead.”

“This guy,” said Brother Knuckles, “maybe he evades a question when he’s gotta, but he don’t know how to lie any better than a two-year-old.”

I said, “Thanks. I think.”

“In my other life, before God called me,” Knuckles continued, “I lived in a filthy sea of liars and lies, and I swam as good as any of those mugs. Odd—he ain’t like them, ain’t like I once was. Fact is, he ain’t like nobody I ever known before.”

After that sweet and heartfelt endorsement, I told my story as succinctly as possible, including that I had for years worked with the chief of police in Pico Mundo, who had vouched for me with Abbot Bernard.

The brothers listened, rapt, and expressed no doubts. Although ghosts and bodachs were not included in the doctrines of their faith, they were men who had given their lives to an absolute conviction that the universe was God-created and that it had a vertical sacred order. Having found a way to understand the existence of the monster in the storm—by defining it as a demon—they would not now be cast into spiritual or intellectual turmoil merely by being asked to believe that a nobody smart-ass fry cook was visited by the restless dead and tried to bring them justice as best he could.

They were emotional at the news that Brother Constantine had not committed suicide. But the faceless figure of Death in the bell tower intrigued more than frightened them, and they were in agreement that if a traditional exorcism would be effective with either of these two recent apparitions, it would be more likely to work on the tower phantom than on an uberskeleton that could overturn an SUV.

I couldn’t tell whether Brother Leopold and Rodion Romanovich believed me, but I didn’t owe those two any evidence beyond the sincerity of my story.

To Leopold, I said, “I don’t believe that an exorcism will work in either case—do you?”

The novice lowered his gaze to the place on the floor where the cubes had been. He nervously licked his lips.

The Russian spared his comrade the need to answer: “Mr. Thomas, I am fully prepared to believe that you live on a ledge between this world and the next, that you see what we cannot. And now you have seen apparitions previously unknown to you.”

“Are they previously unknown to *you*?” I asked.

“I am merely a librarian, Mr. Thomas, with no sixth sense. But I am a man of faith, whether you believe that or not, and now that I have heard your story, I am worried about the children as much as you are. How much time do we have? Whatever will happen, *when* will it happen?”

I shook my head. “I only saw seven bodachs this morning. There would be more if the violence was imminent.”

“That was this morning. Do you think we should have a look now—past one-thirty in the afternoon?”

“Bring all your tools and the...weapons,” Abbot Bernard advised his brothers.

The snow had melted off my boots. I wiped them on the mat at the door between the garage and the basement of the school, while the other men, who were all veterans of winter and all more considerate than I, shucked off their zippered rubber boots and left them behind.

With lunch finished, most of the kids were in the rehabilitation and recreation rooms, each of which I visited with the abbot, a few brothers, and Romanovich.

Sooty shadows, cast by nothing in this world, slid through these rooms and along the hallway, quivering with anticipation, wolfish and eager, seeming to thrill to the sight of so many innocent children who they somehow knew would in time be screaming in terror and agony. I counted seventy-two bodachs and knew that others would be prowling the corridors on the second floor.

“Soon,” I told the abbot. “It’s coming soon.”

CHAPTER 41

WHILE THE SIXTEEN WARRIOR MONKS AND the one duplicitous novice determined how to fortify the two stairwells that served the second floor of the school, Sister Angela was present to ensure that her nuns were prepared to offer any assistance that might be wanted.

As I headed toward the northwest nurses' station, she fell in beside me. "Oddie, I hear something happened on the trip back from the abbey."

"Yes, ma'am. Sure did. I don't have time to go into it now, but your insurance carrier is going to have a lot of questions."

"Do we have bodachs here?"

I looked left and right into the rooms we passed. "The place is crawling with them, Sister."

Rodion Romanovich followed us with the authoritarian air of one of those librarians who rules the stacks with an intimidating scowl, whispers *quiet* sharply enough to lacerate the tender inner tissues of the ear, and will pursue an overdue-book fine with the ferocity of a rabid ferret.

"How is Mr. Romanovich assisting here?" Sister Angela asked.

"He isn't assisting, ma'am."

"Then what's he doing?"

"Scheming, most likely."

"Shall I throw him out?" she asked.

Through my mind flickered a short film of the mother superior wrenching the Russian's arm up hard behind his back in some clever tae kwon do move, muscling him downstairs to the kitchen, and making him sit in a corner on a stool for the duration.

"Actually, ma'am, I'd rather have him hovering over me than have to wonder where he is and what he's up to."

At the nurses' station, Sister Miriam, with *Thanks be to God* forever on her lips, or at least forever on the lower one, was still behind the counter.

She said, "Dear, the dark clouds of mystery surrounding you are getting so thick I soon won't be able to see you. This sooty whirl of smog will go past, and people will say, 'There's Odd Thomas. Wonder what he looks like these days.' "

"Ma'am, I need your help. You know Justine in Room Thirty-two?"

"Dear, I not only know every child here, but I love them like they were my own."

"When she was four, her father drowned her in the bathtub but didn't finish the job the way he did with her mother. Is that correct, do I have it right?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I don't want to think in what sort of place his soul is festering now." She glanced at her mother superior and said, with an edge of guilt in her voice, "Actually, I not only sometimes think about it, I *enjoy* thinking about it."

"What I need to know, Sister, is maybe he *did* finish the job, and Justine was dead for a couple minutes before the police or the paramedics revived her. Could that have happened?"

Sister Angela said, "Yes, Oddie. We can check her file, but I believe that was the case. She suffered brain damage from prolonged lack of oxygen, and in fact had no vital signs when the police broke into the house and found her."

This was why the girl could serve as a bridge between our world and the next: She had once been over there, if only briefly, and had been pulled back by men who had all the best intentions. Stormy had been able to reach out to me through Justine because Justine belonged on the Other Side more than she did here.

I asked, “Are there other children here who suffered brain damage from oxygen deprivation?”

“A few,” Sister Miriam confirmed.

“Are they—are any of them—more alert than Justine? No, that’s not the issue. Are they capable of speech? That’s what I need to know.”

Having moved to the counter beside the mother superior, Rodion Romanovich scowled intently at me, like a mortician who, in need of work, believed that I would soon be a candidate for embalming.

“Yes,” said Sister Angela. “There are at least two.”

“Three,” Sister Miriam amended.

“Ma’am, were any of the three clinically dead and then revived by police or paramedics, the way Justine was?”

Frowning, Sister Miriam looked at her mother superior. “Do you know?”

Sister Angela shook her head. “I suppose it would be in the patient records.”

“How long will it take you to review the records, ma’am?”

“Half an hour, forty minutes? Maybe we’ll find something like that in the first file.”

“Would you please do it, Sister, fast as you can? I need a child who was dead once but can still talk.”

Of the three of them, only Sister Miriam knew nothing about my sixth sense. “Dear, you are starting to get downright spooky.”

“I’ve always been, ma’am.”

CHAPTER 42

IN ROOM 14, JACOB HAD FINISHED THE LATEST portrait of his mother and had sprayed it with fixative. He carefully sharpened each of his many pencils on the sandpaper block, in anticipation of the blank page of the drawing tablet on the slantboard.

Also on the table was a lunch tray laden with empty dishes and dirty flatware.

No bodachs were currently present, although the darksome spirit who called himself Rodion Romanovich stood in the open doorway, his coat draped over one arm but his fur hat still on his head. I had forbidden him to enter the room because his glowering presence might intimidate the shy young artist.

If the Russian entered against my wishes, I would snatch his hat from his head, park my butt on it, and threaten to scent it with essence of Odd if he didn't back off. I can be ruthless.

I sat across the table from Jacob and said, "It's me again. The Odd Thomas."

Toward the end of my previous visit, he had met my every comment and question with such silence that I'd become convinced he had gone into an internal redoubt where he didn't any longer hear me or even recognize that I was present.

"The new portrait of your mother came out very well. It's one of your best."

I had hoped that he would be in a more garrulous mood than when I had last seen him. This proved to be a false hope.

“She must have been very proud of your talent.”

Jacob finished sharpening the last of the pencils, kept it in his hand, and shifted his attention to the drawing tablet, studying the blank page.

“Since I was last here,” I told him, “I had a wonderful roast-beef sandwich and a crisp dill pickle that probably wasn’t poisoned.”

His thick tongue appeared, and he bit gently on it, perhaps deciding what his first pencil strokes should be.

“Then this nasty guy almost hanged me from the bell tower, and I got chased through a tunnel by a big bad scary thing, and I went on a snow adventure with Elvis Presley.”

He began lightly and fluidly to sketch the outline of something that I could not recognize at once from my upside-down point of view.

At the doorway, Romanovich sighed impatiently.

Without looking at him, I said, “Sorry. I know my interrogation techniques aren’t as direct as those of a librarian.”

To Jacob, I said, “Sister Miriam says you lost your mother when you were thirteen, more than twelve years ago.”

He was sketching a boat from a high perspective.

“I’ve never lost a mother because I never really had one. But I lost a girl I loved. She meant everything to me.”

With a few lines he suggested that the sea, when fully drawn, would be gently rolling.

“She was beautiful, this girl, and beautiful in her heart. She was kind and tough, sweet and determined. Smart, she was smarter than me. And so funny.”

Jacob paused to study what he had thus far put on the paper.

“Life had been hard on this girl, Jacob, but she had enough courage for an army.”

His tongue retreated, and he bit instead on his lower lip.

“We never made love. Because of a bad thing that happened to her when she was a little girl, she wanted to wait. Wait until we could afford to be married.”

With two styles of cross-hatching, he began to give substance to the hull of the boat.

“Sometimes I thought I couldn’t wait, but then I always could. Because she gave me so much else, and everything she gave me was more than a thousand other girls could ever give. All she wanted was love with respect, respect was so important to her, and I could give her that. I don’t know what she saw in me, you know? But I could give her that much.”

The pencil whispered over the paper.

“She took four bullets in the chest and abdomen. My sweet girl, who never hurt a soul.”

The moving pencil gave Jacob comfort. I could see how he took comfort from creation.

“I killed the man who killed her, Jacob. If I had gotten there two minutes sooner, I might have killed him before he killed her.”

The pencil hesitated, but then moved on.

“We were destined to be together forever, my girl and I. We had a fortune-teller’s card that said so. And we will be...forever. This here, now—this is just an intermission between act one and act two.”

Perhaps Jacob trusts God to guide his hand and show him the very boat and the precise place on the ocean where the bell rang, so he will know it, after all, when his own time comes to float away.

“They didn’t scatter my girl’s ashes at sea. They gave them to me in an urn. A friend in my hometown keeps it safe for me.”

As the pencil whispered, Jacob murmured, “She could sing.”

“If her voice was as lovely as her face, it must have been sweet. What did she sing?”

“So pretty. Just for me. When the dark came.”

“She sang you to sleep.”

“When I woke up and the dark wasn’t gone yet, and the dark seemed so big, then she sang soft and made the dark small again.”

That is the best of all things we can do for one another: Make the dark small.

“Jacob, earlier you told me about someone called the Neverwas.”

“He’s the Neverwas, and we don’t care.”

“You said he came to see you when you were ‘full of the black.’ ”

“Jacob was full of the black, and the Neverwas said, ‘*Let him die.*’ ”

“So ‘full of the black’ means you were ill. Very ill. Was the man who said they should let you die—was he a doctor?”

“He was the Neverwas. That’s all he was. And we don’t care.”

I watched the graceful lines emerge from the simple pencil gripped by the stubby fingers of the short broad hand.

“Jacob, do you remember the face of the Neverwas?”

“A long time ago.” He shook his head. “A long time ago.”

Cataracts of falling snow made a blind eye of the window.

In the doorway, Romanovich tapped one finger against the face of his watch and raised his eyebrows.

We might have precious little time remaining, but I could think of nowhere better to spend it than here, where I had been sent by the medium of the once-dead Justine.

Intuition raised a question that at once seemed important to me.

“Jacob, you know my name, my full name.”

“The Odd Thomas.”

“Yes. My last name is Thomas. Do you know your last name?”

“Her name.”

“That’s right. It would be your mother’s last name, too.”

“Jennifer.”

“That’s a first name, like Jacob.”

The pencil stopped moving, as if the memory of his mother came so vividly to him that no part of his mind or heart remained free to guide his drawing.

“Jenny,” he said. “Jenny Calvino.”

“So you are Jacob Calvino.”

“Jacob Calvino,” he confirmed.

Intuition had told me that the name would be revealing, but it meant nothing to me.

Again the pencil moved, and the boat took further form, the vessel from which Jenny Calvino’s ashes had been dispersed.

As during my previous visit, a second large drawing tablet lay closed on the table. The longer I tried and dismally failed to think of questions that might extract vital information from Jacob, the more my attention was compelled toward that tablet.

If I inspected the second tablet without permission, Jacob might consider my curiosity a violation of his privacy. Offended, he might withdraw again, and give me nothing further.

On the other hand, if I asked to see the tablet and he refused permission, that avenue of inquiry would be closed off.

Jacob's last name was not revelatory, as I had thought it would be, but in this case, I did not think that intuition would fail me. The tablet seemed almost to glow, almost to be floating above the table, the most vivid thing in the room, hyper-real.

I slid the tablet in front of me, and Jacob either did not notice or did not care.

When I turned back the cover, I found a drawing of this room's only window. Pressed to the glass was a kaleidoscope of bones, which he had rendered in exquisite detail.

Sensing that I had found something alarming, Romanovich took a step into the room.

I raised one hand to warn him to stop, but then held up the drawing so he could see it.

When I turned the page, I found another depiction of the beast at the same window, though in this one, the bones formed a pattern different from the first.

Either the thing had clung to the window long enough for Jacob to draw it in great detail, which I doubted, or he had a photographic memory.

The third drawing was of a robed figure wearing a necklace of human teeth and bones: Death as I had seen him in the bell tower, with pale hands and without a face.

As I was about to show this drawing to Romanovich, three bodachs slunk into the room, and I closed the tablet.

CHAPTER 43

EITHER NOT INTERESTED IN ME OR PRETENDING no interest, the three sinister shapes gathered around Jacob.

Their hands were fingerless, as devoid of detail as were their faces and forms. Yet they were more suggestive of paws—or the webbed extremities of amphibians—than of hands.

As Jacob worked, oblivious of his spirit visitors, they appeared to stroke his cheeks. Quivering with excitement, the specters traced the curve of his thick neck and kneaded his heavy shoulders.

Bodachs appear to experience this world with some if not all of the usual five senses, perhaps also with a sixth sense of their own, but they have no effect on things here. If a hundred were to rush past in a pack, they would make no sound, create no slightest draft.

They seemed to thrill to a radiance produced by Jacob that was invisible to me, perhaps his life force, knowing that soon it would be torn from him. When eventually the violence comes, the pending horror that has drawn them, they will shudder and spasm and swoon in ecstasy.

Previously, I have had reason to suspect that they might not be spirits. I sometimes wonder if they are instead time travelers who return to the past not physically but in virtual bodies.

If our current barbaric world spirals into greater corruption and brutality, our descendants may become so cruel and so morally perverse that they cross time to watch us suffer, bearing orgasmic witness to the bloodbaths from which their sick civilization grew.

In truth, that is a few small steps down from current audiences' fascination with the wall-to-wall disaster coverage, bloody murder stories, and relentless fear-mongering that comprise TV news.

These descendants of ours would surely look like us and would be able to pass for us if they journeyed here in their real bodies. Therefore, the creepy bodach form, the virtual body, might be a reflection of their twisted, diseased souls.

One of these three prowled on all fours around the room, and sprang onto the bed, where it seemed to sniff the sheets.

As if it were smoke drawn by a draft, another bodach slithered through a crack under the bathroom door. I don't know what it did in there, but for sure it didn't take a potty break.

They don't pass through walls and closed doors, as the lingering dead can do. They must have the crack, the chink, the open keyhole.

While they have no mass and should not be affected by gravity, the bodachs do not fly. They climb and descend stairs three or four at a time, in a lope, but never glide through the air as do movie ghosts. I have seen them race in frenzied packs, as swift as panthers but limited by the contours of the land.

They seem to be bound by some—but not all—rules of our world.

From the doorway, Romanovich said, "Is something wrong?"

I shook my head and subtly made a zip-your-lips gesture, which any real librarian should at once understand.

Although surreptitiously watching the bodachs, I pretended to be interested only in Jacob's drawing of a boat at sea.

In all my life, I have encountered just one other person who could see bodachs, a six-year-old English boy. Moments after he had spoken aloud of these dark presences, within their hearing, he had been crushed by a runaway truck.

According to the Pico Mundo coroner, the driver of the truck had suffered a massive stroke and had collapsed against the steering wheel.

Yeah, right. And the sun comes up every morning by sheer chance, and mere coincidence explains why darkness follows sunset.

After the bodachs departed Room 14, I said to Romanovich, "For a minute there, we weren't alone."

I opened the tablet to the third drawing and stared at faceless Death festooned with human teeth. The following pages were blank.

When I turned the tablet to face Jacob and put it on the table near him, he did not glance at it, but remained fixated on his work.

“Jacob, where did you see this thing?”

He did not reply, and I hoped that he had not gone away from me again.

“Jake, I’ve seen this thing, too. Just today. At the top of the bell tower.”

Trading his pencil for another, Jacob said, “He comes here.”

“To this room, Jake? When did he come?”

“Many times he comes.”

“What does he do here?”

“Watches Jacob.”

“He just watches you?”

The sea began to flow from the pencil. The initial tones and textures committed to the paper suggested that the water would be undulant, ominous, and dark.

“Why does he watch you?” I asked.

“You know.”

“I do? I guess I forgot.”

“Wants me dead.”

“You said earlier that the Neverwas wants you dead.”

“He’s the Neverwas, and we don’t care.”

“This drawing, this hooded figure—is he the Neverwas?”

“Not scared of him.”

“Is this who came to see you when you were sick that time, when you were full of the black?”

“The Neverwas said, ‘*Let him die,*’ but she wouldn’t let Jacob die.”

Either Jacob saw spirits, as I did, or this death figure was no more a spirit than had been the walking boneyard.

Seeking to establish the reality of it, I said, “Your mother saw the Neverwas?”

“She said come, and he came just the once.”

“Where were you when he came?”

“Where they all wore white and squeaked in their shoes and used the needles for medicine.”

“So you were in the hospital, and the Neverwas came. But did he come in a black robe with a hood, with a necklace of human teeth?”

“No. Not like that, not back in the long ago, only now.”

“And he had a face then, didn’t he?”

In graded tones, the sea formed, full of its own darkness, but brightened elsewhere by reflections of the sky.

“Jacob, did he have a face in the long ago?”

“A face and hands, and she said, ‘What’s wrong with you,’ and the Neverwas said, ‘What’s wrong is with him,’ and she said, ‘My God, my God, are you afraid to touch him,’ and he said, ‘Don’t be a bitch about it.’ ”

He lifted his pencil from the paper because his hand had begun to tremble.

The emotion in his voice had been intense. Toward the end of that soliloquy, his mild speech impediment had thickened.

Concerned that I might drive him into withdrawal by pressing too hard, I gave him time to settle.

When his hand stopped trembling, he returned to the creation of the sea.

I said, “You are being such a help to me, Jake. You are being a friend to me, and I know this isn’t easy for you, but I love you for being such a friend to me.”

He glanced almost furtively at me, then returned his gaze at once to the drawing paper.

“Jake, will you draw something especially for me? Will you draw the face of the Neverwas, the way he looked in the long ago?”

“Can’t,” he said.

“I’m pretty sure you have a photographic memory. That means you remember everything you see, in great detail, even from long before the ocean and the bell and the floating away.” I glanced at the wall with the many portraits of his mother. “Like your mother’s face. Am I right, Jake? Do you remember everything from long ago as clear as if you just saw it an hour ago?”

He said, “It hurts.”

“What hurts, Jake?”

“All of it, so clear.”

“I’ll bet it does. I know it does. My girl has been gone sixteen months, and I see her clearer every day.”

He drew, and I waited.

Then I said, “Do you know how old you were that time in the hospital?”

“Seven. I was seven.”

“So will you draw me the face of the Neverwas, from that time in the hospital when you were seven?”

“Can’t. My eyes was funny then. Like a window with the rain and nothing looks right through it.”

“Your vision was blurred that day?”

“Blurred.”

“From the sickness, you mean.” My hope deflated. “I guess it might have been blurred.”

I turned back one tablet page to the second drawing of the bone kaleidoscope at the window.

“How often have you seen this thing, Jake?”

“More than one thing. Different ones.”

“How often have they been at the window?”

“Three times.”

“Just three? When?”

“Two times yesterday. Then when I woke from the sleep.”

“When you woke up this morning?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve seen them, too,” I told him. “I can’t figure out what they are. What do you think they are, Jake?”

“The dogs of the Neverwas,” he said without hesitation. “I’m not scared of them.”

“Dogs, huh? I don’t see dogs.”

“Not dogs but like dogs,” he explained. “Like really bad dogs, he teaches to kill, and he sends them, and they kill.”

“Attack dogs,” I said.

“I’m not scared, and I won’t be.”

“You’re a very brave young man, Jacob Calvino.”

“She said...she said don’t be scared, we wasn’t born to be all the time scared, we was born happy, babies laugh at everything, we was born happy and to make a better world.”

“I wish I’d known your mother.”

“She said everyone...everyone, if he’s rich or he’s poor, if he’s somebody big or nobody at all—everyone has a grace.” A look of peace came over his embattled face when he said the word *grace*. “You know what a grace is?”

“Yes.”

“A grace is a thing you get from God, you use it to make a better world, or not use it, you have to choose.”

“Like your art,” I said. “Like your beautiful drawings.”

He said, “Like your pancakes.”

“Ah, you know I made those pancakes, huh?”

“Those pancakes, that’s a grace.”

“Thank you, Jake. That’s very kind of you.” I closed the second tablet and got up from my chair. “I have to go now, but I’d like to come back, if that’s all right.”

“All right.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

“All right, okay,” he assured me.

I went to his side of the table, put a hand on his shoulder, and studied the drawing from his perspective.

He was a superb renderer, but he wasn’t just that. He understood the qualities of light, the fact of light even in shadow, the beauty of light and the need for it.

At the window, though the winter twilight lay a few hours away, most of the light had been choked out of the blizzard-throttled sky. Already the day had come to dusk.

Earlier, Jacob had warned me that the dark would come with the dark. Maybe we couldn’t expect that death would wait for full night. Maybe the gloom of this false dusk was dark enough.

CHAPTER 44

OUTSIDE ROOM 14, AFTER I LEFT JACOB WITH the promise to return, Rodion Romanovich said, “Mr. Thomas, your questioning of that young man—it was not done as I would have done it.”

“Yes, sir, but the nuns have an absolute rule against ripping out fingernails with pliers.”

“Well, even nuns are not right about everything. What I was about to say, however, is that you drew him out as well as anyone could have done. I am impressed.”

“I don’t know, sir. I’m circling close to it, but I’m not there yet. He has the key. I was sent to him earlier in the day because he has the key.”

“Sent to him by whom?”

“By someone dead who tried to help me through Justine.”

“Through the drowned girl you mentioned earlier, the one who was dead and then revived.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I was right about you,” Romanovich said. “Complex, complicated, even intricate.”

“But innocuous,” I assured him.

Unaware that she walked through a cluster of bodachs, scattering them, Sister Angela came to us.

She started to speak, and I zipped my lips again. Her periwinkle blues narrowed, for although she understood about bodachs, she wasn’t used to being told to shut up.

When the malign spirits had vanished into various rooms, I said, “Ma’am, I’m hoping you can help me. Jacob here—what do you know about his father?”

“His father? Nothing.”

“I thought you had backgrounds on all the kids.”

“We do. But Jacob’s mother was never married.”

“Jenny Calvino. So that’s a maiden—not a married—name.”

“Yes. Before she died of cancer, she arranged for Jacob to be admitted to another church home.”

“Twelve years ago.”

“Yes. She had no family to take him, and on the forms, where the father’s name was requested, I’m sad to say, she wrote *unknown*.”

I said, “I never met the lady, but from even what little I know about her, I can’t believe she was so promiscuous that she wouldn’t know.”

“It’s a world of sorrow, Oddie, because we make it so.”

“I’ve learned some things from Jacob. He was very ill when he was seven, wasn’t he?”

She nodded. “It’s in his medical records. I’m not sure exactly, but I think...some kind of blood infection. He almost died.”

“From things Jacob has said, I believe Jenny called his father to the hospital. It wasn’t a warm and fuzzy family reunion. But this name—it may be the key to everything.”

“Jacob doesn’t know the name?”

“I don’t think his mother ever told him. However, I believe Mr. Romanovich knows it.”

Surprised, Sister Angela said, “Do you know it, Mr. Romanovich?”

“If he knows it,” I said, “he won’t tell you.”

She frowned. “Why won’t you tell me, Mr. Romanovich?”

“Because,” I explained, “he’s not in the business of giving out information. Just the opposite.”

“But, Mr. Romanovich,” said Sister Angela, “surely dispensing information is a fundamental part of a librarian’s job.”

“He is not,” I said, “a librarian. He will claim to be, but if you press the point, all you’ll get out of him is a lot more about Indianapolis than you need to know.”

“There is no harm,” Romanovich said, “in acquiring exhaustive knowledge about my beloved Indianapolis. And the truth is, you also know the name.”

Again surprised, Sister Angela turned to me. “Do you know the name of Jacob’s father, Oddie?”

“He suspects it,” said Romanovich, “but is reluctant to believe what he suspects.”

“Is that true, Oddie? Why are you reluctant to believe?”

“Because Mr. Thomas admires the man he suspects. And because if his suspicions are correct, he may be up against a power with which he cannot reckon.”

Sister Angela said, “Oddie, is there any power with which you cannot reckon?”

“Oh, it’s a long list, ma’am. The thing is—I need to be sure I’m right about the name. And I have to understand his motivation, which I don’t yet, not fully. It might be dangerous to approach him without full understanding.”

Turning to the Russian, Sister Angela said, “Surely, sir, if you can share with Oddie the name and motivation of this man, you will do so to protect the children.”

“I wouldn’t necessarily believe anything he told me,” I said. “Our fur-hatted friend has his own agenda. And I suspect he’ll be ruthless about fulfilling it.”

Her voice heavy with disapproval, the mother superior said, “Mr. Romanovich, sir, you presented yourself to this community as a simple librarian seeking to enrich his faith.”

“Sister,” he disagreed, “I never said that I was simple. But it is true that I am a man of faith. And whose faith is so secure that it never needs to be further enriched?”

She stared at him for a moment, and then turned to me again. “He is a real piece of work.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’d turn him out in the snow if it wasn’t such an unchristian thing to do—and if I believed for a minute we could manhandle him through the door.”

“I don’t believe we could, Sister.”

“Neither do I.”

“If you can find me a child who was once dead but can speak,” I reminded her, “I might learn what I need to know by other means than Mr. Romanovich.”

Her wimpled face brightened. “That’s what I came to tell you before we got into all this talk about Jacob’s father. There’s a girl named Flossie Bodenblatt—”

“Surely not,” said Romanovich.

“Flossie,” Sister Angela continued, “has been through very much, too much, so much—but she is a girl with spirit, and she has worked hard in speech therapy. Her voice is so clear now. She was down in rehab, but we’ve brought her to her room. Come with me.”

CHAPTER 45

NINE-YEAR-OLD FLOSSIE HAD BEEN AT ST. Bartholomew's for one year. According to Sister Angela, the girl was one of the minority who would be able to leave someday and live on her own.

The names on the door plaques were FLOSSIE and PAULETTE. Flossie waited alone.

Frills, flounce, and dolls characterized Paulette's half of the room. Pink pillows and a small green-and-pink vanity table.

Flossie's area was by contrast simple, clean, all white and blue, decorated only with posters of dogs.

The name *Bodenblatt* suggested to me a German or Scandinavian background, but Flossie had a Mediterranean complexion, black hair, and large dark eyes.

I had not encountered the girl before, or had seen her only at a distance. My chest grew tight, and I knew at once that this might be more difficult than I had expected.

When we arrived, Flossie was sitting on a rug on the floor, paging through a book of dog photographs.

"Dear," said Sister Angela, "this is Mr. Thomas, the man who would like to talk to you."

Her smile was not the smile that I remembered from another place and time, but it was close enough, a wounded smile and lovely.

"Hello, Mr. Thomas."

Sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of her, I said, “I’m so pleased to meet you, Flossie.”

Sister Angela perched on the edge of Flossie’s bed, and Rodion Romanovich stood among Paulette’s dolls and frills, like a bear that had turned the tables on Goldilocks.

The girl wore red pants and a white sweater with an appliquéd image of Santa Claus. Her features were fine, nose upturned, chin delicate. She could have passed for an elf.

The left corner of her mouth pulled down, and the left eyelid drooped slightly.

Her left hand was cramped into a claw, and she braced the book on her lap with that arm, as if she had little other use for it than bracing things. She had been turning pages with her right hand.

Now her attention focused on me. Her stare was direct and unwavering, full of confidence earned from painful experience—a quality I had also seen before, in eyes this very shade.

“So you like dogs, Flossie?”

“Yes, but I don’t like my name.” If she had once had a speech impediment caused by brain damage, she had overcome it.

“You don’t like Flossie? It’s a pretty name.”

“It’s a cow’s name,” she declared.

“Well, yes, I have heard of cows named Flossie.”

“And it sounds like what you do with your teeth.”

“Maybe it does, now that you mention it. What would you prefer to be called?”

“Christmas,” she said.

“You want to change your name to Christmas?”

“Sure. Everyone loves Christmas.”

“That’s true.”

“Nothing bad ever happens on Christmas. So then nothing bad could happen to someone named Christmas, could it?”

“So, let me begin again,” I said. “I’m so pleased to meet you, Christmas Bodenblatt.”

“I’m gonna change the last p-p-part, too.”

“And what would you prefer to *Bodenblatt*?”

“Almost anything. I haven’t made up my mind yet. It’s gotta be a good name for working with dogs.”

“You want to be a veterinarian when you grow up?”

She nodded. “Can’t be, though.” She pointed to her head and said with awful directness, “I lost some smarts in the car that day.”

Lamely, I said, “You seem plenty smart to me.”

“Nope. Not dumb but not smart enough for a vet. If I work hard on my arm, though, and my leg, and they get b-b-better, I can work with a vet, you know, like help him with dogs. Give b-baths to dogs. Trim them and stuff. I could do a lot with dogs.”

“You like dogs, I guess.”

“Oh, I love dogs.”

A radiance arose in her as she talked about dogs, and joy made her eyes appear less wounded than they had been.

“I had a dog,” she said. “He was a good dog.”

Intuition warned me that questions I might ask about her dog would take us places I could not bear to go.

“Did you come to talk about dogs, Mr. Thomas?”

“No, Christmas. I came to ask a favor.”

“What favor?”

“You know, the funny thing is, I don’t remember. Can you wait here for me, Christmas?”

“Sure. I got a dog book.”

I rose to my feet and said, “Sister, can we talk?”

The mother superior and I moved to the farther end of the room, and confident that we could not manhandle him, the Russian joined us.

In a voice almost a whisper, I said, “Ma’am...what happened to this girl...what did she have to endure?”

She said, “We don’t discuss the children’s histories with just anyone,” and fixed the Russian with a meaningful look.

“I am many things,” said Romanovich, “but not a gossip.”

“Or a librarian,” said Sister Angela.

“Ma’am, there’s a chance maybe this girl can help me learn what is coming—and save all of us. But I’m...afraid.”

“Of what, Oddie?”

“Of what this girl might have endured.”

Sister Angela brooded for a moment, and then said, “She lived with her parents and grandparents, all in one house. Her cousin came around one night. Nineteen. A problem boy, and high on something.”

I knew she was not a naïf, but I didn’t want to see her saying what surely she would say. I closed my eyes.

“Her cousin shot them all. Grandparents and parents. Then he spent some time...sodomizing the girl. She was seven.”

They are something, these nuns. All in white, they go down into the dirt of the world, and they pull out of it what is precious, and they shine it up again as best they can. Clear-eyed, over and over again, they go down into the dirt of the world, and they have hope always, and if ever they are afraid, they do not show it.

“When the drugs wore off,” she said, “he knew he’d be caught, so he took the coward’s way. In the garage, he fixed a hose to the exhaust pipe, opened a window just wide enough to slip the hose into the car. And he took the girl into the car with him. He would not leave her only as damaged as she was. He had to take her with him.”

There is no end to the wailing of senseless rebellion, to the elevation of self above all, the narcissism that sees the face of any authority only in the mirror.

“Then he chickened out,” Sister Angela continued. “He left her alone in the car and went in the house to call nine-one-one. He told them he had attempted suicide and his lungs burned. He was short of breath and wanted help. Then he sat down to wait for the paramedics.”

I opened my eyes to take strength from hers. “Ma’am, once last night and once today, someone on the Other Side, someone I know, tried to reach me through Justine. I think to warn me what’s coming.”

“I see. I think I see. No, all right. God help me, I accept it. Go on.”

“There’s this thing I can do with a coin or a locket on a chain, or with most anything bright. I learned it from a magician friend. I can induce a mild hypnosis.”

“To what purpose?”

“A child who’s been dead and revived is maybe like a bridge between this world and the next. Relaxed, in a light hypnosis, she might be a voice for that person on the Other Side who wasn’t able to speak to me through Justine.”

Sister Angela’s face clouded. “But the Church discourages an interest in the occult. And how traumatic would this be for the child?”

I took a deep breath and let it out. “I’m not going to do it, Sister. I just want you to understand that maybe, doing this, I could learn what’s coming, and so maybe I should do it. But I’m too weak. I’m scared, and I’m weak.”

“You’re not weak, Oddie. I know you better than that.”

“No, ma’am. I’m failing you here. I can’t handle this...with Christmas over there and her heart so full of dogs. It’s too much.”

“There’s something I don’t understand about this,” she said. “What don’t I know?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t think how to explain the situation.

After retrieving his fur-trimmed coat from Paulette’s bed, Romanovich said in a rough whisper, “Sister, you know that Mr. Thomas lost one who was most dear to him.”

“Yes, Mr. Romanovich, I am aware of that,” she said.

“Mr. Thomas saved many people that day but was not able to save her. She was a girl with black hair and dark eyes, and skin like this girl here.”

He was making connections that could only be made if he knew much more about my loss than was in the press.

Previously unreadable, his eyes were still storyless; his book remained closed.

“Her name,” Romanovich said, “was Bronwen Llewellyn, but she disliked her name. She felt that Bronwen sounded like an elf. She called herself Stormy.”

He no longer merely puzzled me. He mystified me. “Who are you?”

“She called herself Stormy, as Flossie calls herself Christmas,” he continued. “Stormy was abused as a girl, by her adoptive father.”

“No one knows that,” I protested.

“Not many do, Mr. Thomas. But a few social workers know. Stormy did not suffer severe physical damage, mental retardation. But you can see, Sister Angela, the parallels here make this most difficult for Mr. Thomas.”

Most difficult, yes. Most difficult. And as a mark of how very difficult, no twist of wit came to mind in that moment, not even a pucker of sour humor, no thin astringent joke.

“To speak to the one he lost,” Romanovich said, “through the medium of one who reminds him of her...too much. It would be too much for anyone. He knows that using this girl to channel a spirit would be traumatic for her, but he tells himself her trauma is acceptable if lives can be saved. Yet because of who she is, of *how* she is, he cannot proceed. She is an innocent, as Stormy was, and he will not use an innocent.”

Watching Christmas with her book of dogs, I said, “Sister, if I use her as a bridge between the living and the dead...what if that brings back to her the memory of death that she’s forgotten? What if when I’m done with her, she has one foot in each world, and can never be whole in this one or know any peace here? She was already used as though she were just a thing, used and thrown away. She can’t be used again, no matter what the justifications are. Not again.”

From an inner pocket of the coat draped over his arm, Romanovich produced a long vertical-fold wallet, and from the wallet a laminated card, which he did not at once present to me.

“Mr. Thomas, if you were to read a twenty-page report on me that was prepared by seasoned intelligence analysts, you would know all that is worth knowing about me, as well as much that would not have been of interest even to my mother, though my mother doted on me.”

“Your mother the assassin.”

“That is correct.”

Sister Angela said, “Excuse me?”

“Mother was also a concert pianist.”

I said, “She was probably a master chef, too.”

“In fact, I learned cakes from her. After reading a twenty-page report on you, Mr. Thomas, I thought I knew everything about you, but as it turns out, I knew little of importance. By that, I do not mean only your...gift. I mean I did not know the kind of man you are.”

Although I wouldn't have thought the Russian could be a medicine for melancholy, he suddenly proved to be an effective mood-elevator.

“What did your father do, sir?” I asked.

“He prepared people for death, Mr. Thomas.”

Heretofore, I had not seen Sister Angela nonplussed.

“So it's a family trade, sir. Why do you so directly call your mother an assassin?”

“Because, you see, technically an assassin is one who proceeds only against highly placed political targets.”

“Whereas a mortician is not as choosy.”

“A mortician is not indiscriminate, either, Mr. Thomas.”

If Sister Angela didn't regularly attend tennis matches as a spectator, she would have a sore neck in the morning.

“Sir, I'll bet your father was also a chess master.”

“He won only a single national championship.”

“Too busy with his career as a mortician.”

“No. Unfortunately, a five-year prison sentence fell at that very point at which he was at his most competitive as a chessman.”

“Bummer.”

As Romanovich gave me the laminated photo-ID card with embedded holographs, which he had taken from his wallet, he said to Sister Angela, “All of that was in the old Soviet, and I have confessed it and atoned. I have long been on the side of truth and justice.”

Reading from the card, I said, “National Security Agency.”

“That is correct, Mr. Thomas. After watching you with Jacob and with this girl here, I have decided to take you into my confidence.”

“We must be careful, Sister,” I warned. “He may only mean that he is a confidence man.”

She nodded but seemed no less perplexed.

“We need to talk somewhere more private,” Romanovich said.

Returning his NSA credentials, I said, “I want a few words with the girl.”

As once more I sat on the floor near Christmas, she looked up from her book and said, “I like cats, too, b-b-but they aren’t dogs.”

“They sure aren’t,” I agreed. “I’ve never seen a group of cats strong enough to pull a dogsled.”

Picturing cats in the traces of a sled, she giggled.

“And you’ll never get a cat to chase a tennis ball.”

“Never,” she agreed.

“And dogs never have mouse breath.”

“Yuck. Mouse breath.”

“Christmas, do you really want to work with dogs one day?”

“I really do. I know I could do a lot with dogs.”

“You have to keep up rehab, get back as much strength in your arm and leg as you can.”

“Gonna get it all b-back.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“You gotta retrain the b-b-brain.”

“I’m going to stay in touch with you, Christmas. And when you’re grown up and ready to be on your own, I have a friend who will make sure you’ll have a job doing something wonderful with dogs, if that’s still what you want.”

Her eyes widened. “Something wonderful—like what?”

“That’ll be for you to decide. While you’re getting stronger and growing up, you think about what would be the most wonderful job you could do with dogs—and that will be it.”

“I had a good dog. His name was F-Farley. He tried to save me, but Jason shot him, too.”

She spoke about the horror with more dispassion than I could have done, and in fact I felt that I would not maintain my composure if she said another word about it.

“One day, you’ll have all the dogs you want. You can live in a sea of happy fur.”

Although she couldn’t go directly from Farley to a giggle, she smiled. “A sea of happy fur,” she said, savoring the sound of it, and

her smile sustained.

I held out my hand. "Do we have a deal?"

Solemnly, she thought about it, and then she nodded and took my hand. "Deal."

"You're a very tough negotiator, Christmas."

"I am?"

"I'm exhausted. You have worn me down. I am bleary and dopey and pooped. My feet are tired, my hands are tired, even my hair is tired. I need to go and have a long nap, and I really, really need to eat some pudding."

She giggled. "Pudding?"

"You've been such a tough negotiator, you've so exhausted me that I can't even chew. My teeth are tired. In fact my teeth are already asleep. I can only eat pudding."

Grinning, she said, "You're silly."

"It's been said of me before," I assured her.

Because we needed to talk in a place where bodachs were unlikely to enter, Sister Angela led Romanovich and me to the pharmacy, where Sister Corrine was dispensing evening medicines into small paper cups on which she had written the names of her patients. She agreed to give us privacy.

When the door closed behind Sister Corrine, the mother superior said, "All right. Who is Jacob's father, and why is he so important?"

Romanovich and I looked at each other, and we spoke as one: "John Heineman."

"Brother John?" she asked dubiously. "Our patron? Who gave up all his wealth?"

I said, "You haven't seen the uberskeleton, ma'am. Once you've seen the uberskeleton, you pretty much know it couldn't be anyone else but Brother John. He wants his son dead, and maybe all of them, all the children here."

CHAPTER 46

RODION ROMANOVICH HAD SOME CREDIBILITY with me because of his National Security Agency ID and because he was droll. Maybe it was the effect of rogue molecules of tranquilizers in the medicinally scented air of the pharmacy, but minute by minute, I grew more willing to trust him.

According to the Hoosier, twenty-five years before we had come under siege in this blizzard, John Heineman's fiancée, Jennifer Calvino, had given birth to their child, Jacob. No one knows if she had availed herself of a sonogram or other testing, but in any case, she had carried the child to term.

Twenty-six, already a physicist of significant accomplishments, Heineman had not reacted well to her pregnancy, had felt trapped by it. Upon his first sight of Jacob, he denied fatherhood, withdrew his proposal of marriage, cut Jennifer Calvino out of his life, and gave her no more thought than he would have given a basal-cell carcinoma once it had been surgically removed from his skin.

Although even at that time, Heineman had been a man of some means, Jennifer asked him for nothing. His hostility to his deformed son had been so intense that Jennifer decided Jacob would be both happier and safer if he had no contact with his father.

Mother and son did not have an easy life, but she was devoted to him, and in her care, he thrived. When Jacob was thirteen, his mother died, after arranging for his lifelong institutional care through a church charity.

Over the years, Heineman became famous and wealthy. When his research, as widely reported, drove him to the conclusion that the subatomic structure of the universe suggested indisputable design, he had reexamined his life and, in something like penitence, had given away his fortune and retreated to a monastery.

“A changed man,” said Sister Angela. “In contrition for how he treated Jennifer and Jacob, he gave up everything. Surely he couldn’t want his son dead. He funded this facility for the care of children like Jacob. And for Jacob himself.”

Leaving the mother superior’s argument unaddressed, Romanovich said, “Twenty-seven months ago, Heineman came out of seclusion and began to discuss his current research with former colleagues, by phone and in E-mails. He had always been fascinated by the strange order that underlies every apparent chaos in nature, and during his years of seclusion, using computer models of his design, processed on twenty linked Cray supercomputers, he had made breakthroughs that would enable him, as he put it, ‘to prove the existence of God.’ ”

Sister Angela didn’t need to mull that over to find the flaw in it. “We can approach belief from an intellectual path, but in the end, God must be taken on faith. Proofs are for things of this world, things in time and of time, not beyond time.”

Romanovich continued: “Because some of the scientists with whom Heineman spoke were on the national-security payroll, and because they recognized risks related to his research and certain defense applications as well, they reported him to us. Since then, we have had one of ours in the abbey guesthouse. I am only the latest.”

“For some reason,” I said, “you were alarmed enough to introduce another agent as a postulant, now a novice, Brother Leopold.”

Sister Angela’s wimple seemed to stiffen with her disapproval. “You had a man falsely profess vows to God?”

“We did not intend for him to go beyond simple postulancy, Sister. We wanted him to spend a few weeks deeper in the community than a guest might ever get. As it turned out, he was a man searching for a new life, and he found it. We lost him to you—though we feel he still owes us some assistance, as his vows allow.”

Her scowl was more imposing than any of his had been. “More than ever, Mr. Romanovich, I think you are a dubious piece of work.”

“You are undoubtedly correct. Anyway, we became alarmed when Brother Constantine committed suicide—because thereafter, Heineman at once stopped calling and E-mailing his old colleagues, and has not since communicated with anyone outside St. Bartholomew’s.”

“Perhaps,” said Sister Angela, “the suicide moved him to trade his research for prayer and reflection.”

“We think not,” Romanovich said drily.

“And Brother Timothy has been murdered, ma’am. There is no doubt of it now. I found the body.”

Although she had already accepted the fact of his murder, this hard confirmation left her stricken.

“If it helps you come to terms with the situation,” Romanovich said to her, “we believe that Heineman may not be fully aware of the violence he has unleashed.”

“But, Mr. Romanovich, if two are dead and others threatened, how could he not be aware?”

“As I recall, poor Dr. Jekyll did not at first realize that his quest to rid himself of all evil impulses had in the process created Mr. Hyde, whose nature was pure evil unleavened by the goodness of the doctor.”

Seeing in my mind’s eye the uberskeleton assaulting the SUV, I said, “That thing in the snow wasn’t merely the dark side of a human personality. There was nothing human about it.”

“Not his dark side,” Romanovich agreed. “But perhaps *created by* his dark side.”

“What does that mean, sir?”

“We aren’t sure, Mr. Thomas. But I think now it is incumbent upon us to find out—quickly. You have been given a universal key.”

“Yes.”

“Why, Mr. Thomas?”

“Brother Constantine is one of the lingering dead. I was given a key so I could let myself into anyplace on the property where he

went poltergeist. I've been trying to...counsel him to move on."

"You lead an interesting life, Mr. Thomas."

"You're no slouch yourself, sir."

"You are even allowed access to John's Mew."

"We connected, sir. He makes good cookies."

"You have a culinary bond."

"Seems like we all do, sir."

Sister Angela shook her head. "I can't cook water."

Romanovich threw the switch that beetled his hydraulic brow over his eyes. "Does he know of your gift?"

"No, sir."

"I think you are his Mary Reilly."

"I hope you aren't becoming enigmatic again, sir."

"Mary Reilly was Dr. Jekyll's housekeeper. For all that he concealed from her, he subconsciously hoped that she would find him out and stop him."

"Did this Mary Reilly end up killed, sir?"

"I do not recall. But if you have not actually done any dusting for Heineman, you may be safe."

"What now?" asked Sister Angela.

"Mr. Thomas and I must make it alive into John's Mew."

"And out again alive," I said.

Romanovich nodded. "We can certainly try."

CHAPTER 47

THE STORM-SUITED MONKS NUMBERED TEN more than seven. Only two or three whistled while they worked. None was unusually short. As they secured the southeast and the northwest stairwells, however, I half expected Snow White to stop by with bottled water and words of encouragement.

In the interest of safety, the stairwell doors could not be locked. At each floor, the landing was a generous space, so the door opened into the stairwell instead of outward.

At the basement level, ground floor, and third floor, the monks drilled four holes in each door frame—two on the left, two right—and fitted them with steel sleeves. Into each sleeve, they inserted a half-inch-diameter bolt.

The bolts protruded an inch from the sleeves, preventing the door from opening. This scheme engaged not merely the strength of the frame but also of the entire wall in support of the door.

Because the sleeves were not threaded and were wider than the shafts inserted into them, the bolts could be plucked out in seconds to facilitate a hasty exit from the stairwell.

At the second floor, the children's dormitory, the trick was to devise a way to prevent the doors from being pulled open in the unlikely event that something broke into the stairwell, through a bolt-reinforced door, at another level. Already the brothers were debating the merits of three security options.

From the southeast stairs, Romanovich and I enlisted Brother Knuckles, and from the northwest stairs, Brother Maxwell, for the defense of Jacob Calvino. Each of them brought two baseball bats in case the first was cracked in battle.

If the Mr. Hyde part of Brother John Heineman's personality had an animus against *all* mentally and physically disabled people, then no child in the school was safe. Every one of them might be slated for destruction.

Common sense suggested, nonetheless, that Jacob—*Let him die*—remained the primary target. He would most likely either be the only victim or the first of many.

When we returned to Jacob's room, he was for once not drawing. He sat in a straight-backed chair, and a pillow on his lap served as a hand rest when he needed it. Head bowed, intently focused, he was embroidering flowers with peach-colored thread on white fabric, perhaps a handkerchief.

At first, embroidery seemed to be an unlikely pursuit for him, but his workmanship proved to be exquisite. As I watched him finesse intricate patterns from needle and thread, I realized that this was no more remarkable—and no less—than his ability to summon detailed drawings from pencil lead with these same short broad hands and stubby fingers.

Leaving Jacob to his embroidery, I gathered with Romanovich, Knuckles, and Brother Maxwell at the only window.

Brother Maxwell had graduated from the University of Missouri School of Journalism. For seven years, he worked as a crime reporter in Los Angeles.

The number of serious crimes was greater than the number of reporters available to cover them. Every week, scores of industrious thugs and motivated maniacs committed outrageous acts of mayhem, and discovered, to their disgruntlement, that they had been denied even so much as two inches of column space in the press.

One morning, Maxwell found himself having to choose between covering a kinky-sex murder, an extremely violent murder committed with an ax and a pick and a shovel, a murder involving

cannibalism, and the assault upon and ritual disfigurement of four elderly Jewish women in a group home.

To his surprise as well as to the surprise of his colleagues, he barricaded himself in the coffee room and would not come out. He had vending machines stocked with candy bars and peanut-butter-filled cheese crackers, and he figured he could go at least a month before he might develop scurvy due to severe vitamin C deficiency.

When his editor arrived to negotiate through the barricaded door, Maxwell demanded either to have fresh orange juice delivered weekly by ladder through the third-story coffee-room window—or to be fired. After considering those options for exactly the length of time that the newspaper's vice president of employee relations deemed necessary to avoid a wrongful-termination lawsuit, the editor fired Maxwell.

Triumphant, Maxwell vacated the coffee room, and only later, at home, with a sudden gale of laughter, realized that he simply could have quit. Journalism had come to seem not like a career but like an incarceration.

By the time he finished laughing, he decided that his petit madness had been a divine gift, a call to leave Los Angeles and to go where he could find a greater sense of community and less gang graffiti. He had become a postulant fifteen years ago, then a novice, and for a decade he had been a monk under full vows.

Now he examined the window in Jacob's room and said, "When this building was converted from the old abbey, some of the windows on the ground floor were enlarged and replaced. They have wood muntins. But on this level, the old windows remain. They're smaller, and they're solid bronze—rails, muntins, everything bronze."

"Nothin's gonna chop or chew through those too easy," Brother Knuckles declared.

"And the panes," said Romanovich, "are ten-inch squares. That brute we encountered in the storm would not fit through one. Indeed, if it managed to tear out the entire window, it would still be too large to get into the room."

I said, "The one in the cooling tower was smaller than the one that smacked down the SUV. It couldn't get through a ten-inch pane, but it'll fit through an open window this size."

"Casement window, opens outward," Brother Maxwell noted, tapping the crank handle. "Even if it smashed a pane and reached through, it would be blocking the window it was trying to open."

"While clinging to the side of the building," said Romanovich.

"In high wind," Brother Maxwell said.

"Which it might be able to do," I said, "while also keeping seven plates spinning atop seven bamboo poles."

"Nah," Brother Knuckles said. "Maybe three plates but not seven. We're good here. This is good."

Squatting beside Jacob, I said, "That's beautiful embroidery."

"Keeping busy," he said, his head remaining bowed, his eyes on his work.

"Busy is good," I said.

He said, "Busy is happy," and I suspected that his mother had counseled him about the satisfaction and the peace that come from giving to the world whatever you are capable of contributing.

Besides, his work gave him a reason to avoid eye contact. In his twenty-five years, he had probably seen shock, disgust, contempt, and sick curiosity in too many eyes. Better not to meet any eyes except those of the nuns, and those you drew with a pencil and into which you could shade the love, the tenderness, for which you yearned.

"You're going to be all right," I said.

"He wants me dead."

"What he wants and what he gets are not the same thing. Your mom called him the Neverwas because he was never there for the two of you when you needed him."

"He's the Neverwas, and we don't care."

"That's right. He's the Neverwas, but he's also the Neverwill. He never will hurt you, never will get at you, not as long as I'm here, not as long as one sister or one brother is here. And they're *all* here, Jacob, because you're special, you're precious to them, and to me."

Raising his misshapen head, he met my eyes. He did not at once look shyly away, as always he had done previously.

“You all right?” he asked.

“I’m all right. Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I’m all right. You...you’re in danger?”

Because he would know a lie, I said, “Maybe a little.”

His eyes, one higher in his tragic face than the other, were pellucid, full of timidities and courage, beautiful even in their different elevations.

His gaze sharpened as I had never seen it, as his soft voice grew softer still: “Did you accuse yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Absolution?”

“I received it.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“So you’re ready.”

“I hope I am, Jacob.”

He not only continued to meet my eyes but also seemed to search them. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what, Jacob?”

“Sorry about your girl.”

“Thank you, Jake.”

“I know what you don’t know,” he said.

“What is that?”

“I know what she saw in you,” he said, and he leaned his head on my shoulder.

He had done what few other people have ever achieved, though many may have tried: He had rendered me speechless.

I put an arm around him, and we stayed like that for a minute, neither of us needing to say anything more, because we were both all right, we were ready.

CHAPTER 48

IN THE ONLY ROOM CURRENTLY WITHOUT CHILDREN in residence, Rodion Romanovich put a large attaché case on one of the beds.

The case belonged to him. Brother Leopold had earlier fetched it from the Russian's room in the guesthouse and had brought it back in the SUV.

He opened the case, which contained two pistols nestled in the custom-molded foam interior.

Picking up one of the weapons, he said, "This is a Desert Eagle in fifty Magnum. In a forty-four Magnum or three-fifty-seven, it is a formidable beast, but the fifty Magnum makes an incredible noise. You will enjoy the noise."

"Sir, with that in a cactus grove, you could do some heavy-duty meditation."

"It does the job, but it has kick, Mr. Thomas, so I recommend that you take the other pistol."

"Thank you, sir, but no thank you."

"The other is a SIG Pro three-fifty-seven, quite manageable."

"I don't like guns, sir."

"You took down those shooters in the mall, Mr. Thomas."

"Yes, sir, but that was the first time I ever pulled a trigger, and anyway it was someone else's gun."

"This is someone else's gun. It is my gun. Go ahead, take it."

"What I usually do is just improvise."

“Improvise what?”

“Self-defense. If there’s not a real snake or a rubber snake around, there’s always a bucket or something.”

“I know you better now, Mr. Thomas, than I did yesterday, but in my judgment you remain in some ways a peculiar young man.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The attaché case contained two loaded magazines for each pistol. Romanovich jammed a magazine in each weapon, put the spare magazines in his pants pockets.

The case also contained a shoulder holster, but he didn’t want it. Holding the pistols, he put his hands in his coat pockets. They were deep pockets.

When he took his hands out of his pockets, the guns were no longer in them. The coat had been so well made that it hardly sagged with its burdens.

He looked at the window, checked his watch, and said, “You would not think it was just twenty past three.”

Behind the white gravecloth of churning snow, the dead-gray face of the day awaited imminent burial.

After closing the attaché case and tucking it under the bed, he said, “I sincerely hope that he is merely misguided.”

“Who, sir?”

“John Heineman. I hope he is not mad. Mad scientists are not only dangerous, they are tedious, and I have no patience for tedious people.”

To avoid interfering with the work of the brothers in the two stairwells, we rode down to the basement in the elevator. There was no elevator music. That was nice.

When all the children were in their rooms and the stairwells were secured, the monks would call the two elevators to the second floor. They would use the mother superior’s key to shut them down at that position.

If anything nefarious got into a shaft from the top or the bottom, the elevator cab itself would blockade access to the second floor.

The ceiling of each cab featured an escape panel. The brothers had already secured those panels from the inside, so nothing on the

roof of the cab could enter by that route.

They seemed to have thought of everything, but they were human, and therefore they had definitely not thought of everything. If we were capable of thinking of everything, we would still be living in Eden, rent-free with all-you-can-eat buffets and infinitely better daytime TV programming.

In the basement, we went to the boiler room. The gas fire-rings were hissing, and the pumps were rumbling, and there was a general happy atmosphere of Western mechanical genius about the place.

To reach John's Mew, we could venture out into the blizzard and strive through deep drifts to the new abbey, risking encounter with an uberskeleton sans the armor of an SUV. For adventure, that route had many things to recommend it: challenging weather, terror, air so cold it would clear your head if it didn't freeze the mucus in your sinus passages, and an opportunity to make snow angels.

The service tunnels offered an avenue without weather and with no wind shriek to cover the rattling approach of the plug-uglies. If perhaps those boneyards, however many there might be, had all gone topside, to prowl around the school in anticipation of nightfall, we would have an easy sprint to the basement of the new abbey.

I took the special wrench from the hook beside the crawl-through entrance to the service passageway, and we knelt at the steel access panel. We listened.

After half a minute, I asked, "You hear anything?"

When another half minute had passed, he said, "Nothing."

As I put the wrench to the first of the four bolts and started to turn it, I thought I heard a soft scraping noise against the farther side of the panel.

I paused, listened, and after a while said, "Did you hear something?"

"Nothing, Mr. Thomas," said Romanovich.

Following another half-minute of attentive listening, I rapped one knuckle against the access panel.

From beyond exploded a frenzied clitterclatter full of rage and need and cold desire, and the eerie keening that accompanied all

the frantic tap-dancing seemed to arise from three or four voices.

After tightening the bolt that I had begun to loosen, I returned the special wrench to the hook.

As we rode the elevator up to the ground floor, Romanovich said, "I regret that Mrs. Romanovich is not here."

"For some reason, sir, I wouldn't have thought there was a Mrs. Romanovich."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Thomas. We have been married for twenty blissful years. We share many interests. If she were here, she would so enjoy this."

CHAPTER 49

IF ANY EXITS FROM THE SCHOOL WERE BEING monitored by skeletal sentinels, the front door, the garage doors, and the mud-room door adjacent the kitchen would be the most likely places for them to concentrate their attention.

Romanovich and I agreed to depart the building by a window in Sister Angela's office, which was the point farthest removed from the three doors that most invited the enemy's attention. Although the mother superior was not present, her desk lamp glowed.

Indicating the posters of George Washington, Flannery O'Connor, and Harper Lee, I said, "The sister has a riddle, sir. What shared quality does she most admire in those three people?"

He didn't have to ask who the women were. "Fortitude," he said. "Washington obviously had it. Ms. O'Connor suffered from lupus but refused to let it defeat her. And Ms. Lee needed fortitude to live in that place at that time, publish that book, and deal with the bigots who were angered by her portrait of them."

"Two of them being writers, you had a librarian's advantage."

When I switched off the lamp and opened the drapes, Romanovich said, "It is still a total whiteout. We will be disoriented and lost ten steps from the school."

"Not with my psychic magnetism, sir."

"Do they still include prizes in boxes of Cracker Jack?"

With a twinge of guilt, I opened a couple of Sister Angela's desk drawers, found a pair of scissors, and cut off six feet of drapery cord.

I wrapped one end around my gloved right hand.

“When we’re outside, I’ll give you the other end, sir. Then we won’t be separated even if we’re snowblind.”

“I do not understand, Mr. Thomas. Are you saying that the cord will act as some kind of dowsing rod leading us to the abbey?”

“No, sir. The cord just keeps us together. If I concentrate on a person that I need to find, and drive or walk around awhile, I’ll almost always be drawn to him by my psychic magnetism. I’m going to be thinking about Brother John Heineman, who is in the Mew.”

“How interesting. The most interesting part, to me, is the adverb *almost*.”

“Well, I’m the first to admit that I don’t live rent-free in Eden.”

“And what does that mean when you admit it, Mr. Thomas?”

“I’m not perfect, sir.”

After making sure that my hood was firmly fastened under my chin, I raised the bottom half of the double-hung window, went out into the roar and rush of the storm, and scanned the day for signs of cemetery escapees. If I’d seen any shambling bones, I would have been in big trouble, because visibility was down to an arm’s length.

Romanovich followed me and closed the window behind us. We were not able to lock it, but our warrior monks and nuns could not guard the entire building, anyway; they were even now retreating to the second floor, to defend that more limited position.

I watched the Russian tie the loose end of the cord to his wrist. The tether between us was about four and a half feet long.

Only six steps from the school, I became disoriented. I had no clue which direction would bring us to the abbey.

I summoned into mind an image of Brother John sitting in one of the armchairs in his mysterious receiving room, down in the Mew, and I slogged forward, reminding myself to be alert for a loss of tension on the cord.

The snow lay everywhere at least knee-deep, and in places the drifts came nearly to my hips. Wading uphill through an avalanche couldn’t have been a whole lot more annoying than this.

Being a Mojave boy, I again found the bitter cold only slightly more appealing than machine-gun fire. But the cacophony of the

storm, combined with the whiteout, was the worst of it. Step by frigid step, a weird kind of open-air claustrophobia got a grip on me.

I also resented that the deafening hoot-and-boom of the wind prevented Romanovich and me from saying a word. During the weeks that he had been in the guesthouse, he'd seemed to be a taciturn old bear; but as this day had unfolded, he had become positively loquacious. I was enjoying our conversations as much now that we were allied in a cause as when I had thought that we were enemies.

Once they have exhausted the subject of Indianapolis and its many wonders, a lot of people have nothing more of interest to say.

I knew we had reached the stone stairs down to John's Mew when I stumbled into them and nearly fell. Snow had drifted against the door at the bottom of the steps.

The cast-bronze words LIBERA NOS A MALO, on the plaque above the door, had mostly been obscured by encrusting snow, so that instead of reading *Deliver us from evil*, it read simply *evil*.

After I unlocked the half-ton door, it pivoted open smoothly on ball-bearing hinges, revealing the stone corridor bathed in blue light.

We went inside, and the door closed, and we disengaged ourselves from the tether that had kept us together during the slog.

"That was most impressive, Mr. Thomas."

"Psychic magnetism isn't an earned skill, sir. Taking pride in it would be like taking pride in how well my kidneys function."

We brushed snow from our coats, and he took off his bearskin hat to shake it.

At the brushed stainless-steel door with LUMIN DE LUMINE embedded in polished letters, I knocked one foot against the other to shed as much caked snow as possible.

Romanovich removed his zippered boots and stood in dry shoes, a more considerate guest than I.

Translating the words on the door, he said, " 'Light from light.' "

" 'Waste and void, waste and void. Darkness on the face of the deep,' " I said. "Then God commanded light. The light of the world

descends from the Everlasting Light that is God.”

“That is surely one thing it means,” said Romanovich. “But it may also mean that the visible can be born from the invisible, that matter can arise from energy, that thought is a form of energy and that thought itself can be concretized into the very object that is imagined.”

“Well, sir, that’s a mouthful to get out of three words.”

“Most assuredly,” he agreed.

I flattened the palm and fingers of my right hand against the plasma screen in the wide steel architrave.

The pneumatic door slid open with the engineered hiss intended to remind Brother John that in every human enterprise, no matter with what good intentions it is undertaken, a serpent lurks. Considering where his work apparently had led him, perhaps in addition to the hiss, loud bells should have rung, lights should have flashed, and an ominous recorded voice should have said *Some things men were never meant to know*.

We stepped into the seamless, wax-yellow, porcelain-like vessel where buttery light emanated from the walls. The doors hissed shut at our backs, the light faded, and darkness enveloped us.

“I have no sense of motion,” I said, “but I’m pretty sure it’s an elevator, and we’re going down a few floors.”

“Yes,” Romanovich said, “and I suspect that surrounding us is an enormous lead reservoir filled with heavy water.”

“Really? That thought hadn’t occurred to me.”

“No, it would not.”

“What is heavy water, sir, besides being obviously heavier than ordinary water?”

“Heavy water is water in which the hydrogen atoms have been replaced with deuterium.”

“Yes, of course. I’d forgotten. Most people buy it at the grocery store, but I prefer to get the million-gallon jug at Costco.”

A door hissed open in front of us, and we stepped into the vestibule bathed in red light.

“Sir, what is the purpose of heavy water?”

“It is used chiefly as a coolant in nuclear reactors, but here I believe it has other purposes, including perhaps, secondarily, as an additional layer of shielding against cosmic radiation that might affect subatomic experiments.”

In the vestibule, we ignored the plain stainless-steel doors to the left and right, and went forward to the door in which were embedded the words PER OMNIA SAECULA SAECULORUM.

“‘For ever and ever,’ ” said Romanovich, scowling. “I do not like the sound of that.”

Pollyanna Odd, surfacing again, said, “But, sir, it’s merely praising God. ‘For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever and ever, amen.’ ”

“No doubt that was Heineman’s conscious intention when he chose these words. But one suspects that unconsciously he was expressing pride in his own achievements, suggesting that his works, performed here, would endure for ever and ever, beyond the end of time, where only God’s kingdom otherwise endures.”

“I hadn’t thought of that interpretation, sir.”

“No, you would not, Mr. Thomas. These words might indicate pride beyond mere hubris, the self-glorification of one who needs no word of praise or approval from others.”

“But Brother John is not an egomaniacal nutbag, sir.”

“I did not say that he was a nutbag. And more likely than not, he sincerely believes that, through this work, he is devoutly and humbly seeking to know God.”

Without a hiss, *For ever and ever* slid aside, and we proceeded into the thirty-foot-diameter chamber where, at the center, standing on a wine-colored Persian carpet, four wingback chairs were served by four floor lamps. Currently, three lamps shed light.

Brother John, in tunic and scapular, with his hood pushed back from his head, waited in one of those three chairs.

CHAPTER 50

IN THE COZINESS OF HONEY-COLORED LIGHT, WITH the surrounding room in shadows and the curved wall darkly lustrous, Romanovich and I settled in the two chairs to which we had clearly been directed.

On the tables beside our chairs, where usually three fresh warm cookies would have been provided on a red plate, no cookies were in evidence. Perhaps Brother John had been too busy to bake.

His hooded violet eyes were as piercing as ever, but they seemed to reveal no suspicion or hostility. His smile was warm, as was his deep voice when he said, “I have been inexplicably weary today, and at times even vaguely depressed.”

“That is interesting,” Romanovich remarked to me.

Brother John said, “I am glad you came, Odd Thomas. Your visits refresh me.”

“Well, sir, sometimes I think I make a pest of myself.”

Brother John nodded at Romanovich. “And you, our visitor from Indianapolis—I have only seen you once or twice at a distance and have never had the pleasure of speaking with you.”

“That pleasure is now yours, Dr. Heineman.”

Raising one large hand in genteel protest, Brother John said, “Mr. Romanovich, I am not that man anymore. I am only John or Brother John.”

“Likewise, I am only Agent Romanovich of the National Security Agency,” said the assassin’s son, and produced his ID.

Rather than lean forward from his chair to accept and examine the laminated card, Brother John turned to me. “Is he indeed, Odd Thomas?”

“Well, sir, this feels true in a way that librarian never did.”

“Mr. Romanovich, Odd Thomas’s opinion carries more weight with me than any identification. To what do I owe the honor?”

Putting away his ID, Romanovich said, “You have quite a vast facility here, Brother John.”

“Not really. The vastness you sense may be the scope of the work, rather than the size of the facility.”

“But you must need many specialists to keep it functioning.”

“Only six brothers who have had intense technical training. My systems are all but entirely solid-state.”

“On occasion, tech support comes in from Silicon Valley by helicopter.”

“Yes, Mr. Romanovich. I am pleased but surprised the NSA would be interested in the work of a spiritual seeker.”

“I am a man of faith myself, Brother John. I was intrigued when I heard that you have developed a computer model that you believe has shown you the deepest, most fundamental structure of reality, even far below the level of quantum foam.”

Brother John sat in silence, and finally said, “I must assume that some of my conversations with former colleagues, which I allowed myself a couple of years ago, were reported to you.”

“That is correct, Brother John.”

The monk frowned, then sighed. “Well, I should not hold them to blame. In the highly competitive secular world of science, there is no expectation of keeping a confidence of this nature.”

“So you believe you have developed a computer model that has shown you the deepest structure of reality?”

“I do not believe it, Mr. Romanovich. I *know* that what the model shows me is true.”

“Such certitude.”

“To avoid a bias toward my views, I didn’t create the model. We inputted the entirety of substantive quantum theory and the

evidence supporting it, allowing the computer array to develop the model with no human bias.”

“Computers are creations of human beings,” said Romanovich, “so they have bias built in.”

To me, Brother John said, “The melancholy I’ve struggled with today does not excuse my bad manners. Would you like some cookies?”

That he offered cookies only to me seemed significant. “Thank you, sir, but I’m saving room for two slices of cake after dinner.”

“Back to your certitude,” Romanovich said. “How can you *know* what the model shows you is true?”

A beatific look overcame Brother John. When he spoke, his voice had a tremor that might have been inspired by awe. “I have applied the lesson of the model...and it works.”

“And what is the lesson of the model, Brother John?”

Leaning forward in his chair, seeming to refine the silence of the room to a hush by the force of his personality, he said softly, “Under the final level of apparent chaos, one finds strange order again, and the final level of order is *thought*.”

“Thought?”

“All matter, when seen at its root, arises out of a base web that has all the characteristics of thought waves.”

He clapped his hands once, and the previously dark, lustrous walls brightened. Across them, around us, floor to ceiling, intricate interlacing lines of numerous colors presented ever-changing patterns that suggested layers like thermal currents in an infinitely deep ocean. For all their complexity, the lines were clearly ordered, the patterns purposeful.

This display possessed such beauty and mystery that I was at the same time mesmerized by it and compelled to look away, struck both by wonder and fear, by awe but equally by a sense of inadequacy, which made me want to cover my face and confess all the baseness in myself.

Brother John said, “What you see before you is not the thought patterns of God that underlie all matter, which of course we have no

way of actually seeing, but a computer representation of them, based on the model I mentioned.”

He clapped his hands twice. The astonishing patterns faded, and the walls went dark again, as though the display had been controlled by one of those devices that some elderly people use to turn the room lights on and off without having to get out of bed.

“This little exhibition so profoundly affects people,” Brother John said, “resonates with us on some level so deep, that witnessing more than a minute of it can result in extreme emotional distress.”

Rodion Romanovich looked as shaken as I suppose I did.

“So,” said the Russian, after regaining his composure, “the lesson of the model is that the universe—all its matter and forms of energy—arises out of thought.”

“God imagines the world, and the world becomes.”

Romanovich said, “Well, we know that matter can be transformed to energy, as burning oil produces heat and light—”

“As splitting the nucleus of an atom produces the nuclei of lighter atoms,” Brother John interrupted, “and also the release of great energy.”

Romanovich pressed him: “But are you saying that thought—at least Divine thought—is a form of energy that can shape itself into matter, the reverse of nuclear fission?”

“Not the reverse, no. This is not merely nuclear fusion. The usual scientific terms do not apply. It is...imagining matter into existence by the power of the will. And because we have been given thought, will, and imagination, albeit on a human scale, we too have this power to create.”

Romanovich and I locked eyes, and I said, “Sir, have you ever seen the movie *Forbidden Planet*?”

“No, Mr. Thomas, I have not.”

“When this is all over, I think we should watch it together.”

“I will make the popcorn.”

“With salt and just a pinch of chili powder?”

“So shall it be.”

Brother John said, “Are you sure you won’t have some cookies, Odd Thomas? I know you like my cookies.”

I expected him to make sorcerous gestures toward the table beside my chair, conjuring chocolate-chip treats from thin air.

Romanovich said, “Brother John, you said earlier that you have applied the lesson of your computer model, the lesson being that all matter as we know it has arisen out of thought. The universe, our world, the trees and the flowers and the animals...all imagined into existence.”

“Yes. You see, my science has led me back to faith.”

“How do you mean you *applied* what you believe you’ve learned?”

The monk leaned forward in his wingback chair, his hands fisted on his knees as if he were struggling to contain his excitement. His face appeared to have shed forty years, returning him to boyhood and the wonder thereof.

“I have,” he whispered, “created life.”

CHAPTER 51

THIS WAS THE CALIFORNIA SIERRA, NOT THE Carpathian Mountains. Outside, snow flew rather than rain, without thunderclaps or bolts of lightning. In this room I found a disappointing lack of bizarre machines with gold-plated gyroscopes, crackling arcs of electricity, and demented hunchbacks with lantern eyes. In the days of Karloff and Lugosi, they really understood the demands of melodrama better than our mad scientists do these days.

On the other hand, it is true that Brother John Heineman was less mad than misguided. You will see that this is true, though you will also see that between the mad and the misguided, the line is as thin as a split hair that has been split again.

“This chamber,” said Brother John with a curious mix of glee and solemnity, “isn’t merely a room but is also a revolutionary machine.”

To me, Rodion Romanovich said, “This is always trouble.”

“If I envision an object and consciously project that image,” Brother John continued, “the machine receives it, recognizes the projected nature of it separate from all other kinds of thought, amplifies my directed mental energy to several million times its initial power, and produces the object imagined.”

“Good Lord, sir, your electrical bill must be outrageous.”

“It’s not inconsiderable,” he acknowledged, “but it isn’t as bad as you might think. For one thing, it’s not volts that matter so much as amps.”

“And I suppose you receive a high-user discount.”

“Not only that, Odd Thomas, my laboratory has certain rate advantages because it is in fact a religious organization.”

Romanovich said, “When you say you can imagine an object and the room will produce it—you mean like the cookies you have mentioned.”

Brother John nodded. “Certainly, Mr. Romanovich. Would you like some cookies?”

Glowering, the Russian said, “Cookies are not alive. You said you had created life.”

The monk sobered. “Yes. You’re correct. Let’s not make a parlor game out of it. This is about First Things, man’s relationship to God and the meaning of existence. Let’s go directly to the main show. I will create a floppy for you.”

“A what?” Romanovich asked.

“You will see,” Brother John promised, and smiled knowingly.

He sat back in his chair, closed his eyes, and furrowed his forehead as if in thought.

“Are you doing it now?” I asked.

“If I am allowed to concentrate, yes.”

“I thought you would need a helmet of some kind, you know, with all kinds of wires trailing from it.”

“Nothing so primitive, Odd Thomas. The room is attuned to the precise frequency of my brain waves. It’s a receiver and an amplifier, but only of my projected thoughts, no one else’s.”

I glanced at Romanovich. He looked as bearishly disapproving as ever I had seen him.

Perhaps twenty seconds had passed before the air felt thicker, as though the humidity had abruptly increased, but this heaviness had no moist quality. Pressure pushed in upon me from all sides, as if we had been descending into oceanic depths.

On the Persian carpet, in front of Brother John’s chair, arose a silvery shimmering, like a reflection of light that had bounced off a bright object elsewhere in the room, although that was not the explanation for it.

After a moment, tiny white cubes had formed apparently out of nothing, as rock sugar crystallizes on a string that is suspended in a glass of highly sweetened water. The number of tiny cubes rapidly increased, and at the same time they began to fuse with one another, as if I were watching a rewinding video of the incident in the garage.

Romanovich and I rose to our feet, no doubt motivated by the same thought: *What if a “floppy” is the pet name Brother John has given to the ambulatory boneyards?*

We need not have been alarmed. What formed before us was a creature the size of a hamster. All white, combining features of a puppy, a kitten, and a baby bunny, it opened huge eyes that were as blue as—but less predatory than—the eyes of Tom Cruise, gave me a winning smile, and made an appealing, musical burbling sound.

Brother John opened his eyes, smiled at his creation, and said, “Gentlemen, meet your first floppy.”

* * *

I was not present in the school to witness this, but following is what I was told of events unfolding parallel to Brother John’s revelations in the Mew:

In Room 14, as Jacob does needlepoint, Brother Knuckles places a chair in the open doorway, where he sits, a baseball bat across his knees, and observes the activity in the hallway.

Brother Maxwell, fifteen years downriver from his journalism career, is perhaps hoping that he has not come all this way and time only to encounter the same mindless violence that he could have had *without* a vow of poverty, in Los Angeles.

Maxwell sits in a chair near the only window. Because the whirl of snow half hypnotized him, he has not been focusing on the fading day beyond the glass.

A noise more crisp than the wind, a series of faint clinks and squeaks, draws his attention to the window. Pressed to the far side

of the panes is a shifting kaleidoscope of bones.

Rising slowly from his chair, as if a sudden movement might agitate the visitor, Maxwell whispers, "Brother Salvatore."

In the open doorway, with his back to the room, Brother Knuckles is thinking about the latest book by his favorite author, which isn't about either a china rabbit or a mouse who saves a princess, but is nonetheless wonderful. He doesn't hear Brother Maxwell.

Backing away from the window, Brother Maxwell realizes that he has left both his baseball bats beside the chair he vacated. He again whispers for Salvatore, but perhaps no louder than before.

The patterns of bone at the window constantly change, but not in an agitated fashion, almost lazily, conveying the impression that the creature may be in a state similar to sleep.

The dreamy quality of the kaleidoscopic movement encourages Brother Maxwell to return to his chair to pick up one of the baseball bats.

As he bends down and grips that weapon, he hears a pane of glass crack above him, and as he startles upright, he shouts, "*Salvatore!*"

* * *

Although it had formed out of cubes, the floppy was as furry, cuddly, and floppy as its name. Its huge ears drooped over its face, and it brushed them back with one paw, then rose on its hind feet. The Pillsbury Doughboy might have something like this as his pet.

His face a portrait of enchantment, Brother John said, "All my life, I've been obsessed with order. With finding order within chaos. With imposing order *on* chaos. And here is this sweet little thing, born out of the chaos of thought, out of the void, out of nothing."

Still standing, no less wary than when he had expected one of the boneyards to rise up before him, Romanovich said, "Surely you have not shown this to the abbot."

"Not yet," Brother John said. "In fact, you're the first to see this... this proof of God."

“Does the abbot even know your research was leading to...this?”

Brother John shook his head. “He understands that I intended to prove that at the bottom of physical reality, under the last layer of apparent chaos is ordered thought waves, the mind of God. But I never told him that I would create *living* proof.”

“You never told him,” Romanovich said, his voice groaning under the weight of his astonishment.

Smiling at his creation as it tottered this way and that, Brother John said, “I wanted to surprise him.”

“Surprise him?” Romanovich traded astonishment for disbelief. “*Surprise* him?”

“Yes. With proof of God.”

With barely throttled contempt, more directly than I might have said it under these circumstances, Romanovich declared, “This is not proof of God. This is *blasphemy*.”

Brother John flinched as if he had been slapped, but recovered at once. “I’m afraid you haven’t entirely followed what I’ve told you, Mr. Romanovich.”

The giggling, toddling, big-eyed floppy did not at first glance seem like a work of supreme blasphemy. My initial take was: *furry, cute, cuddly, adorable*.

When I sat down on the edge of my chair and leaned forward to have a closer look at it, however, I got a chill as sharp as an icicle in the eye.

The floppy’s big blue peepers did not engage me, did not have the curiosity of a kitten’s or puppy’s eyes. They were vacant; a void lay beyond them.

The musical burbling and the giggle charmed, like the recorded voice of a toy—until I reminded myself that here was *not* a toy, that here was a living being. Then its utterances reminded me of the low muttering of dead-eyed dolls in nightmares.

I rose from the chair and took a step or two back from Brother John’s dark miracle.

“Dr. Heineman,” Romanovich said, “you do not know yourself. You do not know what you have done.”

Brother John appeared bewildered by the Russian's hostility. "We have a different perspective, I see, but—"

"Twenty-five years ago, you rejected your deformed and disabled child, disowned and abandoned him."

Shocked that the Russian was privy to that transgression but also clearly stricken by shame, Brother John said, "I am not that man anymore."

"I will grant that you became remorseful, even contrite, and you did an amazingly generous thing by giving away your fortune, taking vows. You are reformed, you may be a better man, but *you are not a different man*. How can you convince yourself of such a thing when you are so conversant with the theology of your faith? From one end of this life to the other, you carry with you all that you have done. Absolution grants you forgiveness for it, but does not expunge the past. The man you were still lives within you, repressed by the man you have struggled to become."

I said, "Brother John, have you ever seen Fredric March in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*? If we get through this alive, maybe we can watch it together."

CHAPTER 52

THE ATMOSPHERE IN THE MEW WAS NOT healthy, which is like saying that you might not want to have a picnic in the cone of a dormant volcano if the ground is rumbling underfoot.

Brother John's feelings had been hurt when his miraculous work had been received with less enthusiasm than he had expected. And his disappointment had about it a quality of wounded pride, a thinly masked resentment, a disturbing childlike peevishness.

The cute, creepy, cuddly, soulless floppy sat on the floor, playing with its feet, making all the noises of a creature that was wonderfully amused with itself, showing off for us, as if confident that we would at any moment coo with admiration for it. Its giggle, however, sounded more humorless by the second.

The bone beasts, the tower phantom, and now this demonic Beanie Baby had exhibited a vanity unseen in genuine supernatural entities. They existed outside the vertical sacred order of human beings and spirits. Their vanity reflected the vanity of their troubled creator.

I thought of Tommy Cloudwalker's three-headed coyote-man and realized that another difference between the genuinely supernatural and the bizarre things we had seen in the past twelve hours was the fundamentally *organic* character of what is supernatural, which is no surprise, really, since true spirits once lived as flesh.

The bone beasts had seemed not organic but like machines. When Death had leaped from the bell tower, it had disassembled in flight,

had broken apart into geometric fragments, as might a failed machine. The floppy was not the equivalent of a puppy or a kitten, but of a wind-up toy.

Standing with his hands in the pockets of his coat, as if he would at any moment withdraw the .50-caliber Desert Eagle and blow the floppy to smithereens, Rodion Romanovich said, “Dr. Heineman, what you have made is not life. Upon death, it does not decompose. It deconstructs itself in some process similar to fission but not fission, producing no heat, leaving nothing. What you have created is *anti* life.”

“You simply do not grasp the achievement,” said Brother John. Like the facade of a summer hotel being boarded up for the off-season, his face steadily put away its former light and animation.

“Doctor,” Romanovich continued, “I am sure that you built the school as atonement for abandoning your son, and I am sure that you had Jacob brought here as an act of contrition.”

Brother John stared at him, still withdrawing behind shutters and boarded windows.

“But the man you were is still within the man you are, and he had his own motivations.”

This accusation aroused Brother John from his withdrawal. “What are you implying?”

Pointing to the floppy, Romanovich said, “How can you put an end to that thing?”

“I am able to think it out of existence as efficiently as I created it.”

“Then for the love of God, do so.”

For a moment, Brother John’s jaw clenched, his eyes narrowed, and he did not appear disposed to oblige the request.

The Russian radiated not just the authority of an officer of the state but also moral authority. He removed his left hand from a coat pocket and made a hurry-up gesture.

Closing his eyes, furrowing his forehead, Brother John imagined the floppy out of existence. Mercifully, the giggling stopped. Then the thing disassembled into rattling, twitching cubes. It vanished.

When the scientist monk opened his eyes, Romanovich said, “You yourself noted that you have been obsessed with order all your life.”

“Any sane man sides with order over anarchy, order over chaos,” said Brother John.

“I agree, Dr. Heineman. But as a young man, you were so obsessed with order that you not only decried disorder, you *despised* it as if it were a personal affront. You abhorred it, recoiled from it. You had no patience for anyone whom you felt furthered disorder in society. Ironically, you exhibited what might be called an intellectual rather than an emotional obsessive-compulsive disorder.”

“You have been talking to envious men,” said Brother John.

“When your son was born, his deformities and disabilities struck you as biological disorder, the more intolerable because it came from your loins. You disowned him. You wanted him to die.”

“I never wanted him to die. That is outrageous.”

I felt a little like a traitor to him when I said, “Sir, Jacob remembers when you visited him in the hospital and urged his mother to let his infection run its course untreated.”

Atop his tall lanky body, his round face bobbed like a balloon on the end of a string, and I could not tell whether he was nodding in agreement or shaking his head in denial. He might have been doing both. He could not speak.

In a voice no longer characterized by accusation, opting for a note of quiet entreaty, Romanovich said, “Dr. Heineman, have you any conscious awareness that you have been creating abominations that have materialized outside this room, that have killed?”

* * *

At the school, in Room 14, Brother Maxwell stands tense, his baseball bat raised, while Brother Knuckles, having dealt with more than his share of wiseguys in years past, and having recently mowed down an uberskeleton with an SUV, is wary but not wound tight.

In fact, leaning almost insouciantly on his bat as if it is a cane, Knuckles says, “Some big guys, they think struttin’ the muscle will

put your tail between your legs, but all they got is strut, they ain't got the guts to back up the brag."

"This thing," says Maxwell, "doesn't have either guts or muscle, it's all bones."

"Ain't that what I'm tellin' you?"

Half the cracked pane breaks out of the bronze muntins, shatters on the floor.

"No way this chump gets through the window, not with all them little squares."

The remaining portion of the broken pane cracks loose and falls to the floor.

"You don't scare me," Knuckles tells the dog of the Neverwas.

Maxwell says, "It scares *me*."

"No it don't," Knuckles assures him. "You're good, Brother, you're solid."

A clutching gnarl of flexing bones gropes through the hole in the casement window.

Another pane cracks, and a third explodes, spraying shards of glass onto the two monks' shoes.

Toward the farther end of the room, Jacob sits with the pillow on his lap, his head bowed to his embroidery, exhibiting no fear, creating beautiful order out of blank white cloth and peach thread, while the disorderly creation at the window shatters two more panes of glass and strains against the bronze muntins.

Brother Fletcher steps in from the hall. "Showtime. You need some backup?"

Brother Maxwell says yes, but Brother Knuckles says, "Seen tougher mugs than this in Jersey. You watchin' the elevator?"

"It's covered," Brother Fletcher assures him.

"Then maybe stay beside Jacob, move him out fast if this chump gets through the window."

Brother Maxwell protests: "You said it won't get through."

"It ain't gonna, Brother. Yeah, it's makin' a big show, but the true fact is—this geek, he's scared of us."

The stressed bronze muntins and rails of the casement window creaked, groaned.

* * *

“Abominations?” Brother John’s round face seemed to swell and redden with the pressure of new dark possibilities that his mind could barely contain. “Create without conscious awareness? It isn’t possible.”

“If it is not possible,” Romanovich said, “then have you created them intentionally? Because they do exist. We have seen them.”

I unzipped my jacket and removed from within a folded page that I had torn out of Jacob’s tablet. As I opened the sheet of paper, the drawing of the beast flexed with an illusion of movement.

“Your son has seen this at his window, sir. He says it is the dog of the Neverwas. Jennifer called you the Neverwas.”

Brother John accepted the drawing, spellbound by it. The doubt and fear in his face belied the confidence in his voice when he said, “This is meaningless. The boy is retarded. This is the fantasy of a deformed mind.”

“Dr. Heineman,” the Russian said, “twenty-seven months ago, from things you said to your former colleagues in calls and E-mails, they inferred that you might have already...created something.”

“I did. Yes. I showed it to you moments ago.”

“That pathetic flop-eared creature?”

Pity more than scorn informed Romanovich’s voice, and Brother John met it with silence. Vanity receives pity as a wasp receives a threat to its nest, and a desire to sting brought an unholy venomous shine to the monk’s violet, hooded eyes.

“If you have advanced no further in these twenty-seven months,” Romanovich said, “could it be because something happened about two years ago that frightened you off your research, and you have only recently begun again to power up this god-machine of yours and ‘create’?”

“Brother Constantine’s suicide,” I said.

“Which was not a suicide,” said Romanovich. “Unconsciously, you had dispatched some abomination into the night, Dr. Heineman, and when Constantine saw it, he could not be allowed to live.”

Either the drawing cast a dark enchantment over the scientist monk or he did not trust himself to meet our eyes.

“You suspected what had happened, and you put your research on hold—but twisted pride made you return to it recently. Now Brother Timothy is dead...and even at this hour, you stalk your son through this monstrous surrogate.”

With his gaze still upon the drawing, a pulse jumping in his temples, Brother John said tightly, “I long ago accused myself of my sins against my son and his mother.”

“And I believe your confession was even sincere,” Romanovich conceded.

“I received absolution.”

“You confessed and were forgiven, but some darker self within you did not confess and did not think he needed to be forgiven.”

“Sir, Brother Timothy’s murder last night was...horrendous, inhuman. You have to help us stop this.”

All this time later, I am saddened to write that when Brother John’s eyes welled with tears, which he managed not to spill, I half believed they were not for Tim but for himself.

Romanovich said, “You progressed from postulant to novice, to professed monk. But you yourself have said you were spooked when your research led you to believe in a created universe, so you came to God in fear.”

Straining the words through his teeth, Brother John said, “The motivation matters less than the contrition.”

“Perhaps,” Romanovich allowed. “But most come to Him in love. And some part of you, some Other John, has not come to Him at all.”

With sudden intuition, I said, “Brother John, the Other is an angry child.”

At last he looked up from the drawing and met my eyes.

“The child who, far too young, saw anarchy in the world and feared it. The child who resented being born into such a disordered

world, who saw chaos and yearned to find order in it.”

Behind his violet windows, the Other regarded me with the contempt and self-regard of a child not yet acquainted with empathy and compassion, a child from whom the Better John had separated himself but from whom he had not escaped.

I called his attention to the drawing once more. “Sir, the obsessed child who built a model of quantum foam out of forty-seven sets of Lego blocks is the same child who conceived of this complex mechanism of cold bones and efficient joints.”

As he studied the architecture of the bone beast, reluctantly he recognized that the obsession behind the Lego model was the same that inspired this eerie construction.

“Sir, there is still time. Time for that little boy to give up his anger and have his pain lifted.”

The surface tension of his pent-up tears abruptly broke, and one tracked down each cheek.

He looked up at me and, in a voice thick with sadness but also with bitterness, he said, “No. It’s too late.”

CHAPTER 53

FOR ALL I KNOW, DEATH HAD BEEN IN THE ROOM when the curved walls had bloomed with colorful patterns of imagined God thought, and had moved as our heads had turned, to stay always just out of our line of sight. But it came at me now as if it had just swept into the chamber in a cold fury, seized me, lifted me, pulled me face to face with it.

Instead of the previous void in the hood, confronting me was a brutal version of the face of Brother John, angular where his was round, hard where his was soft, a child's idea less of the face of Death than of the face of Power personified. The young genius who had recognized and feared the chaos of the world but who had been powerless to bring order to it had now empowered himself.

His breath was that of a machine, rife with the reek of smoking copper and scalding steel.

He threw me over the wingback chair, as if I were but a knotted mass of rags. I slammed into the cool, curved wall and jacked myself up from the floor even as I landed.

A wingback chair flew, I ducked and scooted, the wall rang like a glass bell, as it had not done when I struck it, the chair stayed where it fell, but I kept moving. And here came Death again.

* * *

At the window, the bronze rails and muntins strain and slightly tweak but do not fail. The keening of the frustrated attacker grows louder than the clatter of its busy bones.

“This geek,” Brother Maxwell decides, “isn’t scared of us.”

“It’s gonna be before we’re done,” Knuckles assures him.

Out of the kaleidoscopic beast and through one of the empty spaces where a windowpane had been, an urgent thrusting tentacle of scissoring bones invades five feet into the room.

The brothers stagger back in surprise.

The extruded form breaks off or is ejected from the mother mass, and collapses to the floor. Instantly the severed limb assembles into a version of the larger creature.

Pincered, spined, barbed, and hooked, as big as an industrial vacuum cleaner, it comes roach-quick, and Knuckles swings for the bleachers.

The Louisville Slugger slams some corrective discipline into the delinquent, splintering off clusters of bones. Knuckles steps toward the thing as it shudders backward, demolishes it with a second swing.

Through the window comes another thrusting tentacle, and as it detaches, Brother Maxwell shouts to Brother Fletcher, “Get Jacob out of here!”

Brother Fletcher, having played some dangerous gigs in his salad days as a saxophonist, knows how to split a dive when customers start trading gunfire, so he is already scamming from the room with Jacob before Maxwell shouts. Entering the hallway, he hears Brother Gregory cry out that something is in the elevator shaft and is furiously intent on getting through the roof of the blocking cab.

* * *

As Death rushed me again, Rodion Romanovich rushed Death, with all the fearlessness of a natural-born mortician, and opened fire with the Desert Eagle.

His promise of incredible noise was fulfilled. The crash of the pistol sounded just a few decibels softer than the thunder of mortar fire.

I didn't count how many rounds Romanovich squeezed off, but Death burst apart into geometric debris, as it had done when leaping down from the bell tower, the fragmenting robe as brittle as the form it clothed.

Instantly, the shards and scraps and splinters of this unnatural construct twitched and jumped with what looked like life but was not—and within seconds remanifested.

When it turned toward Romanovich, he emptied the pistol, ejected the depleted magazine, and frantically dug the spare out of his pants pocket.

Less shattered by the second barrage of gunfire than by the first, Death rose swiftly from ruin.

John, not a brother at this moment, but now a smug child, stood with eyes closed, thinking the Death figure into existence again, and when he opened his eyes, they were not those of a man of God.

* * *

Brother Maxwell slams a home run through the second intruder in Room 14, then sees that Knuckles is again hammering at the first one, which has rattled itself back together with the swiftness of a rose blooming in stop-motion photography.

A third scuttling extrusion of the mother mass assaults, and Maxwell knocks it apart with both a swing and backswing, but the one he had first demolished, now reassembled, rushes him in full bristle and drives two thick barbed spines through his chest.

When Brother Knuckles turns, he witnesses Maxwell pierced and, with horror, sees his brother transformed, as if by contamination,

into a kaleidoscope of flexing-pivoting-rotating bones that shreds out of the storm suit as if stripping away a cocoon, and combines with the bone machine that pierced it.

Fleeing the room, Knuckles frantically pulls shut the door and, holding it closed, shouts for help.

Some consideration has been given to such a predicament as this, and two brothers arrive with a chain, which they loop to the levered handle of the door. They join that handle to the one at the adjacent room, ensuring that each door serves as the lock of the other.

The noise from the elevator shaft grows tremendous, rocking the walls. From behind the closed lift doors comes the sound of the cab roof buckling, as well as the thrum and twang of cables tested nearly to destruction.

Jacob is where he will be safest, between Sister Angela and Sister Miriam, whom surely even the devil himself will treat with wary circumspection.

* * *

Reborn again, Death shunned me and turned toward the Russian, who proved just two steps faster than the Reaper. Snapping the spare magazine into the Desert Eagle, Romanovich moved toward the man whom I had once admired and shot him twice.

The impact of .50-caliber rounds knocked John Heineman off his feet. When he went down, he stayed down. He wasn't able to imagine himself reconstructed, because no matter what that lost dark part of his soul might believe, he was not his own creation.

The Death figure reached Romanovich and laid a hand on his shoulder, but did not assault him. The phantom focused instead on Heineman, as if thunderstruck that its lowercase god had been laid low like any mortal.

This time Death deconstructed into a spill of cubes that split into more cubes, a mound of dancing dice, and they cast themselves with larval frenzy, rattling their dotless faces against one another until

they were only a fizz of molecules, and then atoms, and then nothing at all but a memory of hubris.

CHAPTER 54

BY ELEVEN O’CLOCK THAT NIGHT, AS THE STORM began to wane, the initial contingent of National Security agents—twenty of them—arrived in snow-eating monster trucks. With the phones down, I had no idea how Romanovich contacted them, but by then I had conceded that the clouds of mystery gathered around him made *my* clouds of mystery look like a light mist by comparison.

By Friday afternoon, the twenty agents had grown to fifty, and the grounds of the abbey and all buildings lay under their authority. The brothers, the sisters, and one shaken guest were exhaustively debriefed, though the children, at the insistence of the nuns, were not disturbed with questions.

The NSA concocted cover stories regarding the deaths of Brother Timothy, Brother Maxwell, and John Heineman. Timothy’s and Maxwell’s families would be told that they had perished in an SUV accident and that their remains were too grisly to allow open-casket funerals.

Already, a funeral Mass had been said for each of them. In the spring, though there were no remains to bury, headstones would be erected in the cemetery by the edge of the forest. At least their names in stone would stand with those whom they had known and loved, and by whom they themselves had been loved.

John Heineman, for whom also a Mass had been offered, would be kept in cold storage. After a year, when his death would not seem coincidental with those of Timothy and Maxwell, an announcement

would be made to the effect that he had died of a massive heart attack.

He had no family except the son he had never accepted. In spite of the terror and grief that Heineman had brought to St. Bartholomew's, the brothers and sisters were agreed that in a spirit of forgiveness, he should be buried in their cemetery, though at a discreet distance from the others who were at rest in that place.

Heineman's array of supercomputers were impounded by the NSA. They would eventually be removed from John's Mew and trucked away. All the strange rooms and the creation machine would be studied, meticulously disassembled, and removed.

The brothers and sisters—and yours truly—were required to sign oaths of silence, and we understood that the carefully spelled-out penalties for violation would be strictly enforced. I don't think the feds were worried about the monks and nuns, whose lives are *about* the fulfillment of oaths, but they spent a lot of time vividly explaining to me all the nuances of suffering embodied in the words "rot in prison."

I wrote this manuscript nonetheless, as writing is my therapy and a kind of penance. If ever, my story will be published only when I have moved on from this world to glory or damnation, where even the NSA cannot reach me.

Although Abbot Bernard had no responsibility for John Heineman's research or actions, he insisted that he would step down from his position between Christmas and the new year.

He had called John's Mew the *adytum*, which is the most sacred part of a place of worship, shrine of shrines. He had embraced the false idea that God can be known through science, which pained him considerably, but his greatest remorse arose from the fact that he had been unable to see that John Heineman had been motivated not by a wholesome pride in his God-given genius but by a vanity and a secret simmering anger that corrupted his every achievement.

A sadness settled over the community of St. Bartholomew's, and I doubted that it would lift for a year, if even then. Because the beasts of bone that breached the second-floor defenses of the school had collapsed into diminishing cubes at the moment of Heineman's

demise, as had the figure of Death, only Brother Maxwell had perished in the battle. But Maxwell, Timothy, and again poor Constantine would be mourned anew in each season that life here went on without them.

Saturday evening, three days after the crisis, Rodion Romanovich came to my room in the guesthouse, bringing two bottles of good red wine, fresh bread, cheese, cold roast beef, and various condiments, none of which he had poisoned.

Boo spent much of the evening lying on my feet, as if he feared they might be cold.

Elvis stopped by for a while. I thought he might have moved on by now, as Constantine appeared to have done, but the King remained. He worried about me. I suspected also that he might be choosing his moment with a sense of the drama and style that had made him famous.

Near midnight, as we sat at a small table by the window at which a few days earlier I had been waiting for the snow, Rodion said, "You will be free to leave Monday if you wish. Or will you stay?"

"I may come back one day," I said, "but now this isn't the place for me."

"I believe without exception the brothers and the sisters feel this will forever be the place for you. You saved them all, son."

"No, sir. Not all."

"All of the children. Timothy was killed within the hour you saw the first bodach. There was nothing you could have done for him. And I am more at fault for Maxwell than you are. If I had understood the situation and had shot Heineman sooner, Maxwell might have lived."

"Sir, you're surprisingly kind for a man who prepares people for death."

"Well, you know, in some cases, death is a kindness not only to the person who receives it but to the people he himself might have destroyed. When will you leave?"

"Next week."

"Where will you go, son?"

"Home to Pico Mundo. You? Back to your beloved Indianapolis?"

“I am sadly certain that the Indiana State Library at one-forty North Senate Avenue has become a shambles in my absence. But I will be going, instead, to the high desert in California, to meet Mrs. Romanovich on her return from space.”

We had a certain rhythm for these things that required me to take a sip of wine and savor it before asking, “From space—do you mean like the moon, sir?”

“Not so far away as the moon this time. For a month, the lovely Mrs. Romanovich has been doing work for this wonderful country aboard a certain orbiting platform about which I can say no more.”

“Will she make America safe forever, sir?”

“Nothing is forever, son. But if I had to commend the fate of the nation to a single pair of hands, I could think of none I would trust more than hers.”

“I wish I could meet her, sir.”

“Perhaps one day you will.”

Elvis lured Boo away for a belly rub, and I said, “I do worry about the data in Dr. Heineman’s computers. In the wrong hands...”

Leaning close, he whispered, “Worry not, my boy. The data in those computers is applesauce. I made sure of that before I called in my posse.”

I raised my glass in a toast. “To the sons of assassins and the husbands of space heroes.”

“And to your lost girl,” he said, clinking my glass with his, “who, in her new adventure, holds you in her heart as you hold her.”

CHAPTER 55

THE EARLY SKY WAS CLEAR AND DEEP. THE snow-mantled meadow lay as bright and clean as the morning after death, when time will have defeated time and all will have been redeemed.

I had said my good-byes the night before and had chosen to leave while the brothers were at Mass and the sisters busy with the waking children.

The roads were clear and dry, and the customized Cadillac purred into view without a clank of chains. He pulled up at the steps to the guesthouse, where I waited.

I hurried to advise him not to get out, but he refused to remain behind the wheel.

My friend and mentor, Ozzie Boone, the famous mystery writer of whom I have written much in my first two manuscripts, is a gloriously fat man, four hundred pounds at his slimmest. He insists that he is in better condition than most sumo wrestlers, and perhaps he is, but I worry every time he gets up from a chair, as it seems this will be one demand too many on his great heart.

“Dear Odd,” he said as he gave me a fierce bear hug by the open driver’s door. “You have lost weight, I fear. You are a wisp.”

“No, sir. I weigh the same as when you dropped me off here. It may be that I seem smaller to you because you’ve gotten larger.”

“I have a colossal bag of fine dark chocolates in the car. With the proper commitment, you can gain five pounds by the time we get back to Pico Mundo. Let me put your luggage in the trunk.”

“No, no, sir. I can manage.”

“Dear Odd, you have been trembling in anticipation of my death for years, and you will be trembling in anticipation of my death ten years from now. I will be such a massive inconvenience to all who will handle my body that God, if he has any mercy for morticians, will keep me alive perhaps forever.”

“Sir, let’s not talk about death. Christmas is coming. ’Tis the season to be jolly.”

“By all means, we shall talk about silver bells roasting on an open fire and all things Christmas.”

While he watched, and no doubt schemed to snatch up one of my bags and load it, I stowed my belongings in the trunk. When I slammed the lid and looked up, I discovered that all the brothers, who should have been at Mass, had gathered silently on the guesthouse steps.

Sister Angela and a dozen of the nuns were there as well. She said, “Oddie, may I show you something?”

I went to her as she unrolled a tube that proved to be a large sheet of drawing paper. Jacob had executed a perfect portrait of me.

“This is very good. And very sweet of him.”

“But it’s not for you,” she said. “It’s for my office wall.”

“That company is too rarefied for me, ma’am.”

“Young man, it’s not for you to say whose likeness I wish to look upon each day. The riddle?”

I had already tried on her the *fortitude* answer that Rodion Romanovich had made sound so convincing.

“Ma’am, intellectually I’ve run dry.”

She said, “Did you know that after the Revolutionary War, the founders of our country offered to make George Washington king, and that he declined?”

“No, ma’am. I didn’t know that.”

“Did you know that Flannery O’Connor lived so quietly in her community that many of her fellow townspeople did not know that she was one of the greatest writers of her time?”

“A Southern eccentric, I suppose.”

“Is that what you suppose?”

“I guess if there’s going to be a test on this material, I will fail it. I never was much good in school.”

“Harper Lee,” said Sister Angela, “who was offered a thousand honorary doctorates and untold prizes for her fine book, did not accept them. And she politely turned away the adoring reporters and professors who made pilgrimages to her door.”

“You shouldn’t blame her for that, ma’am. So much uninvited company would be a terrible annoyance.”

I don’t think her periwinkle eyes had ever sparkled brighter than they did on the guesthouse steps that morning.

“Dominus vobiscum, Oddie.”

“And also with you, Sister.”

I had never been kissed by a nun before. I had never kissed one, either. Her cheek was so soft.

When I got into the Cadillac, I saw that Boo and Elvis were sitting in the backseat.

The brothers and sisters stood there on the guesthouse steps in silence, and as we drove away, I more than once looked back at them, looked back until the road descended and turned out of sight of St. Bartholomew’s.

CHAPTER 56

THE CADILLAC HAD BEEN STRUCTURALLY REINFORCED to support Ozzie's weight without listing, and the driver's seat had been handcrafted to his dimensions.

He handled his Cadillac as sweet as a NASCAR driver, and we flew out of the mountains into lower lands with a grace that should not have been possible at those speeds.

After a while, I said to him, "Sir, you are a wealthy man by any standard."

"I have been both fortunate and industrious," he agreed.

"I want to ask you for a favor so big that I'm ashamed to say it."

Grinning with delight, he said, "You never allow anything to be done for you. Yet you're like a son to me. Who am I going to leave all this money to? Terrible Chester will never need all of it."

Terrible Chester was his cat, who had not been born with the name but had earned it.

"There is a little girl at the school."

"St. Bartholomew's?"

"Yes. Her name is Flossie Bodenblatt."

"Oh, my."

"She has suffered, sir, but she shines."

"What is it that you want?"

"Could you open a trust fund for her, sir, in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars, after tax?"

"Consider it done."

“For the purpose of establishing her in life when she leaves the school, for establishing her in a life where she can work with dogs.”

“I shall have the attorney specify it exactly that way. And shall I be the one to personally oversee her transition from the school to the outside world, when the time comes?”

“I would be forever grateful, sir, if you would.”

“Well,” he said, lifting his hands from the wheel just long enough to dust them briskly together, “that was as easy as eating cream pie. Who shall we set up a trust for next?”

Justine’s profound brain damage could not be restored by a trust fund. Money and beauty are defenses against the sorrows of this world, but neither can undo the past. Only time will conquer time. The way forward is the only way back to innocence and to peace.

We cruised awhile, talking of Christmas, when suddenly I was struck by intuition more powerful by far than I had ever experienced before.

“Sir, could you pull off the road?”

The tone of my voice caused his generous, jowly face to form a frown of overlapping layers. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not anything wrong. But something...very important.”

He piloted the Cadillac into a lay-by, in the shade of several majestic pines, and switched off the engine.

“Oddie?”

“Give me a moment, sir.”

We sat in silence as pinions of sunlight and the feathered shadows of the pines fluttered on the windshield.

The intuition became so intense that to ignore it would be to deny who and what I am.

My life is not mine. I would have given my life to save my lost girl’s, but that trade had not been on Fate’s agenda. Now I live a life I don’t need, and know that the day will come when I will give it in the right cause.

“I have to get out here, sir.”

“What—don’t you feel well?”

“I feel fine, sir. Psychic magnetism. I have to walk from here.”

“But you’re coming home for Christmas.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Walk from here? Walk where?”

“I don’t know, sir. I’ll find out in the walking.”

He would not remain behind the wheel, and when I took only one bag from the trunk of the car, he said, “You can’t just walk away with only that.”

“It has everything I need,” I assured him.

“What trouble are you going to?”

“Maybe not trouble, sir.”

“What else would it be?”

“Maybe trouble,” I said. “But maybe peace. I can’t tell. But it sure is calling me.”

He was crestfallen. “But I was so looking forward...”

“So was I, sir.”

“You are so missed in Pico Mundo.”

“And I miss everyone there. But this is the way it has to be. You know how things are with me, sir.”

I closed the lid of the trunk.

He did not want to drive away and leave me there.

“I’ve got Elvis and Boo,” I told him. “I’m not alone.”

He is a hard man to hug, with so much ground to cover.

“You have been a father to me,” I told him. “I love you, sir.”

He could say only, “Son.”

Standing in the lay-by, I watched him drive away until his car had dwindled out of sight.

Then I began to walk along the shoulder of the highway, where intuition seemed to lead me.

Boo fell in at my side. He is the only ghost dog I have ever seen. Animals always move on. For some reason he had lingered more than a year at the abbey. Perhaps waiting for me.

For a while, Elvis ambled at my side, and then he began to walk backward in front of me, grinning like he’d just played the biggest trick ever on me and I didn’t know it yet.

“I thought you’d have moved on by now,” I told him. “You know you’re ready.”

He nodded, still grinning like a fool.

“Then go. I’ll be all right. They’re all waiting for you. Go.”

Still walking backward, he began to wave good-bye, and step by backward step, the King of Rock and Roll faded, until he was gone from this world forever.

We were well out of the mountains. In this California valley, the day was a mild presence on the land, and the trees rose up to its brightness, and the birds.

Perhaps I had gone a hundred yards since Elvis’s departure before I realized that someone walked at my side.

Surprised, I looked at him and said, “Good afternoon, sir.”

He walked with his suit jacket slung over one shoulder, his shirtsleeves rolled up. He smiled that winning smile.

“I’m sure this will be interesting,” I said, “and I am honored if it’s possible that I can do for you what I did for him.”

He pulled on the brim of his hat, as if tipping it without taking it off, and winked.

With Christmas only days away, we followed the shoulder of the highway, walking toward the unknown, which is where every walk ever taken always leads: me, my dog Boo, and the spirit of Frank Sinatra.



NOTE

The books that changed Brother Knuckles's life were both written by Kate DiCamillo. They are *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* and *The Tale of Despereaux*, and they are wonderful stories. How they could have turned Knuckles from a life of crime to a life of goodness and hope *more than a decade before they were actually published*, I do not know. I can only say that life is filled with mystery, and that Ms. DiCamillo's magic may have had something to do with it.

—*Odd Thomas*

DEAN KOONTZ



B a n t a m B o o k s



Odd Hours



ODD HOURS

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents
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About the Author

Also by Dean Koontz

This fourth Odd adventure is dedicated to Bruce, Carolyn, and Michael Rouleau.

To Michael because he makes his parents proud.

To Carolyn because she makes Bruce happy.

To Bruce because he has been so reliable all these years, and because he truly knows what it means to love a good dog.

I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

—*Theodore Roethke*, “The Waking”



CHAPTER 1

IT'S ONLY LIFE. WE ALL GET THROUGH IT.

Not all of us complete the journey in the same condition. Along the way, some lose their legs or eyes in accidents or altercations, while others skate through the years with nothing worse to worry about than an occasional bad-hair day.

I still possessed both legs and both eyes, and even my hair looked all right when I rose that Wednesday morning in late January. If I returned to bed sixteen hours later, having lost all of my hair but nothing else, I would consider the day a triumph. Even minus a few teeth, I'd call it a triumph.

When I raised the window shades in my bedroom, the cocooned sky was gray and swollen, windless and still, but pregnant with a promise of change.

Overnight, according to the radio, an airliner had crashed in Ohio. Hundreds perished. The sole survivor, a ten-month-old child, had been found upright and unscathed in a battered seat that stood in a field of scorched and twisted debris.

Throughout the morning, under the expectant sky, low sluggish waves exhausted themselves on the shore. The Pacific was gray and awash with inky shadows, as if sinuous sea beasts of fantastical form swam just below the surface.

During the night, I had twice awakened from a dream in which the tide flowed red and the sea throbbed with a terrible light.

As nightmares go, I'm sure you've had worse. The problem is that a few of my dreams have come true, and people have died.

While I prepared breakfast for my employer, the kitchen radio brought news that the jihadists who had the previous day seized an ocean liner in the Mediterranean were now beheading passengers.

Years ago I stopped watching news programs on television. I can tolerate words and the knowledge they impart, but the images undo me.

Because he was an insomniac who went to bed at dawn, Hutch ate breakfast at noon. He paid me well, and he was kind, so I cooked to his schedule without complaint.

Hutch took his meals in the dining room, where the draperies were always closed. Not one bright sliver of any windowpane remained exposed.

He often enjoyed a film while he ate, lingering over coffee until the credits rolled. That day, rather than cable news, he watched Carole Lombard and John Barrymore in *Twentieth Century*.

Eighty-eight years old, born in the era of silent films, when Lillian Gish and Rudolph Valentino were stars, and having later been a successful actor, Hutch thought less in words than in images, and he dwelt in fantasy.

Beside his plate stood a bottle of Purell sanitizing gel. He lavished it on his hands not only before and after eating, but also at least twice during a meal.

Like most Americans in the first decade of the new century, Hutch feared everything except what he ought to fear.

When TV-news programs ran out of stories about drunk, drug-addled, murderous, and otherwise crazed celebrities—which happened perhaps twice a year—they sometimes filled the brief gap with a sensationalistic piece on that rare flesh-eating bacteria.

Consequently, Hutch feared contracting the ravenous germ. From time to time, like a dour character in a tale by Poe, he huddled in his lamplit study, brooding about his fate, about the fragility of his flesh, about the insatiable appetite of his microscopic foe.

He especially dreaded that his nose might be eaten away.

Long ago, his face had been famous. Although time had disguised him, he still took pride in his appearance.

I had seen a few of Lawrence Hutchison's movies from the 1940s and '50s. I liked them. He'd been a commanding presence on screen.

Because he had not appeared on camera for five decades, Hutch was less known for his acting than for his children's books about a swashbuckling rabbit named Nibbles. Unlike his creator, Nibbles was fearless.

Film money, book royalties, and a habit of regarding investment opportunities with paranoid suspicion had left Hutch financially secure in his old age. Nevertheless, he worried that an explosive rise in the price of oil or a total collapse in the price of oil would lead to a worldwide financial crisis that would leave him penniless.

His house faced the boardwalk, the beach, the ocean. Surf broke less than a minute's stroll from his front door.

Over the years, he had come to fear the sea. He could not bear to sleep on the west side of the house, where he might hear the waves crawling along the shore.

Therefore, I was quartered in the ocean-facing master suite at the front of the house. He slept in a guest room at the back.

Within a day of arriving in Magic Beach, more than a month previous to the red-tide dream, I had taken a job as Hutch's cook, doubling as his chauffeur on those infrequent occasions when he wanted to go out.

My experience at the Pico Mundo Grill served me well. If you can make hash browns that wring a flood from salivary glands, fry bacon to the crispness of a cracker without parching it, and make pancakes as rich as pudding yet so fluffy they seem to be at risk of floating off the plate, you will always find work.

At four-thirty that afternoon in late January, when I stepped into the parlor with Boo, my dog, Hutch was in his favorite armchair, scowling at the television, which he had muted.

"Bad news, sir?"

His deep and rounded voice rolled an ominous note into every syllable: "Mars is warming."

"We don't live on Mars."

“It’s warming at the same rate as the earth.”

“Were you planning to move to Mars to escape global warming?”

He indicated the silenced anchorman on the TV. “This means the sun is the cause of both, and nothing can be done about it. Nothing.”

“Well, sir, there’s always Jupiter or whatever planet lies beyond Mars.”

He fixed me with that luminous gray-eyed stare that conveyed implacable determination when he had played crusading district attorneys and courageous military officers.

“Sometimes, young man, I think *you* may be from beyond Mars.”

“Nowhere more exotic than Pico Mundo, California. If you won’t need me for a while, sir, I thought I’d go out for a walk.”

Hutch rose to his feet. He was tall and lean. He kept his chin lifted but craned his head forward as does a man squinting to sharpen his vision, which might have been a habit that he developed in the years before he had his cataracts removed.

“Go out?” He frowned as he approached. “Dressed like that?”

I was wearing sneakers, jeans, and a sweatshirt.

He was not troubled by arthritis and remained graceful for his age. Yet he moved with precision and caution, as though expecting to fracture something.

Not for the first time, he reminded me of a great blue heron stalking tide pools.

“You should put on a jacket. You’ll get pneumonia.”

“It’s not that chilly today,” I assured him.

“You young people think you’re invulnerable.”

“Not this young person, sir. I’ve got every reason to be astonished that I’m not already permanently horizontal.”

Indicating the words MYSTERY TRAIN on my sweatshirt, he asked, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know. I found it in a thrift shop.”

“I have never been in a thrift shop.”

“You haven’t missed much.”

“Do only very poor people shop there or is the criteria merely thriftiness?”

“They welcome all economic classes, sir.”

“Then I should go one day soon. Make an adventure of it.”

“You won’t find a genie in a bottle,” I said, referring to his film *The Antique Shop*.

“No doubt you’re too modern to believe in genies and such. How do you get through life when you’ve nothing to believe in?”

“Oh, I have beliefs.”

Lawrence Hutchison was less interested in my beliefs than in the sound of his well-trained voice. “I keep an open mind regarding all things supernatural.”

I found his self-absorption endearing. Besides, if he were to have been curious about me, I would have had a more difficult time keeping all my secrets.

He said, “My friend Adrian White was married to a fortune-teller who called herself Portentia.”

I traded anecdotes with him: “This girl I used to know, Stormy Llewellyn—at the carnival, we got a card from a fortune-telling machine called Gypsy Mummy.”

“Portentia used a crystal ball and prattled a lot of mumbo jumbo, but she was the real thing. Adrian adored her.”

“The card said Stormy and I would be together forever. But it didn’t turn out that way.”

“Portentia could predict the day and very hour of a person’s death.”

“Did she predict yours, sir?”

“Not mine. But she predicted Adrian’s. And two days later, at the hour Portentia had foretold, she shot him.”

“Incredible.”

“But true, I assure you.” He glanced toward a window that did not face the sea and that, therefore, was not covered by draperies. “Does it feel like tsunami weather to you, son?”

“I don’t think tsunamis have anything to do with the weather.”

“I feel it. Keep one eye on the ocean during your walk.”

Like a stork, he stilted out of the parlor and along the hallway toward the kitchen at the back of the house.

I left by the front door, through which Boo had already passed. The dog waited for me in the fenced yard.

An arched trellis framed the gate. Through white lattice twined purple bougainvillea that produced a few flowers even in winter.

I closed the gate behind me, and Boo passed through it as for a moment I stood drawing deep breaths of the crisp salted air.

After spending a few months in a guest room at St. Bartholomew's Abbey, high in the Sierra, trying to come to terms with my strange life and my losses, I had expected to return home to Pico Mundo for Christmas. Instead, I had been called here, to what purpose I didn't know at the time and still had not deduced.

My gift—or curse—involves more than a rare prophetic dream. For one thing, irresistible intuition sometimes takes me places to which I would not go by choice. And then I wait to find out why.

Boo and I headed north. Over three miles long, the boardwalk serving Magic Beach was not made of wood but of concrete. The town called it a boardwalk anyway.

Words are plastic these days. Small loans made to desperate people at exorbitant interest rates are called payday advances. A cheesy hotel paired with a seedy casino is called a resort. Any assemblage of frenetic images, bad music, and incoherent plot is called a major motion picture.

Boo and I followed the concrete boardwalk. He was a German shepherd mix, entirely white. The moon traveling horizon to horizon moved no more quietly than did Boo.

Only I was aware of him, because he was a ghost dog.

I see the spirits of dead people who are reluctant to move on from this world. In my experience, however, animals are always eager to proceed to what comes next. Boo was unique.

His failure to depart was a mystery. The dead don't talk, and neither do dogs, so my canine companion obeyed two vows of silence.

Perhaps he remained in this world because he knew I would need him in some crisis. He might not have to linger much longer, as I frequently found myself up to my neck in trouble.

On our right, after four blocks of beachfront houses came shops, restaurants, and the three-story Magic Beach Hotel with its white walls and striped green awnings.

To our left, the beach relented to a park. In the sunless late afternoon, palm trees cast no shadows on the greensward.

The lowering sky and the cool air had discouraged beachgoers. No one sat on the park benches.

Nevertheless, intuition told me that she would be here, not in the park but sitting far out above the sea. She had been in my red dream.

Except for the lapping of the lazy surf, the day was silent. Cascades of palm fronds waited for a breeze to set them whispering.

Broad stairs led up to the pier. By virtue of being a ghost, Boo made no sound on the weathered planks, and as a ghost in the making, I was silent in my sneakers.

At the end of the pier, the deck widened into an observation platform. Coin-operated telescopes offered views of ships in transit, the coastline, and the marina in the harbor two miles north.

The Lady of the Bell sat on the last bench, facing the horizon, where the moth-case sky met the sullen sea in seamless fusion.

Leaning on the railing, I pretended to meditate on the timeless march of waves. In my peripheral vision, I saw that she seemed to be unaware of my arrival, which allowed me to study her profile.

She was neither beautiful nor ugly, but neither was she plain. Her features were unremarkable, her skin clear but too pale, yet she had a compelling presence.

My interest in her was not romantic. An air of mystery veiled her, and I suspected that her secrets were extraordinary. Curiosity drew me to her, as did a feeling that she might need a friend.

Although she had appeared in my dream of a red tide, perhaps it would not prove to be prophetic. She might not die.

I had seen her here on several occasions. We had exchanged a few words in passing, mostly comments about the weather.

Because she talked, I knew she wasn't dead. Sometimes I realize an apparition is a ghost only when it fades or walks through a wall.

On other occasions, when they have been murdered and want me to bring their killers to justice, they may choose to materialize with their wounds revealed. Confronted by a man whose face has imploded from the impact of a bullet or by a woman carrying her severed head, I am as quick as the next guy to realize I'm in the company of a spook.

In the recent dream, I had been standing on a beach, snakes of apocalyptic light squirming across the sand. The sea had throbbed as some bright leviathan rose out of the deep, and the heavens had been choked with clouds as red and orange as flames.

In the west, the Lady of the Bell, suspended in the air above the sea, had floated toward me, arms folded across her breast, her eyes closed. As she drew near, her eyes opened, and I glimpsed in them a reflection of what lay behind me.

I had twice recoiled from the vision that I beheld in her eyes, and I had both times awakened with no memory of it.

Now I walked away from the pier railing, and sat beside her. The bench accommodated four, and we occupied opposite ends.

Boo curled up on the deck and rested his chin on my shoes. I could feel the weight of his head on my feet.

When I touch a spirit, whether dog or human, it feels solid to me, and warm. No chill or scent of death clings to it.

Still gazing out to sea, the Lady of the Bell said nothing.

She wore white athletic shoes, dark-gray pants, and a baggy pink sweater with sleeves so long her hands were hidden in them.

Because she was petite, her condition was more apparent than it would have been with a larger woman. A roomy sweater couldn't conceal that she was about seven months pregnant.

I had never seen her with a companion.

From her neck hung the pendant for which I had named her. On a silver chain hung a polished silver bell the size of a thimble. In the sunless day, this simple jewelry was the only shiny object.

She might have been eighteen, three years younger than I was. Her slightness made her seem more like a girl than like a woman.

Nevertheless, I had not considered calling her the Girl of the Bell. Her self-possession and calm demeanor required *lady*.

“Have you ever heard such stillness?” I asked.

“There’s a storm coming.” Her voice floated the words as softly as a breath of summer sets dandelion seeds adrift. “The pressure in advance weighs down the wind and flattens the waves.”

“Are you a meteorologist?”

Her smile was lovely, free of judgment and artifice. “I’m just a girl who thinks too much.”

“My name’s Odd Thomas.”

“Yes,” she said.

Prepared to explain the dysfunctional nature of my family that had resulted in my name, as I had done countless times before, I was surprised and disappointed that she had none of the usual questions.

“You knew my name?” I asked.

“As you know mine.”

“But I don’t.”

“I’m Annamaria,” she said. “One word. It would have come to you.”

Confused, I said, “We’ve spoken before, but I’m sure we’ve never exchanged names.”

She only smiled and shook her head.

A white flare arced across the dismal sky: a gull fleeing to land as the afternoon faded.

Annamaria pulled back the long sleeves of her sweater, revealing her graceful hands. In the right she held a translucent green stone the size of a fat grape.

“Is that a jewel?” I asked.

“Sea glass. A fragment of a bottle that washed around the world and back, until it has no sharp edges. I found it on the beach.” She turned it between her slender fingers. “What do you think it means?”

“Does it need to mean anything?”

“The tide washed the sand as smooth as a baby’s skin, and as the water winked away, the glass seemed to open like a green eye.”

The shrieking of birds shattered the stillness, and I looked up to see three agitated sea gulls sailing landward.

Their cries announced company: footfalls on the pier behind us.

Three men in their late twenties walked to the north end of the observation platform. They stared up the coast toward the distant harbor and marina.

The two in khakis and quilted jackets appeared to be brothers. Red hair, freckles. Ears as prominent as handles on beer mugs.

The redheads glanced at us. Their faces were so hard, their eyes so cold, I might have thought they were evil spirits if I hadn't heard their footsteps.

One of them favored Annamaria with a razor-slash smile. He had the dark and broken teeth of a heavy methamphetamine user.

The freckled pair made me uneasy, but the third man was the most disturbing of the group. At six four, he towered half a foot above the others, and had that muscled massiveness only steroid injections can produce.

Unfazed by the cool air, he wore athletic shoes without socks, white shorts, and a yellow-and-blue, orchid-pattern Hawaiian shirt.

The brothers said something to him, and the giant looked at us. He might be called handsome in an early Cro-Magnon way, but his eyes seemed to be as yellow as his small chin beard.

We did not deserve the scrutiny we received from him. Annamaria was an ordinary-looking pregnant woman, and I was just a fry cook who had been fortunate enough to reach twenty-one years of age without losing a leg or an eye, or my hair.

Malevolence and paranoia cohabit in a twisted mind. Bad men trust no one because they know the treachery of which they themselves are capable.

After a long suspicious stare, the giant turned his attention once more to the northern coast and the marina, as did his cohorts, but I didn't think they were done with us.

Half an hour of daylight remained. Because of the overcast, however, twilight seemed to be already upon us. The lampposts lining the pier brightened automatically, but a thin veil of fog had risen out of nowhere to aid and abet the coming dusk.

Boo's behavior confirmed my instincts. He had gotten to his feet. Hackles raised, ears flattened, he focused intently on the giant.

To Annamaria, I said, "I think we better go."

“Do you know them?”

“I’ve seen their kind before.”

As she rose from the bench, she closed the green orb in her right fist. Both hands shrank back into the sleeves of her sweater.

I sensed strength in her, yet she also had an aura of innocence, an almost waiflike air of vulnerability. The three men were the kind to whom vulnerability had a scent as surely as rabbits hidden in tall grass have a smell easily detected by wolves.

Bad men wound and destroy one another, although as targets they prefer those who are innocent and as pure as this world allows anyone to be. They feed on violence, but they *feast* on the despoiling of what is good.

As Annamaria and I walked off the observation deck and toward the shore, I was dismayed that no one had come onto the pier. Usually a few evening fishermen would already have arrived with rods and tackle boxes.

I glanced back and saw Boo moving closer to the three men, who were oblivious of him. The hulk with the chin beard looked over the heads of the other two, again staring at Annamaria and me.

The shore was still distant. The shrouded sun slowly sank behind a thousand fathoms of clouds, toward the drowning horizon, and rising mist damped the lamplight.

When I looked back again, the freckled pair were approaching at a brisk walk.

“Keep going,” I told Annamaria. “Off the pier, among people.”

She remained calm. “I’ll stay with you.”

“No. I can handle this.”

Gently, I pushed her ahead of me, made sure that she kept moving, and then turned toward the redheads. Instead of standing my ground or backing away, I walked toward them, smiling, which surprised them enough to bring them to a halt.

As the one with the bad teeth looked past me at Annamaria, and as number two reached inside his unzipped jacket, I said, “You guys know about the tsunami warning?”

Number two kept his hand in his jacket, and the poster boy for dental hygiene shifted his attention to me. “Tsunami?”

“They estimate twenty to thirty feet.”

“They who?”

“Even thirty feet,” I said, “won’t wash over the pier. She got scared, didn’t want to stay, but I want to ride it out, see it. We must be—what?—forty feet off the water. It could be cool.”

Throughout all this, the big guy had been approaching. As he joined us, number two asked him, “You hear about a tsunami?”

I said with some excitement, “The break slope on the shore here is twenty feet, but the other ten feet of the wave, man, it’s gonna wipe out the front row of buildings.”

Glancing back, as if to assess the potential for destruction, I was relieved to see Annamaria reaching the end of the pier.

“But the pier has deep pilings,” I said. “The pier will ride it out. I’m pretty sure. It’s solid. Don’t you think the pier will ride it out?”

The big guy’s mother had probably told him that he had hazel eyes. Hazel is a light golden-brown. He did not have hazel eyes. They were yellow rather than golden, and they were more yellow than brown.

If his pupils had been elliptical instead of round, I could almost have believed that he was a humanoid puppet and that an intelligent mutant cat was curled up in his skull, peering at me through the empty sockets. And not a *nice* intelligent mutant cat.

His voice dispelled the feline image, for it had a timbre more suited to a bear. “Who’re you?”

Instead of answering, I pretended excitement about the coming tsunami and looked at my wristwatch. “It could hit shore in like a few minutes. I gotta be on the observation deck when it comes.”

“Who’re you?” the hulk repeated, and he put his big right paw on my left shoulder.

The instant he touched me, reality flipped out of sight as if it were a discarded flashcard. I found myself not on the pier but on the shore instead, on a beach across which squirmed reflections of fire. A hideous bright something rose in a sea that pulsed with hellish light under an apocalyptic sky.

The nightmare.

Reality flipped into view again.

The hulk had snatched his hand back from my shoulder. With his wide eyes focused on his spread fingers, he looked as if he had been stung—or had seen the red tide of my dream.

Never before had I passed a dream or a vision, or a thought, or anything but a head cold, to someone else by a touch. Surprises like this spare me from a dull life.

Like the cold-jewel stare of a stone-temple god, the yellow gaze fixed on me again, and he said, “Who the *hell* are you?”

The tone of his voice alerted the redheads that an extraordinary event had occurred. The one with his hand inside his jacket withdrew a pistol, and the one with bad teeth reached into his jacket, most likely not for dental floss.

I ran three steps to the side of the pier, vaulted the railing, and dropped like a fry cook through mist and fading light.

Cold, dark, the Pacific swallowed me, my eyes burned in the brine, and as I swam beneath the surface, I fought the buoyant effect of the salt water, determined that the sea would not spit me up into a bullet-riddled twilight.

CHAPTER 2

STUNG, MY WIDE-OPEN EYES SALTED THE SEAWATER with tears.

As I breast-stroked and frog-kicked, the marine murk at first seemed to be without a scintilla of light. Then I became aware of a sullen-green phosphorescence, universally distributed, through which faint amorphous shadows writhed, perhaps clouds of sand swept off the bottom or long undulant stalks and fronds of seaweed.

The green dismalness abruptly darkened into true gloom. I had swum under the pier, between two of the many concrete columns on which the timber support posts stood.

A blind moment later, I encountered another column bristling with barnacles. I followed it to the surface.

Gasping for air that smelled of iodine and tar, that tasted of salt and chalk, I clung to the encrusted concrete, the barnacles sharp and slick under my hands, and I pulled my sweatshirt sleeves down to protect against cuts as best I could.

At the moment low on energy, the ocean rolled rhythmically and without violence between the pilings, toward shore. Although tame, it nevertheless sought to pull me away from the column.

Every minute I strove to hold fast would drain my strength. My sodden sweatshirt felt like a heavy flak jacket.

The liquid soliloquy of the sea echoed in murmurs and whispers along the pier floor, which was now my ceiling. I heard no shouts from above, no thunder of running footsteps.

Daylight as clouded and as gray as bilge water seeped into this sheltered space. Overhead, an architecture of thick vertical posts, horizontal tie beams, struts, and purlins dwindled into shadows.

The top of this piling, on which one of the posts stood, lay less than three feet above my head. I toed and kned and clawed upward, repeatedly slipping backward but stubbornly gaining more ground than I lost.

These barnacles were of the stalkless variety, snugged tight to the concrete. As inch by inch I pulled myself out of the water, the calcareous shells of the crustaceans cracked and splintered, so the air smelled and tasted chalkier than ever.

This was no doubt a cataclysm for the barnacle community. I felt some regret about the destruction I wreaked, although not as much as I would have felt if, weighed down and weakened by my sodden clothes, I had sunk deep into snares of seaweed, and drowned.

Seated on the thirty-inch-diameter concrete base, an eighteen-inch-diameter wooden column rose high into shadows. Thick stainless-steel pitons had been driven into the wood to serve as handholds and as anchors for safety lines during construction. Using these, I pulled myself onto the six-inch ledge that encircled the post.

Standing there on my toes, dripping and shivering, I tried to find the bright side to my current situation.

Pearl Sugars, my maternal grandmother, a fast-driving and hard-drinking professional poker player now deceased, always encouraged me to find the bright side of any setback.

“If you let the bastards see you’re worried,” Granny Sugars said, “they’ll shake you, break you, and be walking around in your shoes tomorrow.”

She traveled the country to high-stakes private games in which the other players were men, most of them not nice men, some of them dangerous. Although I understood Granny’s point, her solemn advice conjured in my mind an image of scowling tough guys parading around in Granny’s high-heels.

As my racing heart slowed and as I caught my breath, the only bright side I could discern was that if I lived to be an old man—a one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged, hairless old man without a nose—

at least I wouldn't be able to complain that my life had lacked for adventure.

Most likely the mist and the murky water had prevented the hulk with the chin beard and the two gunmen from seeing that I had taken refuge under the pier. They would expect me to swim to shore, and they would by now be arrayed along the beach, searching the low swells for a swimmer.

Although I had leaped off the pier in the last quarter of its length, the tide had carried me closer to land as I'd been swimming for cover. I remained, however, seaward of the structure's midpoint.

From my current perch, I could see a length of the shore. But I doubted that anyone patrolling the beach would have been able to catch sight of me in the deepening gloom.

Nevertheless, when not throwing myself headlong into trouble and leaping off piers, I am a prudent young man. I suspected I would be wise to ascend farther into the webwork of wood.

In some cozy high redoubt, I would roost until the thugs decided that I had drowned. When they went away to raise a toast to my death in whatever greasy barroom or opium den their kind frequented, I would safely go ashore and return home, where Hutch would be washing his face in sanitizing gel and waiting for the tsunami.

Piton to piton, I climbed the pole.

During the first ten feet or so, those eyeletted spikes were solidly planted. Perhaps the greater humidity near the water kept the wood swollen tight around them.

As I continued to ascend, I found some pitons that moved in my hands, the aged and drier wood having shrunk somewhat away from them. They bore my weight, did not pull loose.

Then under my right foot, a piton ripped from the post. With a clink, the spike bounced off the concrete below, and I could even hear the faint *plop* as it met the sea.

I have no incapacitating fear of either heights or darkness. We spend nine months in a nurturing darkness before we're born, and we aspire to the highest of all places when we die.

As the day faded and as I climbed into the substructure of the pier, the shadows grew deeper, more numerous. They joined with one another like the billowing black cloaks of *Macbeth's* witches as they gathered around their cauldron.

Since going to work for Hutch, I had read some of the volumes of Shakespeare's plays that were in his library. Ozzie Boone, the famous mystery writer, my mentor and cherished friend in Pico Mundo, would be delighted if he knew that I was thus continuing my education.

In high school, I had been an indifferent student. In part, my lack of academic achievement could be attributed to the fact that while other kids were at home, dutifully poring through their *Macbeth* assignment, I was being chained to a pair of dead men and dumped off a boat in the middle of Malo Suerte Lake.

Or I was bound with rope, hanging from a rack in a refrigerated meat locker, beside a smiling Japanese chiropractor, waiting for a quartet of unreasonable men to return and torture us, as they had promised to do.

Or I had stepped into the parked motor home of an itinerant serial killer who might return at any moment, where I had discovered two ferocious attack dogs that were determined to keep me from leaving, against which I had no weapons or defenses except one fluffy pink dust mop and six cans of warm Coke, which when shaken spewed foamy streams that terrified the killer canines.

As a teenager, I always intended to do my homework. But when the supplicant dead come to you for justice and you also have occasional prophetic dreams, life tends to interfere with your studies.

Now, as I hung twenty feet above the surface of the sea, the witchy shadows closed around me so completely that I couldn't see the next piton thrusting from the pole above my head. I halted, pondering whether I could ascend safely in the pitch dark or should retreat to the narrow concrete ledge below.

The penetrating odor of creosote, applied to preserve the wood, had grown thicker as I climbed. I could no longer smell the ocean or

the wet concrete pilings, or even my sweat: only the astringent scent of the preservative.

Just as I decided that prudence—which, as you know, is one of my most reliable character traits—required me to go back down to the ledge, lights blinked on under the pier.

Fixed to numerous wooden posts, five feet below my position, floodlights were directed down toward the sea. A long line of them extended from one end of the structure to the other.

I could not recall if the underside of the pier had been illuminated on other nights. These lamps might be automatically activated every evening at dusk.

If the floodlights were only for emergency situations, such as in the event someone fell off the pier, then perhaps a responsible citizen had seen me go over the side and had alerted the authorities.

More likely, the hulk and the redheaded gunmen had known where to find the switch. In that case, they had glimpsed me underwater, making for cover, and they had wasted no time scanning the incoming tide for a shorebound swimmer.

As I hung there in a quandary, trying to decide whether this meant I should continue upward or perhaps return to the water, I heard what for a moment I thought was a chain saw in the distance. Then I recognized the sound as that of an outboard engine.

After ten or fifteen seconds, the engine throttled back. The consequent throbbing chug could not be mistaken for anything but an outboard.

Cocking my head left, right, I tried to hear around the thick support to which I clung. Sounds bounced deceptively through the ranks of posts and crossbeams and ricocheted off the gently rolling water, but after half a minute, I was sure the craft was proceeding slowly shoreward from the ocean-end of the pier.

I looked westward but could not see the boat for the intervening substructure. The pilot might be cruising in open water, paralleling the pier, or he could be threading through the pilings to conduct a more thorough search.

Although the floodlamps were below my position and were directed downward, light bounced off the moving water.

Shimmering phantoms swooped up the columns, across the horizontal beams, and fluttered all the way up against the underside of the pier deck.

In these quivering reflections, I was revealed. An easy target.

If I descended now, I would be going down to death.

Considering the events of the last couple of years, I was ready for death when my time came, and I did not fear it. But if suicide damns the soul, then I would never see my lost girl again. Peace is not worth the slightest risk of being denied that reunion.

Besides, I suspected that Annamaria was in trouble and that I had been drawn to Magic Beach, in part, to help her.

I climbed more rapidly than before, hoping to find a junction of beams or an angular nest between purlins and posts where I would be hidden not merely from the floodlamps reflecting off the water but also from probing flashlights, if the searchers had any.

Although I wasn't afraid of heights, I could have composed an almost infinite list of places that I would rather have been than up a pier post, much like a cat treed by wolves. I counseled myself to be grateful that, indeed, there were not vicious attack dogs below; although on the other hand, to assist in self-defense, I didn't have even so much as a fluffy pink dust mop or a six-pack of warm Cokes.

CHAPTER 3

MONKEY-QUICK BUT CLUMSY IN MY DESPERATION, I scrambled up the post, feet stepping where my hands had grasped a moment earlier.

A loose piton cracked out of dry wood underfoot and fell away, and rang off concrete below. The chug of the approaching outboard masked the sound of the water receiving the steel.

The post bypassed a massive crossbeam. I clambered and clawed sideways onto that horizontal surface with such an ungainly series of maneuvers that no observer would have mistaken me for a member of a species that lived in trees and ate bananas by the bunch.

Although the beam was wide, it was not as wide as I was. Like radiant spirits, the leaping bright reflections of floodlamps off the rolling sea soared and swooned over me, making of me a pigeon, easy plinking for a practiced gunman shooting from below.

Fleeing on all fours is fine if your four are all feet, but hands and knees don't allow much speed. Grateful that I was not afraid of high places, wishing that my stomach shared my insouciance about heights, I stood and my stomach sank.

I peered down into the drink and grew a little dizzy, then glanced west toward the grumble of the outboard. The ranks of intervening pier supports hid the boat from me.

At once, I discovered why high-wire walkers use a balance pole. With my arms tucked close to my sides and hands tensely fisted, I

wobbled as if I were a drunk who had failed out of a twelve-step program in just four steps.

Defensively, I spread my arms and opened my hands. I cautioned myself not to look down at my feet but, instead, at the beam ahead, where I wanted my feet to go.

Quivering specters of reflected light painted an illusion of water across the beam and the surrounding posts, raising in me the irrational feeling that I would be washed off my perch.

This high above the sea, under the cowl of the pier, the odor of creosote intensified. My sinuses burned, and my throat. When I licked my dry lips, the taste of coal tar seemed to have condensed on them.

I halted and closed my eyes for a moment, shutting out the leaping ghosts of light. I held my breath and pressed away the dizziness, and moved on.

When I had crossed half the width of the pier, the north-south beam intersected another running east-west.

The outboard had grown louder, therefore nearer. Still the searchers had not hove into view below.

I turned east, onto the intersecting beam. Always putting foot in front of foot on the narrow path, I was not as fleet as a ballet dancer hurrying *en pointe* across a stage, but I made swift progress.

My jeans did not accommodate such movement as well as a pair of tights would have. Instead they kept binding where too much binding would squeeze my voice into a permanent falsetto.

I crossed another intersection, continuing east, and wondered if I might be able to flee through this support structure all the way to shore.

Behind me, the outboard growled louder. Above the buzz of the engine, I heard the boat's wake slapping against the concrete support columns twenty feet below, which suggested not just that the craft was making greater speed than previously but also that it was close.

As I approached another intersection, two radiant red eyes, low in front of me, brought me to a stop. The fairy light teased fitfully

across the shape before me, but then revealed a rat sitting precisely where the two beams joined.

I am not afraid of rats. Neither am I so tolerant that I would welcome a swarm of them into my home in a spirit of interspecies brotherhood.

The rat was paralyzed by the sight of me looming over it. If I advanced another step, it had three routes by which it could flee to safety.

In moments of stress, my imagination can be as ornate as a carousel of grotesque beasts, standing on end like a Ferris wheel, spinning like a coin, casting off kaleidoscopic visions of ludicrous fates and droll deaths.

As I confronted the rat, I saw in my mind's eye a scenario in which I startled the rodent, whereupon it raced toward me in a panic, slipped under a leg of my jeans, squirmed up my calf, squeaked behind my knee, wriggled along my thigh, and decided to establish a nest between my buttocks. Through all of this, I would be windmilling my arms and hopping on one foot until I hopped off the beam and, with the hapless rodent snuggled between my cheeks, plunged toward the sea just in time to crash into the searchers' boat, smashing a hole in the bottom with my face, thereupon breaking my neck *and* drowning.

You might think that I have earned the name Odd Thomas, but it has been mine since birth.

The racket of the outboard sawed through the support posts, echoing and re-echoing until it seemed that legions of lumberjacks were at work, intent on felling the entire structure.

When I took a step toward the rat, the rat did not relent. As I had nothing better to do, I took another step, then halted because the noise of the outboard abruptly became explosive.

I dared to look down. An inflatable dinghy passed below, wet black rubber glossy under the floodlamps.

The hulk in the Hawaiian shirt sat on the sternmost of two thwarts, one hand on the steering arm of the engine. He piloted the boat with expertise, weaving at speed between the concrete columns, as if late for a luau.

On the longer port and starboard inflation compartments that formed the rounded bulwarks of the craft, in yellow letters, were the words MAGIC BEACH/HARBOR DEPT. The dinghy must have been tied up to the pier; the giant had boldly stolen it to search for me.

Yet he never looked up between the floodlamps as he passed under me. If the dinghy doubled as a search-and-rescue craft, waterproof flashlights would be stowed aboard; but the hulk wasn't using one.

The small craft disappeared among the staggered rows of columns. The engine noise gradually diminished. The ripples and dimples of the dinghy's modest wake were smoothed away by the self-ironing sea.

I had expected to see three men in the boat. I wondered where the dead-eyed redheads had gone.

The other rat had vanished, too, but not up a leg of my blue jeans.

Exhibiting balletic poise, foot in front of foot, I stepped into the junction of beams, which the trembling rodent had once occupied. I meant to continue shoreward, but I stopped.

Now that the blond giant was under the pier, between me and the beach, I was not confident of continuing in that direction.

The mood had changed. An overwhelming sense of peril, of being in the mortal trajectory of a bullet, had propelled me into frantic flight. Now death seemed no less possible than it had before the passage of the dinghy, but less imminent.

The moment felt dangerous rather than perilous, characterized by uncertainty and by the tyranny of chance. If a bullet was coming, I now had hope of dodging it, though only if I made the right moves.

I looked north, east, south along the horizontal beams. West, over my shoulder. Down into floodlit tides. I looked up toward the underside of the pier deck, where the dancing sea translated itself into phrases of half-light that swelled and fluttered and shrank and swelled in an eerie choreography through geometric beams and braces.

I felt as indecisive as the feckless mob in *The Second Part of King Henry the Sixth*, Act 4, when they vacillate repeatedly between swearing loyalty to the grotesque Cade, then to the rightful king.

Shakespeare again. Once you let him into your head, he takes up tenancy and will not leave.

The sound of the outboard engine had been waning. Abruptly it cut out altogether.

Briefly the silence seemed perfect. Then the wordless whispering and the soft idiot chuckling of the sea began to echo off surrounding surfaces.

In the brief period since the dinghy had passed under me, it could not have traveled all the way to the beach. It had probably gone little more than half that distance.

The hulk at the tiller would not surrender steering to the sea and let it pinball the dinghy from post to post. He must have somehow tied up to one of the concrete columns.

He would not have moored the dinghy unless he intended to disembark from it. Already he must be climbing into the pier support structure ahead of me.

Certain that I knew where the redheaded gunmen were, I looked over my shoulder, through the labyrinth of posts and beams to the west. They were not yet in sight.

One in front of me. Two behind. The jaws of a nutcracker.

CHAPTER 4

WHILE I DITHERED AT THE INTERSECTION OF support beams, a pale form loomed out of the south, to my right.

Because occasionally spirits manifest suddenly, unexpectedly, with no regard for my nerves, I don't startle easily. I swayed on the timber but did not plummet from it.

My visitor proved to be Boo, good dog and former mascot of St. Bartholomew's Abbey in the California Sierra.

He could be seen by no one but me, and no touch but mine could detect any substance to him. Yet to my eyes at least, the shimmering reflections sprayed up by the rolling sea played off his flanks and across his face, as if he were as solid as I was.

Although he could have appeared in midair, he walked the crossbeam toward me, like the ghost of Hamlet's father approaching the doomed prince on the platform before the castle.

Well, no. Boo had a tail, soft fur, and a friendly smile. Hamlet's father had none of that, although Hollywood would no doubt eventually give him all three in some misguided adaptation.

I hoped that the *Hamlet* comparison was inappropriate in other ways. At the end of that play, the stage is littered with dead bodies.

Boo stopped when he knew that I had seen him, cocked his head, and wagged his tail. Suddenly facing away from me without having turned around, he padded south, paused, glanced back at me, and then continued.

Even if I had not watched a lot of old episodes of *Lassie*, I understood the dead well enough to know that I was expected to follow my dog. I took some small pride that, unlike young Timmy in the TV show, I didn't need to be barked into obedience.

The blond hulk had not appeared in the east, nor the redheads in the west, so I hurried, if gingerly, after the ghostly shepherd, who led me toward the south side of the pier.

At the end of the timber path, I came to a large railed landing that served two flights of ascending stairs, one to the left, one to the right. The landing might have been a staging platform for workers of one kind or another.

When Boo climbed the stairs to the left, I went after him. The flight was short, and at the top lay a four-foot-wide railed catwalk.

The underside of the pier deck hung little more than one foot above my head. In this high corridor, where only a storm wind could have stirred the air, the stink of creosote thickened.

Darkness pooled deeper here than elsewhere. Nevertheless, the quivering marbled reflections, ever-changing on the ceiling, revealed electrical conduits, junction boxes, and copper pipes that must have been water lines.

The conduits brought power to the lampposts topside and to the emergency floodlamps below me. The copper lines served the freshwater faucets provided at regular intervals for the anglers who, on most nights, fished from the pier.

This catwalk, along which Boo led me, would be used by plumbers and electricians when problems arose with pier utilities.

After we had proceeded some distance shoreward, we came to a two-foot-by-five-foot pop-out in the catwalk. A wooden storage chest with two padlocks filled this space.

In the poor light, I could not see any words or markings on the chest. Perhaps it contained maintenance supplies.

Or interred in the chest might have been the shrunken remains of the pier master's poor wife, Lorraine, who perhaps had been murdered twenty years ago when she complained once too often about a lingering creosote smell in his work clothes.

My eager imagination might have worked up a hair-raising image of Lorraine's shriveled cadaver, pickled in creosote, if I had been able to believe there was actually such a position as a pier master. I don't know where the name Lorraine came from.

Sometimes I am a mystery to myself.

Boo settled on the catwalk and rolled onto his side. He extended one paw toward me and raked the air—universal canine sign language that meant *Sit down, stay awhile, keep me company, rub my tummy*.

With three dangerous men searching for me, a tummy-rub session seemed ill-advised, like pausing in midflight across a howitzer-hammered battlefield to assume the lotus position and engage in some yoga to calm the nerves.

Then I realized that the brute in the orchid-pattern shirt was overdue for an appearance as he searched the support structure from east to west. The storage chest stood about two and a half feet high and offered cover that the open railing did not.

"Good boy," I whispered.

Boo's tail beat against the floor without making a sound.

I stretched out on the catwalk, on my side, left arm bent at the elbow, head resting on my palm. With my right hand, I rubbed my ghost dog's tummy.

Dogs know we need to give affection as much as they need to receive it. They were the first therapists; they've been in practice for thousands of years.

After perhaps two minutes, Boo brought an end to our therapy session by rolling to his feet, ears pricked, alert.

I dared to raise my head above the storage chest. I peered down seven feet into the level of the support structure from which I had recently ascended.

At first I saw no one. Then I spotted the hulk proceeding along the series of east-west beams.

The eddying water far below cast luminous patterns that turned through the support structure like the prismatic rays from a rotating crystal chandelier in a ballroom. The hulk had no one to dance with, but he didn't appear to be in a dancing mood, anyway.

CHAPTER 5

THE BIG MAN DIDN'T WALK THE BEAMS WITH reticence and caution, as I had done, but with such confidence that his mother must have been a circus aerialist and his father a high-rise construction worker. His powerful arms were at his sides, a gun in one and a flashlight in the other.

He paused, switched on the flashlight, and searched among the vertical posts, along the horizontal supports.

On the catwalk, I ducked my head behind the storage chest. A moment later the probing light swept over me, east to west, back again, and then away.

Although Boo had moved past me and stood with his head through a gap in the railing, watching the giant, he remained visible only to me.

When the searcher had moved out of sight into the labyrinth of posts and purlins and struts, I rose to my feet. I continued east.

Padding ahead of me, Boo dematerialized. He appeared solid one moment, then became transparent, faded, vanished.

I had no idea where he went when he was not with me. Perhaps he enjoyed exploring new places as much as did any living dog, and went off to wander previously unvisited neighborhoods of Magic Beach.

Boo did not haunt this world in the way that the lingering human dead haunted it. They were by turns forlorn, fearful, angry, bitter.

Transgressively, they refused to heed the call to judgment, and made this world their purgatory.

This suggested to me that the free will they had been given in this life was a heritage they carried with them into the next, which was a reassuring thought.

Boo seemed to be less a ghost than he was a guardian spirit, always happy and ready to serve, still on the earth not because he had remained behind after death but because he had been sent back. Consequently, perhaps he had the power and permission to move between worlds as he wished.

I found it comforting to imagine that when I didn't urgently need him, he was in Heaven's fields, at play with all the good dogs who had brightened this world with their grace and who had moved on to a place where no dog ever suffered or lived unloved.

Evidently Boo believed that for the immediate future I could muddle on without him.

I continued east along the catwalk until, glancing down at the opportune moment, I glimpsed the inflatable dinghy tied to a concrete column far below, bobbing gently on the floodlit swells. Here the hulk had ascended and had begun searching westward.

At least one-quarter of the pier's length lay to the east of this position. I paused to brood about that.

As it turned out, Boo had been right to think that I would be able to puzzle my way through this development without his counsel. The hulk had not searched the last quarter of the support structure because he was confident that I could not have gone that far before he had climbed up here to look for me.

I did not believe, however, that he was as dumb as he was big. He would have left the last section unsearched only if, in the event that I slipped past him, someone waited on the shore to snare me.

Perhaps both redheads had not begun searching together from the west end of the pier, as I had imagined. One of them might be waiting ahead of me.

Had I been a dog and had Boo been a man, he would have given me a cookie, patted me on the head, and said, "Good boy."

After climbing over the catwalk railing, I lowered myself onto a tie beam below, lost my balance, got it back. I went north toward the center of the pier.

Just before I reached the intersection with the east-west beam, I stepped off the timber, across a six-inch gap, and put one foot on a piton in one of the vertical supports. I grabbed another piton with one hand, and swung onto that post.

I descended to the concrete base column, slid down through the enshrouding colony of barnacles, breaking them with my jeans, taking care to spare my hands, and landed as quietly as I could on the sectioned floorboards of the inflatable dinghy. A softly rattling debris of broken crustacean shells arrived with me.

The boat bobbed under one of the floodlamps. I felt dangerously exposed and was eager to get out of there.

A mooring line extended from the bow ring to a cleat in the concrete: two horns of pitted steel that barely protruded past the barnacles. I did not dare untie the dinghy until I was prepared to struggle against the currents that would carry it toward land.

If I started the engine, the searchers would come at once. Considering the time that I, an inexperienced pilot, would need to negotiate among the pilings and into open water, I might not get out of pistol range before one of the gunmen arrived.

Therefore, I resorted to the oars. A pair were secured with Velcro straps against the starboard bulwark.

Because long oars were needed and space was at a premium in the dinghy, this pair had wooden paddles but telescoping aluminum poles. With a little fumbling and a lot of muttering—both activities at which I excel—I extended the oars and locked them at full length.

I fixed one oar in the port oarlock, but I kept the other one free. Because the staggered ranks of pilings would make it difficult if not impossible to paddle against the tide and also navigate around every column, I hoped to steer and propel the inflatable craft across the remaining width of the pier by pushing off one after another of those concrete impediments.

Finally I untied the belaying line from the cleat. Because the dinghy began at once to drift with the tide, I let the rope ravel on

the floorboard as it wished.

Before the column receded beyond reach, I sat upon the forward thwart, seized the free oar, and used it to thrust off the concrete. Jaws clenched, pulse throbbing in my temples, I tried with all my strength to move the dinghy northward, across the shorebound tide.

And so it did, for a short distance, before the tide pulled it north-northeast, and then east. I corrected course by thrusting off the next piling, the next, the next, and although a couple of times the oar scraped or knocked the concrete, the sound was too brief and low to draw attention.

Inevitably, I could not entirely halt an eastward drift. But the distance to land remained great enough that I hoped the intervening supports would prevent anyone at that end of the pier from seeing me.

When open water lay ahead, I slipped the free pole into the starboard lock, and with both oars I rowed crosstide, pulling harder with the seaward paddle than with the landward.

In the open, I expected a bullet in the back. If it happened, I hoped that it would not cripple me, but cleanly kill me instead, and send me on to Stormy Llewellyn.

Full night had fallen while I had cat-and-moused through the support structure of the pier. The mist that had risen near dusk, just before I had decided Annamaria should leave the pier, was slowly thickening into a heartier brew.

The fog would cloak me quicker than the darkness alone. The poles creaked in the locks and the paddles sometimes struck splashes from the black water, but no one shouted behind me, and moment by moment, I felt more confident of escaping.

My arms began to ache, my shoulders and my neck, but I rowed another minute, another. I was increasingly impressed by the power of the sea, and grateful for the low sluggish waves.

When I allowed myself to look back, the shrouded glow of some of the pier lamps could still be discerned. But when I saw that the pier itself was lost to view in gray murk, I brought both oars aboard and dropped them on the sectioned floorboards.

Under a novice seaman, an inflatable dinghy can be a slippery beast, almost as bad as riding the back of an angry and intoxicated crocodile that wants to thrash you off and eat your *cojones*. But that's a story for another time.

Fearful of falling overboard or capsizing the craft, I crept on my hands and knees to the rear thwart. I sat there with one hand on the steering arm of the outboard.

Instead of a starter rope, there was an electronic ignition, which I found by reading the engine as a blind man reads a line of Braille. A push of the button brought a roar, and then a whoosh of propeller blades chopping surf.

The engine noise prevented me from hearing any shouts that rose from the pier, but now the demonic trinity knew where I had gone.

CHAPTER 6

STEERING STRAIGHT TO SHORE SEEMED UNWISE. The gunman who had been positioned at the landward end of the pier would race north along the beach, using the engine noise to maintain a fix on me.

The fog was not dense enough to bury all of Magic Beach. I could see some fuzzy lights from shoreside businesses and homes, and I used these as a guide to motor north, parallel to the coast.

For the first time since it had happened, I allowed myself to wonder why the big man's hand upon my shoulder had cast me back into the previous night's apocalyptic dream. I couldn't be sure that he had shared my vision. But he had experienced *something* that made him want to take me somewhere private for the kind of intense questioning during which the interrogator acquires a large collection of the interrogee's teeth and fingernails.

I thought of those yellow eyes. And of the voice that belonged to something that would eat Goldilocks with or without gravy: *Who the hell are you?*

My current circumstances were not conducive to calm thought and profound reasoning. I could arrive at only one explanation for the electrifying effect of his hand upon my shoulder.

My dream of that horrendous but unspecified catastrophe was not a dream but, beyond doubt now, a premonition. When the hulk touched me, he triggered a memory of the nightmare, which

backwashed into him *because the mysterious cataclysm that I had inadequately foreseen was one that he would be instrumental in causing.*

The waves were too low to turn my stomach, but when my stomach turned nevertheless, it felt as viscous as an oyster sliding out of its shell.

When I had gone perhaps half a mile from the pier, I set the outboard's steering arm, locked the throttle, stripped off the sodden sweatshirt that had encumbered me on my previous swim, and dived overboard.

Having worked up a sweat with my exertions, I had forgotten how cold the water was: cold enough to shock the breath out of me. I went under. A current sucked me down. I fought upward, broke the surface, spat out a mouthful of seawater, and gasped for air.

I rolled onto my back, using a flutter kick and a modified butterfly stroke to make for land at an easy pace. If one of the redheads waited on the shore for me, I wanted to give him time to hear the dinghy proceeding steadily north and to decide either to follow it or to return to the pier.

Besides, maybe a shark, a really huge shark, a giant mutant shark of unprecedented size would surface under me, kill me with one bite, and swallow me whole. In that event, I would no longer have to worry about Annamaria, the people of Magic Beach, or the possible end of the world.

All but effortlessly afloat in the buoyant salt water, gazing up into the featureless yet ever-changing fog, with no sounds but my breathing and the slop of water washing in and out of my ears, having adjusted to the cold but not yet aching from it, I was as close to the experience of a sensory-deprivation tank as I ever wanted to get.

With no distractions, this seemed like an ideal moment to walk my memory through the red-tide dream in search of meaningful details that had not initially registered with me. I would have been relieved to recall a neon sign that provided the month, day, and hour of the cataclysm, the precise location, and a description of the event.

Unfortunately, my predictive dreams don't work that way. I do not understand why I have been given a prognostic gift vivid enough to make me feel morally obliged to prevent a foreseen evil—but not clear enough to allow me to act at once with force and conviction.

Because of the disturbing supernatural aspects of my life and because the weight of my unusual responsibilities outweighs my power to fulfill them, I risk being crushed by stress. Consequently, I have kept the nonsupernatural part of my life simple. As few possessions as possible. No obligations like a mortgage or a car payment to worry about. I avoid contemporary TV, contemporary politics, contemporary art: all too frantic, fevered, and frivolous, or else angry, bitter.

At times, even working as a fry cook in a busy restaurant became too complicated. I contemplated a less demanding life in tire sales or the retail shoe business. If someone would pay me to watch grass grow, I could handle that.

I have no clothes except T-shirts and jeans, and sweatshirts in cool weather. No wardrobe decisions to make.

I have no plans for the future. I make my life up as I go along.

The perfect pet for me is a ghost dog. He doesn't need to be fed, watered, or groomed. No poop to pick up.

Anyway, drifting through fog toward the shrouded shore, I was at first unable to fish new details of the dream from memory. But then I realized that in the vision, Annamaria had not worn the clothes I had seen her wear in life.

She had been pregnant, as in life, suspended in the air above the luminous and crimson sea, a tempest of fiery clouds behind her.

As I stood on a beach crawling with snakes of light, she floated toward me, freed from the power of gravity, arms folded across her breast, eyes closed.

I recalled her garment fluttering, not as if billowing in the winds of a cataclysm, but as if stirred gently by her own magical and stately progress through the air.

Not a dress or gown. Voluminous but not absurdly so. A robe of some kind, covering her from throat to wrists, to ankles.

Her ankles had been crossed, her feet bare.

The fabric of the garment exhibited the softness and the sheen of silk, and it hung in graceful folds; yet there had been something strange about it.

Something extraordinary.

I was certain that it had been white at first. But then not white. I could not recall what color it had subsequently become, but the change of color hadn't been the strange thing.

The softness of the weave, the sheen of the fabric. The graceful draping. The slightest flutter of the sleeves, and of the hem above the bare feet...

Scissors-kicking, the heels of my sneakered feet bumped something in the water, and an instant later my stroking hands met resistance. I flailed once at an imagined shark before I realized I had reached shallow water and that I was fighting only sand.

I rolled off my back, rose into night air colder than the water. Listening to the outboard engine fade in the distance, I waded ashore through whispering surf and a scrim of sea foam.

Out of the white fog, up from the white beach came a gray form, and suddenly a dazzling light bloomed three inches from my face.

Before I could reel backward, the flashlight swung up, one of those long-handled models. Before I was able to dodge, the flashlight arced down and clubbed me, a glancing blow to the side of my head.

As he hit me, he called me a rectum, although he used a less elegant synonym for that word.

The guy loomed so close that even in the confusing fog-refracted slashes of light, I could see that he was a new thug, not one of the three miscreants from the pier.

The motto of Magic Beach was EVERYONE A NEIGHBOR, EVERY NEIGHBOR A FRIEND. They needed to consider changing it to something like YOU BETTER WATCH YOUR ASS.

My ears were ringing and my head hurt, but I was not dazed. I lurched toward my assailant, and he backed up, and I reached for him, and he clubbed me again, this time harder and squarely on the top of the head.

I wanted to kick his crotch, but I discovered that I had fallen to my knees, which is a position from which crotch-kicking is a too-ambitious offense.

For a moment I thought the faithful were being summoned to church, but then I realized the bell was my skull, tolling loudly.

I didn't have to be psychic to know the flashlight was coming down again, cleaving fog and air.

I said a bad word.

CHAPTER 7

CONSIDERING THAT THIS IS MY FOURTH MANUSCRIPT, I have become something of a writer, even though nothing that I have written will be published until after my death, if ever.

As a writer, I know how the right bad word at a crucial moment can purge ugly emotions and relieve emotional tension. As a guy who has been forced to struggle to survive almost as long as he has been alive, I also know that no word—even a really, really bad word—can prevent a blunt object from splitting your skull if it is swung with enthusiasm and makes contact.

So having been driven to my knees by the second blow, and with my skull ringing as though the hunchback of Notre Dame were inside my head and pulling maniacally on bell ropes, I said the bad word, but I also lunged forward as best I could and grabbed my assailant by the ankles.

The third blow missed its intended target, and I took the impact on my back, which felt better than a whack on the head, although not as good as any moment of a massage.

Facedown on the beach, gripping his ankles, I tried to pull the sonofabitch off his feet.

Sonofabitch wasn't the bad word that I used previously. This was another one, and not as bad as the first.

His legs were planted wide, and he was strong.

Whether my eyes were open or closed, I saw spirals of twinkling lights, and "Somewhere over the Rainbow" played in my head. This

led me to believe that I had nearly been knocked unconscious and that I didn't have my usual strength.

He kept trying to hit my head again, but he also had to strive to stay upright, so he managed only to strike my shoulders three or four times.

Throughout this assault, the flashlight beam never faltered, but repeatedly slashed the fog, and I was impressed by the manufacturer's durability standards.

Although we were in a deadly serious struggle, I could not help but see absurdity in the moment. A self-respecting thug ought to have a gun or at least a blackjack. He flailed at me as though he were an eighty-year-old lady with an umbrella responding to an octogenarian beau who had made a rude proposal.

At last I succeeded in toppling him. He dropped the flashlight and fell backward.

I clambered onto him, jamming my right knee where it would make him regret having been born a male.

Most likely he tried to say a bad word, a very bad word, but it came out as a squeal, like an expression of consternation by a cartoon mouse.

Near at hand lay the flashlight. As he tried to throw me off, I snared that formidable weapon.

I do not like violence. I do not wish to be the recipient of violence, and I am loath to perpetrate it.

Nevertheless, I perpetrated a little violence on the beach that night. Three times I hit his head with the flashlight. Although I did not enjoy striking him, I didn't feel the need to turn myself in to the police, either.

He stopped resisting and I stopped hitting. I could tell by the slow soft whistle of his breathing that he had fallen unconscious.

When all the tension went out of his muscles, I clambered off him and got to my feet just to prove to myself that I could do it.

Dorothy kept singing faintly, and I could hear Toto panting. The twinkling lights behind my eyelids began to spiral faster, as if the tornado was about to lift us out of Kansas and off to Oz.

I returned voluntarily to my knees before I went down against my will. After a moment, I realized that the panting was mine, not that of Dorothy's dog.

Fortunately, my vertigo subsided before my adversary regained consciousness. Although the flashlight still worked, I didn't think it could take much more punishment.

The cracked lens cast a thin jagged shadow on his face. But as I peeled back one of his eyelids to be sure that I had not given him a concussion, I could see him well enough to know that I had never seen him before and that I preferred never to see him again.

Eye of newt. Wool-of-bat hair. Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips. A lolling tongue like a fillet of fenny snake. He was not exactly ugly, but he looked peculiar, as if he'd been conjured in a cauldron by *Macbeth's* coven of witches.

When he had fallen, a slim cell phone had slid half out of his shirt pocket. If he was in league with the trio at the pier, he might have called them when he heard me swimming ashore.

After rolling him onto his side, I took the wallet from his hip pocket. Supposing he had summoned help moments before I had come ashore, I needed to move on quickly and could not pore through his ID there on the beach. I left his folding money in his shirt pocket with his cell phone, and I took the wallet.

I propped the flashlight on his chest. Because his head was raised on a mound of sand, the bright beam bathed him from chin to hairline.

If something like Godzilla woke in a Pacific abyss and decided to come ashore to flatten our picturesque community, this guy's face would dissuade it from a rampage, and the scaly beast would return meekly to the peace of the deeps.

With the fog-diffused lights of town to guide me, I slogged across the wide beach.

I did not proceed directly east. Perhaps Flashlight Guy had told the pier crew that he was on the shore due west of some landmark, by which they could find him. If they were coming, I wanted to cut a wide swath around them.

CHAPTER 8

AS I ANGLED NORTHEAST ACROSS THE STRAND, the soft sand sucked at my shoes and made every step a chore.

Wearing wet jeans and T-shirt on the central coast on a January night can test your mettle. Five weeks ago, however, I had been in the Sierra during a blizzard. This felt balmy by comparison.

I wanted a bottle of aspirin and an ice bag. When I touched the throbbing left side of my head, I wondered if I needed stitches. My hair felt sticky with blood. I found a lump the size of half a plum.

When I left the beach, I was at the north end of the shoreside commercial area, where Jacaranda Avenue dead-ended. From there, a mile of oceanfront houses faced the concrete boardwalk all the way to the harbor.

For its ten-block length, Jacaranda Avenue, which ran east from the boardwalk, was lined with ancient podocarpaceae. The trees formed a canopy that cooled the street all day and shaded the streetlamps at night. Not one jacaranda grew along its namesake avenue.

Wisteria Lane boasted no wisteria. Palm Drive featured oaks and ficuses. Sterling Heights was the poorest neighborhood, and of all the streets in town, Ocean Avenue lay the farthest from the ocean.

Like most politicians, those in Magic Beach seemed to live in an alternate universe from the one in which real people existed.

Wet, rumpled, my shoes and jeans caked with sand, bleeding, and no doubt wild-eyed, I was grateful that the podocarpaceae filtered the

lamplight. In conspiracy with the fog, I traveled in shadows along Jacaranda Avenue and turned right on Pepper Tree Way.

Don't ask.

Three guys were hunting me. With a population of fifteen thousand, Magic Beach was more than a wide place in the highway, but it did not offer a tide of humanity in which I could swim unnoticed.

Furthermore, in my current condition, if an alert policeman spotted me, he would be inclined to stop and chat. He would suspect I had been the target or the perpetrator of violence—or both.

I had no confidence in my ability to convince him that I clubbed myself over the head as punishment for a wrong decision I had made.

I did not want to file a report regarding the gunmen at the pier and the assault at the beach. That would take hours.

Already the three goons would be trying to determine who I was, describing me to people working in the commercial zone near the pier.

They might not get a lead. Having been in town little more than a month, having kept to myself as I waited to discover why I had been drawn there, I had remained a stranger to almost the entire populace.

Even an accurate description of me would not help them much. I am of average height, average weight. I have no distinguishing scars, birthmarks, tattoos, moles, warts, or facial mutations. I do not have a chin beard or yellow eyes. My teeth are not dissolving from meth addiction, but I also do not turn heads as would, say, Tom Cruise.

Except for the paranormal gifts with which I have been burdened, I was born to be a fry cook. Tire salesman. Shoe-store clerk. The guy who puts handbills under windshield wipers in the mall parking lot.

Give me an accurate and detailed description of at least one of the many fry cooks who has whipped up breakfast for you in a diner or coffee shop over the years, one tire salesman or shoe-store clerk who has served you. I know what comes to your mind: *nada*.

Don't feel bad. Most fry cooks and tire salesmen and shoe clerks never want to be famous or widely recognized. We just want to get along. We want to live quietly, avoid hurting anyone, avoid being hurt, provide for ourselves and for those we love, and have some fun along the way. We keep the economy humming, and we fight wars when we have to, and we raise families if we get the chance, but we have no desire to see our pictures in the newspaper or to receive medals, and we don't hope to hear our names as answers to questions on *Jeopardy!*

We are the water in the river of civilization, and those fellow citizens who desire attention, who ride the boats on the river and wave to admiring crowds along the shore...well, they interest us less than they amuse us. We don't envy them their prominence. We embrace our anonymity and the quiet that comes with it.

The artist Andy Warhol said that in the future everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes, and he implied that they would hunger for that fame. He was right, but only about the kind of people he knew.

And as for the guys who put handbills under windshield wipers in the shopping-mall parking lot: Man, they have *totally* got the anonymity thing right; they are as invisible as the wind, as faceless as time.

As I made my way through shadows and fog, along back streets more than main streets, I worried that the yellow-eyed man might have more muscle on his team than just the pair of redheads and Flashlight Guy. Depending on his resources, he could have people searching not just for me but also for Annamaria.

She had known my name. She must know more than that about me. I didn't think she would willingly give me up to the hulk; but he would break her like a ceramic bank to get at the coins of knowledge that she held.

I didn't want her to be hurt, especially not because of me. I had to find her before he did.

CHAPTER 9

BY AN ALLEY I ARRIVED AT THE BACK OF HUTCH Hutchison's house. A gate beside the garage opened to a walkway that led to a brick patio.

Glazed terra-cotta urns and bowls held red and purple cyclamens, but the bleach of fog and the stain of night left the blooms as colorless as barnacle shells.

On a glass-topped wrought-iron table, I put down my wallet and the one I had taken off the agitated man with the flashlight.

Toe to heel, I pried off my sand-caked sneakers. I stripped off my socks and then my blue jeans, which were crusted with enough sand to fill a large hourglass. With a garden hose, I washed my feet.

Mrs. Nicely came three days a week to clean, as well as to do the laundry and ironing. Her surname suited her even better than my first name suited me, and I did not want to cause her extra work.

The back door was locked. Among the cyclamens in the nearest bowl, in a Ziploc pill bag, Hutch kept a spare key. After retrieving the two wallets, I let myself into the house.

Fragrant with the cinnamony aroma of chocolate-pumpkin cookies that I had baked earlier in the afternoon, brightened only by the golden glow of string lights hidden in the recessed toe kick of the cabinets, the kitchen waited warm and welcoming.

I am no theologian. I would not be surprised, however, if Heaven proved to be a cozy kitchen, where delicious treats appeared in the

oven and in the refrigerator whenever you wanted them, and where the cupboards were full of good books.

After blotting my wet feet on the small rug, I snatched a cookie from the plate that stood on the center island, and I headed for the door to the downstairs hall.

I intended to go upstairs with the stealth of a Ninja assassin, quickly shower, dress my head wound if it didn't need stitches, and put on fresh clothes.

When I was halfway across the kitchen, the swinging door opened. Hutch switched on the overhead lights, stork-walked into the room, and said, "I just saw a tsunami many hundreds of feet high."

"Really?" I asked. "Just now?"

"It was in a movie."

"That's a relief, sir."

"Uncommonly beautiful."

"Really?"

"Not the wave, the woman."

"Woman, sir?"

"Téa Leoni. She was in the movie."

He stilted to the island and took a cookie from the plate.

"Son, did you know there's an asteroid on a collision course with the earth?"

"It's always something," I said.

"If a large asteroid strikes land"—he took a bite of the cookie—"millions could die."

"Makes you wish the world was nothing but an ocean."

"Ah, but if it lands in the ocean, you get a tsunami perhaps a thousand feet high. Millions dead that way, too."

I said, "Rock and a hard place."

Smiling, nodding, he said, "Absolutely wonderful."

"Millions dead, sir?"

"What? No, of course not. The cookie. Quite wonderful."

"Thank you, sir." I raised the wrong hand to my mouth and almost bit into the two wallets.

He said, "Soberingly profound."

“It’s just a cookie, sir,” I said, and took a bite of mine.

“The possibility all of humanity could be exterminated in a single cataclysmic event.”

“That would put a lot of search-and-rescue dogs out of work.”

He lifted his chin, creased his brow, and drew his noble face into the expression of a man always focused on tomorrow. “I was a scientist once.”

“What field of science, sir?”

“Contagious disease.”

Hutch put down his half-eaten cookie, fished a bottle of Purell from a pocket, and squeezed a large dollop of the glistening gel into the cupped palm of his left hand.

“A terrible new strain of pneumonic plague would have wiped out civilization if not for me, Walter Pidgeon, and Marilyn Monroe.”

“I haven’t seen that one, sir.”

“She was marvelous as an unwitting pneumonic-plague carrier.”

His gaze refocused from the future of science and mankind to the glob of germ-killing goop on his palm.

“She certainly had the lungs for the role,” he said.

Vigorously, he rubbed his long-fingered hands together, and the sanitizing gel made squishy sounds.

“Well,” I said, “I was headed up to my room.”

“Did you have a nice walk?”

“Yes, sir. Very nice.”

“A ‘constitutional’ we used to call them.”

“That was before my time.”

“That was before *everyone*’s time. My God, I am old.”

“Not that old, sir.”

“Compared to a redwood tree, I suppose not.”

I hesitated to leave the kitchen, out of concern that when I started to move, he would notice that I was without shoes and pants.

“Mr. Hutchison—”

“Call me Hutch. Everyone calls me Hutch.”

“Yes, sir. If anyone comes around this evening looking for me, tell them I came back from my walk very agitated, packed my things, and split.”

The gel had evaporated; his hands were germ-free. He picked up his half-eaten cookie.

With dismay, he said, "You're leaving, son?"

"No, sir. That's just what you tell them."

"Will they be officers of the law?"

"No. One might be a big guy with a chin beard."

"Sounds like a role for George Kennedy."

"Is he still alive, sir?"

"Why not? I am. He was wonderfully menacing in *Mirage* with Gregory Peck."

"If not the chin beard, then maybe a redheaded guy who will or will not have bad teeth. Whoever—tell him I quit without notice, you're angry with me."

"I don't think I could be angry with you, son."

"Of course you can. You're an actor."

His eyes twinkled. He swallowed some cookie. With his teeth just shy of a clench, he said, "You ungrateful little shit."

"That's the spirit, sir."

"You took five hundred in cash out of my dresser drawer, you thieving little bastard."

"Good. That's good."

"I treat you like a son, I *love* you like a son, and now I see I'm lucky you didn't slit my throat while I slept, you despicable little worm."

"Don't ham it up, sir. Keep it real."

Hutch looked stricken. "Hammy? Was it really?"

"Maybe that's too strong a word."

"I haven't been before a camera in half a century."

"You weren't over the top," I assured him. "It was just too... fulsome. That's the word."

"Fulsome. In other words, less is more."

"Yes, sir. You're angry, see, but not furious. You're a little bitter. But it's tempered with regret."

Brooding on my direction, he nodded slowly. "Maybe I had a son I lost in the war, and you reminded me of him."

"All right."

“His name was Jamie, he was full of charm, courage, wit. You seemed so like him at first, a young man who rose above the base temptations of this world...but you were just a leech.”

I frowned. “Gee, Mr. Hutchison, a leech...”

“A parasite, just looking for a score.”

“Well, okay, if that works for you.”

“Jamie lost in the war. My precious Corrina dead of cancer.” His voice grew increasingly forlorn, gradually diminishing to a whisper. “So alone for so long, and you...you saw just how to take advantage of my vulnerability. You even stole Corrina’s jewelry, which I’ve kept for thirty years.”

“Are you going to tell them all this, sir?”

“No, no. It’s just my motivation.”

He snared a plate from a cabinet and put two cookies on it.

“Jamie’s father and Corrina’s husband is not the type of old man to turn to booze in his melancholy. He turns to the cookies...which is the only sweet thing he has left from the month that you cynically exploited him.”

I winced. “I’m beginning to feel really bad about myself.”

“Do you think I should put on a cardigan? There’s something about an old man huddled in a tattered cardigan that can be just wonderfully pathetic.”

“Do you have a tattered cardigan?”

“I have a cardigan, and I could tatter it in a minute.”

I studied him as he stood there with the plate of cookies and a big grin.

“Look pathetic for me,” I said.

His grin faded. His lips trembled but then pressed together as if he struggled to contain strong emotion.

He turned his gaze down to the cookies on the plate. When he looked up again, his eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“You don’t need the cardigan,” I said.

“Truly?”

“Truly. You look pathetic enough.”

“That’s a lovely thing to say.”

“You’re welcome, sir.”

“I better get back to the parlor. I’ll find a deliciously sad book to read, so by the time the doorbell rings, I’ll be fully in character.”

“They might not get a lead on me. They might not come here.”

“Don’t be so negative, Odd. They’ll come. I’m sure they will. It’ll be great fun.”

He pushed through the swinging door with the vigor of a younger man. I listened to him walk down the hallway and into the parlor.

Shoeless, pantless, bloody, I scooped some cubes from the icemaker and put them in a OneZip plastic bag. I wrapped a dishtowel around the bag.

Pretending the confidence of a fully dressed man, I walked down the hallway. Passing the open doors to the parlor, I waved to Hutch when, from the solace of his armchair, moored in melancholy, he waved listlessly at me.

CHAPTER 10

MY SCALP WAS ABRADED, NOT LACERATED. IN THE shower, the hot water and shampoo stung, but I didn't begin to bleed freely again.

Unwilling to take the time to cautiously towel or blow-dry my hair, I pulled on fresh jeans and a clean T-shirt. I laced my backup pair of sneakers.

The MYSTERY TRAIN sweatshirt had been lost to the sea. A similar thrift-shop purchase featured the word WYVERN across the chest, in gold letters on the dark-blue fabric.

I assumed Wyvern must be the name of a small college. Wearing it did not make me feel any smarter.

As I dressed, Frank Sinatra watched me from the bed. He lay atop the quilted spread, ankles crossed, head propped on pillows, hands behind his head.

The Chairman of the Board was smiling, amused by me. He had a winning smile, but his moods were mercurial.

He was dead, of course. He had died in 1998, at the age of eighty-two.

Lingering spirits look the age they were when death took them. Mr. Sinatra, however, appears whatever age he wishes to be, depending on his mood.

I have known only one other spirit with the power to manifest at any age he chose: the King of Rock 'n' Roll.

Elvis had kept me company for years. He had been reluctant to move on, for reasons that took me a long while to ascertain.

Only days before Christmas, along a lonely California highway, he had finally found the courage to proceed to the next world. I'd been happy for him then, to see his sorrow lift and his face brighten with anticipation.

Moments after Elvis departed, as Boo and I walked the shoulder of the highway, drawn toward an unknown destination that proved to be Magic Beach, Mr. Sinatra fell in step beside me. He appeared to be in his early thirties that day, fifty years younger than when he died.

Now, lying on the bed, he looked forty or forty-one. He was dressed as he had been in some scenes in *High Society*, which he had made with Bing Crosby in 1956.

Of all the spirits I have seen, only Elvis and Mr. Sinatra are able to manifest in the garments of their choice. Others haunt me always in whatever they were wearing when they died.

This is one reason I will never attend a costume party dressed as the traditional symbol of the New Year, in nothing but a diaper and a top hat. Welcomed into either Hell or Heaven, I do not want to cross the threshold to the sound of demonic or angelic laughter.

When I had pulled on the Wyvern sweatshirt and was ready to leave, Mr. Sinatra came to me, shoulders forward, head half ducked, dukes raised, and threw a few playful punches at the air in front of my face.

Because he evidently hoped that I would help him move on from this world as I had helped Elvis, I had been reading biographies of him. I did not know as much about him as I knew about the King, but I knew the right thing for this moment.

“Robert Mitchum once said you were the only man he was afraid to fight, though he was half again as big as you.”

The Chairman looked embarrassed and shrugged.

As I picked up the cloth-wrapped bag of ice and held it against the lump on the side of my head, I continued: “Mitchum said he knew he could knock you down, probably more than once, but he

also knew you would keep getting up and coming back until one of you was dead.”

Mr. Sinatra gestured as if to say that Mitchum had overestimated him.

“Sir, here’s the situation. You came to me for help, but you keep resisting it.”

Two weeks ago, he had gone poltergeist on me, with the result that my collection of books about him went twirling around my room.

Spirits cannot directly harm us, not even evil spirits. This is our world, and they have no power over us. Their blows pass through us. Their fingernails and teeth cannot draw blood.

Sufficiently malevolent, however, with bottomless depths of rage to draw upon, they can spin spiritual power into whips of force that lash inanimate objects into motion. Squashed by a refrigerator hurled by a poltergeist, you tend not to take solace in the fact that the blow was indirect, rather than from the ghostly hand itself.

Mr. Sinatra wasn’t evil. He was frustrated by his circumstances and, for whatever reason, fearful about leaving this world—though he would never admit to the fear. As one who had not found organized religion highly credible until later in life, he was now confused about his place in the vertical of sacred order.

The biographies had not ricocheted from wall to wall with violent force, but had instead circled the room like the horses on a carousel. Every time I tried to pluck one of those books from the air, it had eluded me.

“Mr. Mitchum said you’d keep getting up and coming back until one of you was dead,” I repeated. “But in *this* fight, sir, one of us is already dead.”

His sunny smile grew wintry for a moment, but then thawed away. As dark as his bad moods could be, they were always short seasons.

“There’s no point in you resisting me. No point. All I want to do is help you.”

As was often the case, I could not read those extraordinary blue eyes, but at least they were not bright with hostility.

After a moment, he affectionately pinched my cheek.

He went to the nearest window and turned his back to me, a genuine spirit watching the fog haunt the night with its legions of false ghosts.

I recalled “It Was a Very Good Year,” a song that could be read as the sentimental and boastful recollections of an irredeemable Casanova. The poignant melancholy of his interpretation had elevated those words and that music to art.

For him, the good and the bad years were gone, and what remained was merely forever. Maybe he resisted eternity out of fear based in remorse, though maybe not.

The next life promised to be without struggle, but everything I had learned about him suggested that he had *thrived* on struggle. Perhaps he could not imagine an interesting life without it.

I can imagine it easily enough. After death, whatever I might have to face, I will not linger on this side of the door. In fact, I might cross the threshold at a run.

CHAPTER 11

I DID NOT WANT TO LEAVE THE HOUSE BY THE front door. The way my luck was running, I would find the barbarian horde on the porch, about to pay a visit.

In my dictionary, three bad guys who between them have at least one chin beard, one set of rotten teeth, and three guns qualify as a horde.

Leaving by the back of the house meant I had to pass the parlor, where Hutch brooded about the wife and son he'd never had and about how lonely and vulnerable he was after losing them.

I did not mind if he called me an ungrateful little shit again; that was merely rehearsal for a possible visit from a representative of the horde. The quick shower, the change of clothes, and the chat in the kitchen with Hutch had cost me twenty minutes, however, and I was anxious to locate Annamaria.

"Odd," he said as I tried to move past the open parlor doors with the stealth of a Special Forces op in camouflage and sound-suppressing footgear.

"Oh, hi."

Roosting in his armchair with a chenille throw across his lap, as if keeping eggs warm in a bird's nest, he said, "In the kitchen a little while ago, when we were talking about what a useful bit of wardrobe a cardigan can be..."

"A tattered cardigan," I qualified.

"This may seem a peculiar question...."

“Not to me, sir. Nothing seems peculiar to me anymore.”

“Were you wearing pants?”

“Pants?”

“Later, I had the strangest impression that you hadn’t been wearing any pants.”

“Well, sir, I never wear pants.”

“Of course you wear pants. You’re wearing them now.”

“No, these are jeans. I only have jeans—and one pair of chinos. I don’t consider them pants. Pants are dressier.”

“You were wearing jeans in the kitchen?”

As I stood in the parlor doorway, holding a bag of ice to the lump on the side of my head, I said, “Well, I wasn’t wearing chinos, sir.”

“How very peculiar.”

“That I wasn’t wearing chinos?”

“No. That I can’t remember them.”

“If I wasn’t wearing chinos, you wouldn’t remember them.”

He thought about what I had said. “That’s true enough.”

“Just enough, sir,” I agreed, and changed the subject. “I’m going to leave you a note about the dinner casserole.”

Putting aside the novel he had been reading, he said, “Aren’t you cooking dinner?”

“I’ve already made it. Chicken enchiladas in tomatillo sauce.”

“I love your tomatillo enchiladas.”

“And a rice and green-bean salad.”

“Does the rice have green sauce, too?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, good. Do I heat them in the microwave?”

“That’s right. I’ll leave a note about time and power.”

“Could you put Post-its on the dishes?”

“Take the Post-its off before you put the dishes in the oven.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t make that mistake. Again. Going out?”

“Just for a little while.”

“You aren’t leaving for good, are you?”

“No, sir. And I didn’t steal Corrina’s jewelry, either.”

“I was a diamond merchant once,” Hutch said. “My wife conspired to have me killed.”

“Not Corrina.”

“Barbara Stanwyck. She was having an affair with Bogart, and they were going to run off to Rio with the diamonds. But, of course, something went very wrong for them.”

“Was it a tsunami?”

“You have a sly sense of humor, son.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“No, no. I like it. I believe my career would have been much bigger if I’d been able to get roles in a few comedies. I can be quite funny in my own way.”

“I’m well aware.”

“Barbara Stanwyck was consumed by flesh-eating bacteria, and Bogart was hit by an asteroid.”

“I’ll bet the audience didn’t see that coming.”

Picking up the book again, Hutch said, “Do you enjoy the fog so much that you want to take a second walk in it, or is there something else I should know?”

“There’s nothing else you should know, sir.”

“Then I will wait for the doorbell and denounce you as a fiend to anyone who asks.”

“Thank you.”

In the kitchen, I emptied the ice-filled OneZip bag into the sink and tossed it in the trash.

The lump on my head remained the size of half a plum, but it no longer throbbed.

On two yellow Post-its, with a blue pen, I wrote directions for heating the enchiladas and the rice salad. With a red pen, I printed REMOVE THIS TAG BEFORE PUTTING IN OVEN.

Standing at the kitchen island, I went through the contents of the wallet that I had taken off Flashlight Guy.

In his California driver’s-license photo, I recognized the man I had left lying on the beach, although he only slightly resembled something conjured out of a witch’s cauldron. His name was Samuel Oliver Whittle. Thirty years old, he had an address in Magic Beach.

In his Nevada driver’s-license photo, he smiled broadly at the camera, which was a mistake. His smile transformed his face, and

not in a good way. He looked like a lunatic villain from a Batman movie.

Nevada, where he had an address in Las Vegas, knew him as Samuel Owen Bittel. In Vegas, he was two years older than he claimed to be in his California incarnation, but perhaps a Las Vegas lifestyle aged a person prematurely.

He had no credit cards. This made him suspicious in a country that not only looked to the future but lived on the earnings from it.

The wallet contained no insurance card, no Social Security card, nor any of the other ID you might have expected.

An employee-identification card revealed that he worked for the Magic Beach Harbor Department.

Suddenly a theme had developed. Perhaps the hulk with the chin beard had not taken the inflatable dinghy without permission; maybe he had the authority to use it because he, too, worked for the harbor department, which also had responsibility for the beaches and the town's one pier.

I found it difficult to believe that the redheads were also on the municipal payroll. Thugs who worked for the government usually tried not to *look* like thugs.

After returning the cards to Sam Whittle's wallet, I tucked it in my left hip pocket.

Whatever trouble I found in the coming hours, at least some of it would involve men with guns. I did not have a gun of my own and did not want one. On occasion I have used a bad guy's firearm after taking it away from him, but only in desperation.

When I was a child, my mother spoiled guns for me, not because she disapproved of them, but because she had a psychotic attachment to a pistol. Guns spook me.

In a clutch or a corner, I tend to make a weapon out of what is near at hand. That can be anything from a crowbar to a cat, though if I had a choice, I would prefer an angry cat, which I have found to be more effective than a crowbar.

Although weaponless, I left the house by the back door, with two chocolate-pumpkin cookies. It's a tough world out there, and a man has to armor himself against it however he can.

CHAPTER 12

PAW AFTER PAW SILENT ON WET BLACKTOP, THE fog crept along the alleyway behind Hutch's house, rubbing its furry flanks against the garages on both sides, slipping through fence pickets, climbing walls, licking into every niche and corner where mouse or lizard might have taken shelter.

These earthbound clouds swathed nearby things in mystery, made objects half a block away appear to be distant, dissolved the world entirely past the one-block mark, and raised in the mind a primitive conviction that the edge of the earth lay near at hand, a precipice from which I would fall forever into eternal emptiness.

Slowly turning in a circle, turning again, I ate one cookie and concentrated on Annamaria: on her long hair the color of molasses, on her face, on her too-pale skin. In my mind, I saw her delicate hand close around the ocean-polished orb of green bottle glass and retreat with it into the long sleeve of her sweater....

My imperfect gift has one more imperfect aspect, which I have discussed before, though not in this fourth manuscript. My lost girl, Stormy Llewellyn, had called it psychic magnetism.

If I wish to find someone whose whereabouts I don't know, I can surrender myself to impulse and intuition, drive or bicycle or walk around wherever my whims take me, concentrating on that person's face and name...and usually within half an hour, I will find him. Psychic magnetism.

This handy talent is problematic because I cannot control or foresee when or where the desired encounter will occur. I might spot my target across a busy street—or turn a corner and collide with him.

If I am seeking a bad guy, psychic magnetism might put me on his trail—or drop me into his talons.

And if I am in pursuit of someone who is no threat, someone I need to question or to sweep out of harm's way, I cannot be sure the search will be successful. I usually find the person I'm seeking, but not always. Once in a while, resorting to psychic magnetism in desperate circumstances can be a waste of precious minutes when I have not a second to spare.

I am a half-assed champion of the imperiled innocent: able to see the lingering dead, but unable to hear what of value they might wish to tell me; informed by predictive dreams that never provide me with sufficient detail to be certain of what they predict, of when the event will occur, or of where the horror will go down; without gun or sword, armored only with cookies.

All of this fearsome uncertainty ought to have made a hermit of me, ought to have sent me fleeing to a cave or to a remote cabin, in curmudgeonly rejection of the dead and the living. But my heart tells me that the gift was given to be used, imperfect or not, and that if I deny it, I will wither away in despair and will earn no life after this one, no reunion with my lost girl.

At least this time, standing in the alleyway behind Hutch's house, I sought not someone who wanted me dead, but instead a young woman who might need me to keep her alive. I most likely would not blunder into the teeth of the tiger.

The thick muffling fog was a time machine that rolled the night back more than one hundred years, silencing all the sounds of modern civilization—car engines, radios, the TV voices that often leaked from houses. The peaceful quiet of the nineteenth century coddled Magic Beach.

One cookie finished, concentrating on Annamaria, I suddenly set off north along the alley, as if I were a milk-wagon horse following a

route so familiar that I did not need to think about my purpose or my destination.

Windows, usually electric-bright, glowed softly, as if the rooms beyond were candlelit. At the end of the alleyway, the sodium-yellow streetlight appeared to throb subtly, like gas flames, as a thousand slowly pulsing moth wings of fog pressed against the lenses of the lamp.

Nibbling my last cookie, I turned east where the alley met the street, and headed inland.

At only 6:45 on a Wednesday evening, the town appeared to have gone to bed for the night, snuggled down in Nature's white blankets. The damp chill encouraged dog owners to take shorter walks than usual, and the blinding density of the fog dissuaded drivers from unnecessary trips.

By the time that I had gone three blocks east and one block north of Hutch's place, I had seen only two ghostly cars in motion, each at least half a block distant. They looked like deep-sea submersibles in a Jules Verne tale, quietly motoring through a murky oceanic abyss.

In that quaint residential neighborhood known as the Brick District, which had no brick streets and only two brick houses, a large vehicle turned the corner at the farther end of the block. A soft kaleidoscope of fog formed shifting white-on-white patterns in the headlights.

Deep inside me, a still small voice said *Hide*.

I left the sidewalk, jumped a waist-high plum-thorn hedge, and knelt behind that greenery.

I smelled woodsmoke from fireplaces, wet foliage, and garden mulch.

In the hedge, something smelled me and bolted from cover. I almost startled to my feet before I realized I had spooked a rabbit, which was already gone across the lawn.

The truck approached with the throttled growl of a prowling beast, traveling even slower than the low visibility required.

Oppressed by a feeling that a deadly threat loomed behind me, I glanced toward the house in front of which I had taken refuge. The windowpanes were dark. Except for the lazily billowing fog, nothing

moved, and as far as I could tell, no watcher waited in either the scud or the shadows.

Still on my knees, I kept my head bowed behind the hedge while the truck growled closer.

The surrounding fog drank in the twin beams of the vehicle and glowed like swamp gas, yet contained the light within itself and brightened neither me nor the hedge.

I held my breath, though the driver could not have heard me exhale.

As the truck skulked past, seeming to sniff at the pavement for the scent of prey, the fog around me darkled with the passage of the headlamps.

I dared to rise just far enough to peer across the plum thorn toward the street.

Although the vehicle passed less than ten feet away, the dashboard lights were not bright enough to reveal the driver, only a lumpish shadow. I was able, however, to make out the city seal emblazoned on the door. And black letters on an orange background announced MAGIC BEACH/HARBOR DEPARTMENT.

Fog folded the truck out of sight. Its engine faded to a distant guttural purr.

Rising to my feet, I breathed fog faintly scented with exhaust fumes. After my third inhalation, the last engine noise whispered away into another neighborhood.

I wondered what kind of corruption coiled in the heart of the harbor department.

Moving toward the break in the hedge that accommodated the front walkway, I heard a noise issue from the dark house. Not loud. The low *squeak-ping* of metal tweaking metal.

Although a sense of danger welled in me once more, I turned from the street and followed the walkway to the foot of the porch steps.

Intuition told me that pretending to have heard nothing would be taken as a sign of weakness. And weakness would invite attack.

The subtle sound was a kind of singing, still metallic but also reminiscent of an insect's clicking serenade.

No less than the world around it, the porch was filled with fog and shadows.

“Who’s there?” I asked, but received no reply.

Climbing the steps, I saw movement to my right. The rhythmic sweep of a slatted form—forward, back—timed to the squeak-ping-click, drew me forward.

I found a bench swing suspended from ceiling hooks. The chains torqued as the bench came forward, and the torsion was released as it swung backward.

Someone must have been sitting here in the dark, not swinging but perhaps watching me as I hid from the truck. Judging by the size of the current arc, the watcher had shoved back with his feet and had gotten up mere seconds ago, leaving the swing in motion to attract my attention.

I stood alone on the porch.

If he had come down the steps as I ascended, I would have encountered him, and if he had vaulted over the porch railing, I would have heard him.

The front door, no matter how stealthily pulled open and drawn shut, would have made some noise if he had gone inside.

Four windows faced me. With no light to reflect, the glass was as black as the sky at the rim of the universe, beyond the light of all stars.

I took a moment to stare at each window. If someone had been observing me from the other side, I would have seen a form in a paler shade of black than that of the lightless room.

The swing continued to move.

For a moment I thought its arc had not diminished, as though an unseen occupant still powered it. The metallic song of the twisting chain links undeniably had subsided...and as I watched, the swing gradually slowed toward a stop.

I considered rapping softly on one of the windows, to see what I might stir up.

Instead, I retreated to the steps, descended.

Around me, fog and dark and quiet pooled.

On the porch, I had felt that I might be in the company of someone, something.

As one who sees the lingering dead, I had never imagined that a class of spirits might walk the earth invisible to me.

Now I considered that possibility—and rejected it. Something strange had occurred, but ghosts were not the explanation.

Concentrating once more on the face of Annamaria, I left the property of the porch-swing phantom, returned to the public sidewalk, and headed north. Soon I was in the grip of psychic magnetism.

No night birds sang. No dogs barked. No whiff of breeze, no roosting owl, no stalking cat rustled the leaves of any tree. I had gone too far inland to hear the susurrations of the sea.

Although I repeatedly glanced behind, I caught no glimpse of anyone trailing me. Perhaps the skin on the back of my neck prickled not because someone might be following me but instead because I was so alone, with no friend to turn to except an eighty-eight-year-old actor who lived inside himself to such an extent that he never noticed the blood on my face or, later, the ice pack held to my head.

CHAPTER 13

HUTCH'S PREDICTED TSUNAMI HAD SWEEPED across the town, if you allowed that the fog was the white shadow of the dark sea, because it inundated every neighborhood, imposing the stillness of drowned cities. For all I knew, it measured a thousand feet high.

As I sought Annamaria, the currents of opaque mist increasingly seemed to me not just the shadow of the sea, but a foreshadowing of a tide to come, the red tide of my dream.

Street after street, every tree stood turbaned, robed, and bearded—until I arrived at the foot of a broad-leafed giant from which the fog appeared to shrink. This specimen towered sixty or seventy feet, and it offered a magnificent architecture of wide-spreading limbs.

Because knowing the names of things is a way to pay respect to the beauty of the world, I know the names of many trees; but I did not know the name of this one and could not recall having seen one like it before.

The leaves had two lamina, each with four lobes. Between thumb and forefinger, they felt thick and waxy.

Among the black branches, white flowers as large as bowls seemed radiant in the dark. They were reminiscent of magnolia blooms, though more imposing, but this was not a magnolia. Water dripped from the petals, as if the tree had condensed the fog to form these flowers.

Behind the tree stood a half-seen, two-story Victorian house, dressed with less gingerbread than was standard for the style, with a

modest porch rather than a grand veranda.

Although the fog seemed to retreat from the tree, it conquered the house. The pale lights inside were barely able to pierce the windowpanes.

I passed under the tree, and psychic magnetism drew me not toward the residence but toward the detached garage, where a ruddy glow pressed out from the second-floor windows, tinting the fog.

Behind the garage, a flight of stairs led to a landing. At the top, the four French panes in the door were curtained with pleated sheers.

As I was about to knock, the latch slipped from the striker plate in the jamb, and the door eased inward a few inches. Through the gap, I could see a plastered wall where soft ringlets of shadow pulsed in a shimmerous coppery light.

I expected the door to be caught by a security chain and to see Annamaria peering warily past those links. But no chain was engaged, and no face appeared.

After a hesitation, I pushed the door open. Beyond lay a large room softly illuminated by five oil lamps.

One lamp rested on a dinette table at which stood two chairs. Annamaria sat facing the door.

She smiled as I crossed the threshold. She raised her right hand to motion me to the empty chair.

Pleased to be out of the dampness and chilly air, I closed the door and engaged the lock.

In addition to the table and two chairs, the humble furniture included a narrow bed in one corner, a nightstand on which stood a gooseneck desk lamp, a worn and sagging armchair with a footstool, and an end table.

Distributed around the room, the five oil lamps were squat, long-necked glass vessels in which floated burning wicks. Two were the color of brandy, and three were red.

When I sat across the table from her, I found dinner waiting. Two kinds of cheese and two kinds of olives. Tomatoes cut in wedges.

Circlets of cucumber. Dishes of herb-seasoned yogurt glistening with a drizzle of olive oil. A plate of ripe figs. A loaf of crusty bread.

I didn't realize how thirsty I was until I saw the mug of tea, which tasted as if it had been sweetened with peach juice.

As decoration, in a wide shallow bowl floated three of the white flowers from the tree at the front of the property.

Without a word, we began to eat, as if there were nothing unusual about my having found her or about her expecting me.

One of the oil lamps stood on the counter in the kitchenette, the others in the main space. On the ceiling above each lamp were circles of light and tremulous watery shadows of the glass vessels.

"Very nice," I said eventually. "The oil lamps."

She said, "The light of other days."

"Other days?"

"The sun grows the plants. The plants express essential oils. And the oils fire the lamps—giving back the light of other days."

I'd never thought of the light of an oil lamp being the stored, converted, and then liberated sunshine of years past, but of course it was.

"Lamplight reminds me of my parents."

"Tell me about them."

"You would be bored."

"Try me."

A smile. A shake of the head. She continued eating and said no more.

She wore the white tennis shoes, the dark-gray slacks, and the roomy pink sweater that she had worn earlier on the pier. The long sleeves were rolled up now to form thick cuffs, exposing her slender wrists.

The graceful silver bell gleamed on the silver chain.

"The pendant is lovely," I said.

She did not reply.

"Does it have any significance?"

She met my eyes. "Doesn't everything?"

Something in her stare made me look away, and fear found me. Not fear of her. Fear of...I knew not what. I felt a helpless sinking of

the heart for reasons that eluded me.

She fetched a ceramic pitcher from the kitchen and refreshed my tea.

When she returned to her chair, I reached across the table to her, palm turned up. “Will you take my hand?”

“You want to confirm what you already know.”

I continued to reach out to her.

She acquiesced, and took my hand.

The garage apartment vanished, and I no longer sat on a chrome-and-vinyl chair, but stood upon a beach in bloody light, with the sky afire and molten masses rising in the sea.

When she released my hand, the dream relented. The only fires were those burning on the lamp wicks, safely contained in glass.

“You’re part of it,” I said.

“Not like the big man on the pier is part of it.”

He had been surprised by the vision that I had passed to him; but Annamaria was not surprised.

She said, “That man and I are in different camps. What camp are you in, Odd Thomas?”

“Have you had the dream, too?”

“It isn’t a dream.”

I looked into the palm of my hand, by the touch of which she had summoned the nightmare.

When I lifted my gaze, her dark eyes were ages older than her face, yet they seemed gentle and kind.

“What’s going to happen? When? Where—here in Magic Beach? And how are you a part of it?”

“That isn’t for me to say.”

“Why not?”

“All things in their time.”

“What does that mean?”

Her smile reminded me of the smile of someone else, but I could not remember who. “It means—all things in their time.”

Perhaps because time was the subject, I glanced at the lighted wall clock in the kitchen. I compared its declaration to that of my wristwatch.

The correct time was one minute until seven. The kitchen clock showed one minute until midnight, a five-hour error.

Then I realized that the thin red hand counting off the seconds had frozen on the 12. The broken wall clock had stopped.

“Your clock doesn’t work.”

“That depends on what you want from a clock.”

“The time,” I suggested.

When I returned my attention to Annamaria, I discovered that she had unclasped the silver chain and had taken it from around her neck. She held it out to me, the tiny bell suspended.

“Will you die for me?” she asked.

I said at once, “Yes,” and took the offered bell.

CHAPTER 14

WE CONTINUED EATING, AS IF THE CONVERSATION and the events that had occurred since I had walked through the door were as ordinary as those of any dinner hour.

In fact, people were not in the habit of asking if I would die for them. And I was not accustomed to answering in the positive, without hesitation.

I would have died for Stormy Llewellyn, and she would have died for me, and neither of us would have needed to ask the other the question that Annamaria had posed to me. Stormy and I had understood, at a level more profound than mind or heart, at the level of blood and bone, that we were committed to each other at any cost.

Although I would have given my life for my lost girl, Fate had not allowed me to make that trade. Since the bullet-shattered day in which she died, I have lived a life I don't need.

Don't get me wrong. I do not seek death. I love life, and I love the world as its exquisite design is revealed in each small portion of the whole.

No one can genuinely love the world, which is too large to love entire. To love all the world at once is pretense or dangerous self-delusion. Loving the world is like loving the *idea* of love, which is perilous because, feeling virtuous about this grand affection, you are freed from the struggles and the duties that come with loving people as individuals, with loving one place—home—above all others.

I embrace the world on a scale that allows genuine love—the small places like a town, a neighborhood, a street—and I love life, because of what the beauty of this world and of this life portend. I don't love them to excess, and I stand in awe of them only to the extent that an architect might stand in the receiving room of a magnificent palace, amazed and thrilled by what he sees, while knowing that all this is as nothing compared to the wondrous sights that lie beyond the next threshold.

Since that day of death in Pico Mundo, seventeen months earlier, my life had not been mine. I had been spared for a reason I could not understand. I had known the day would come when I would give my life in the right cause.

Will you die for me?

Yes.

Instantly upon hearing the fateful question, I felt that I had been waiting to hear it since Stormy's death, and that the answer had been on my tongue before the question had been spoken.

Although I had committed myself to this cause with no knowledge of it, I was nevertheless curious about what the men on the pier were planning, how Annamaria figured in their plans, and why she needed my protection.

With the silver chain around my neck and the small bell pendant against my breastbone, I said, "Where is your husband?"

"I'm not married."

I waited for her to say more.

With her fork she held down a fig, and with her knife trimmed off the stem.

"Where do you work?" I asked.

Setting the knife aside, she said, "I don't work." She patted her swollen abdomen, and smiled. "I labor."

Surveying the modest accommodations, I said, "I suppose the rent is low."

"Very low. I stay here free."

"The people in the house are relatives?"

"No. Before me, a poor family of three lived here free for two years, until they had saved enough to move on."

“So the owners are just...good people?”

“You can’t be surprised by that.”

“Maybe.”

“You have known many good people in your young life.”

I thought of Ozzie Boone, Chief Wyatt Porter and his wife, Karla, Terri Stambaugh, and all of my friends in Pico Mundo, thought of the monks at St. Bartholomew’s, of Sister Angela and the nuns who ran the orphanage and school for special-needs children.

“Even in this rough and cynical age,” she said, “you’re neither rough nor cynical yourself.”

“With all due respect, Annamaria, you don’t really know me.”

“I know you well,” she disagreed.

“How?”

“Be patient and you’ll understand.”

“All things in their time, huh?”

“That’s right.”

“I sort of think the time is now.”

“But you are wrong.”

“How can I help you if I don’t know what kind of fix you’re in?”

“I’m not in a fix.”

“Okay, then what kind of mess, what kind of pickle, what kind of trap?”

Finished eating, she blotted her mouth with a paper napkin.

“No mess, pickle, or trap,” she said, with a trace of amusement in her gentle voice.

“Then what would you call it?”

“The way of things.”

“You’re in the way of things? What things are you standing in the way of?”

“You misheard me. What lies before me is just the way of things, not a fix from which I need to be extricated.”

Out of the shallow bowl, she retrieved one of the huge floating flowers, and she placed it on her folded napkin.

“Then why did you ask that question, why did you give me the bell, what do you need me to do for you?”

“Keep them from killing me,” she said.

“Well, there you go. That sounds like a pickle to me.”

She plucked one thick white petal from the flower and set it aside on the table.

I said, “Who wants to kill you?”

“The men on the pier,” she replied, plucking another petal from the flower. “And others.”

“How many others?”

“Innumerable.”

“Innumerable—as in *countless*, as in the countless grains of sand on the oceans’ shores?”

“That would be more like *infinite*. Those who want me dead can be counted, and have been, but there are too many for the number to matter.”

“Well, I don’t know. I think it matters to me.”

“But you’re wrong about that,” she quietly assured me.

She continued to disassemble the flower. She had made a separate pile of half its petals.

Her self-possession and calm demeanor did not change when she spoke of being the target of killers.

For a while I waited for her eyes to meet mine again, but her attention remained on the flower.

I said, “The men on the pier—who are they?”

“I don’t know their names.”

“Why do they want to kill you?”

“They don’t yet know they want to kill me.”

After considering that response for a moment and being unable to make sense of it, I said, “When will they know that they want to kill you?”

“Soon enough.”

“I see,” I lied.

“You will,” she said.

Impurities in the wicks periodically caused the flames to leap, flutter, and subside. The reflections on the ceiling swelled, shrank, shivered.

I said, “And when these guys finally realize that they want to kill you, *why* will they want to kill you?”

“For the wrong reason.”

“Okay. All right. What would the wrong reason be?”

“Because they’ll think that I know what horror they intend to perpetrate.”

“Do you know what horror they intend to perpetrate?”

“Only in the most general terms.”

“Why not share those general terms with me?”

“Many deaths,” she said, “and much destruction.”

“Those are some spooky terms. And way too general.”

“My knowledge here is limited,” she said. “I’m only human, like you.”

“Does that mean—a little bit psychic like me?”

“Not psychic. It only means that I am human, not omniscient.”

She had plucked all the petals from the flower, leaving only the fleshy green receptacle, the sepals that had protected the petals, a spray of stamens, and the pistil.

I plunged into our monkey-barrel conversation once more: “When you say they’ll want to kill you for the wrong reason, that implies there’s a right reason for them to want to kill you.”

“Not a right reason,” she corrected, “but from their point of view, a better one.”

“And what would be that better reason?”

At last she met my eyes. “What have I done to this flower, odd one?”

Stormy and only Stormy had sometimes called me “odd one.”

Annamaria smiled, as though she knew what thought had passed through my mind, what association she had triggered.

Indicating the pile of petals, I said, “You’re just nervous, that’s all.”

“I’m not nervous,” she said with quiet conviction. “I was not asking you why I did it, only to tell me what it is that I’ve done to the flower.”

“You’ve trashed it.”

“Is that what you think?”

“Unless you’re going to make a potpourri with it.”

“When the flower was floating in the bowl, although it had been cut from the tree, how did it look?”

“Beautiful.”

“Lush and alive?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And now it looks dead.”

“Very dead.”

She propped her elbows on the table, rested her face in her cupped hands, and smiled. “I’m going to show you something.”

“What?”

“Something with the flower.”

“All right.”

“Not now.”

“When?”

“All things in their time,” she said.

“I hope I live that long.”

Her smile broadened, and her voice was soft with the affection of a friend. “You have a certain grace, you know.”

I shrugged and shifted my attention to the flame within the red glass lamp between us.

She said, “Let’s have no misunderstanding. I mean—a grace on which you can rely.”

If she thought that she had distracted me with the flower and that I had forgotten the question that she had dodged, she was wrong. I returned to it:

“If they don’t want to kill you right now but *will* want to kill you soon, and for the wrong reason—what is the right reason? I’m sorry. Excuse me. I mean, what is the *better* reason they might have for wanting you dead?”

“You will know when you will know,” she said.

“And when will I know?”

As she replied, I answered my question in sync with her: “All things in their time.”

Crazily, I did not believe that she was withholding information or was speaking in riddles either to deceive me or to entice me. She impressed me as being absolutely truthful.

Furthermore, I had the sense that everything she had said had carried more meaning than I had taken from it, and that eventually, when I looked back on our dinner, I would realize that on this night, in this hour, I should have known her for who she was.

With both hands, Annamaria picked up her mug of tea and sipped from it.

She looked no different in this flattering lamplight from the way that she had looked in the gray light of late afternoon, on the pier. Neither beautiful nor ugly, and yet not merely plain. Petite yet somehow powerful. She had a compelling presence for reasons that I could not define, a presence that was not as magnetic as it was humbling.

Suddenly my promise to keep her safe was a weight on my chest.

I raised one hand to the pendant that I now wore.

Lowering the mug of tea, she looked at the bell captured between my thumb and forefinger.

I said, “ ‘The bell invites me...it is a knell that summons me to Heaven or to Hell.’ ”

“Shakespeare,” she said. “But that’s not quite the quote. And a man like you doesn’t need to doubt his ultimate destination.”

Again I lowered my gaze to the oil lamp. Perhaps because my imagination is so rich, I saw the leaping flame fashion itself, for just a moment, into the image of a dragon rampant.

Together, without more talk, we quickly cleared the table, hastily put away the uneaten food, rinsed and stacked the dishes.

Annamaria retrieved a car coat from a closet and pulled it on as I employed a long-handled wick pincher to snuff the flame in the kitchen lamp, and also the one in the lamp by which we had eaten dinner.

She came to me with just a purse, and I said, “You may need more than that.”

“I don’t have much else,” she said, “some clothes, but suddenly I don’t think we have time.”

The same hunch had harried me into quickly cleaning off the dinner table.

“Put out the other lamps,” she said, withdrawing a flashlight from the purse. “Quickly.”

I extinguished the remaining three flames.

As she played the flashlight across the floor, toward the door, out of the silent night came the roar of an approaching vehicle, a truck by the sound of it.

At once, she hooded the beam to prevent it from brightening the windows.

Brakes barked in the night, and the previously racing engine only idled now—in the driveway in front of the garage above which we waited.

A truck door slammed. And then another.

CHAPTER 15

“THIS WAY,” SHE SAID, AND WITH THE FLASHLIGHT still hooded, Annamaria led me to a door that I assumed must open on a closet.

Instead, a landing lay beyond, and narrow interior stairs went down to the garage.

Although sturdy, the stairhead door could be locked only from inside the apartment. If the hulk and his friends got into the apartment, we could not foil their pursuit.

Because Annamaria was pregnant and because I was afraid that, in a rush, she might trip and fall, I took the flashlight and urged her to hold fast to the railing and to follow me with caution.

Filtering the beam through fingers, holding the light behind me to illuminate her way more than mine, I descended into the garage less quickly than I would have liked.

I was relieved to see that the roll-up door featured no glass panels. Two windows, one in the north wall and one in the south, were small and set just below the ceiling.

Our light was not likely to be seen through those high dusty panes. Nevertheless, I continued to keep the lens half covered.

Two vehicles were parked in the garage: facing out, a Ford Explorer; facing in, an older Mercedes sedan.

As Annamaria reached the bottom of the stairs, she whispered, “There’s a way out, along the south wall.”

From above came the knock of knuckles on the door to her tiny apartment.

Through the smell of grease and oil and rubber, wary of putting a foot in a slippery spot on the floor, we moved past the SUV, past the sedan, and found the side exit.

Overhead, a second round of knocking sounded more insistent than the first. Definitely not just a pizza delivery.

With the thumb-turn knob, I disengaged the deadbolt. Because the door opened inward, it did not block my view in any direction when I leaned through to have a look outside.

The Victorian house stood to the north side of this building, out of sight. Here, a narrow walkway lay between the south wall of the garage and the high hedge that defined the property line.

If we stepped outside and went east, toward the front of the garage, we would find our visitors' truck in the driveway. If we went west, toward the back of the structure, we would be at the foot of the stairs that led up to the landing, where someone had just been knocking.

Even in the dense fog, I did not want to place a bet on our chances of getting off the property without encountering trouble. Two doors had slammed, so two men were out there—at least two—and I did not think they would both have gone up the outer stairs, since they had not arrived with a large gift basket, wine, and flowers. One of them would remain behind to snare us if we escaped from the man now knocking upstairs.

Turning from the door, leaving it open, I scanned the shadowy ceiling and saw no fluorescent fixtures, only one bare incandescent bulb. Another light would be built in to the chain-drive mechanism that raised the large roll-up, but it would come on only when that door was up.

When I guided Annamaria toward the Mercedes sedan, she trusted me at once. She neither resisted nor asked what I intended.

The knocking had stopped. From above came a subtle crack of breaking glass, which the visitor could not entirely muffle.

As I took hold of the handle on the rear passenger-side door, I was suddenly afraid that the car would be locked. Our luck held, and the

door opened.

Overhead, the footsteps were so heavy that I would not have been surprised if they had been accompanied by a giant's voice chanting, "Fee, fi, fo, fum," and promising to grind up our bones to make his bread.

The interior lights of the Mercedes were not bright. We had no choice but to risk them.

As I encouraged Annamaria into the backseat of the sedan, I saw in my mind's eye the modest apartment above us. The intruder would see the stacked dishes in the sink: two mugs, two sets of flatware. Sooner than later, he would touch the long neck of one of the oil lamps.

The glass would not be merely warm, but hot. With a smile, he would snatch back his stung fingers, certain that we had fled only as he had arrived.

I glanced toward the south-wall door that I had left standing open to the walkway alongside the property-line hedge. Tendrils of fog crept across the threshold and probed around the jamb, like the fingers of a blind ghost, but no one had yet appeared in the doorway.

Annamaria slid across the backseat, and I climbed into the sedan after her. I pulled the door shut firmly without slamming it, though with more noise than I would have liked. The interior car lights winked out.

The Mercedes was at least twenty years old, maybe twenty-five, from the era when the Germans still made them big, boxy, and not in the least aerodynamic. We were able to slide down in that roomy space, heads below the windows.

This was not quite Poe's purloined-letter trick, but something similar. Our pursuers would expect us to flee, and the open south-side door would suggest that we had done just that.

In the heat of the moment, believing they were close on our heels, they were not likely to suspect that we would risk hiding in what was virtually plain sight.

Of course, they *might* find the open door and the in-creeping fog to be a tad too obvious. They might decide to search the garage, and

if they did, we were doomed.

They were not fools, after all. They were serious men. I had it on good authority that they were planning many deaths and much destruction; and men don't get much more serious than that.

CHAPTER 16

HUDDLING IN THE BACK OF THE MERCEDES, WE had arrived at one of those moments of extreme stress that I mentioned earlier, one of those awkward situations in which my imagination can be as ornate as a carousel of grotesque beasts, standing on end like a Ferris wheel, vigorously spinning off visions of ludicrous fates and droll deaths.

If we were found, these men could shoot us through the windows. They could open the doors and shoot us point-blank. They could bar the doors, set the car on fire, and roast us alive.

Whatever they chose to do to us, we would not die as easily as any of those scenarios allowed. They would first need to find out who we were and what we knew about their plans.

Torture. They would torture us. Pliers, sharp blades, needles, red-hot pokers, nail guns, garlic presses applied to the tongue. Blinding bleach, caustic acids, unpleasant-tasting elixirs, secondhand smoke. They would be enthusiastic torturers. They would be relentless. They would enjoy it so much that they would take videos of our suffering to play later for their adoring mothers.

I had told Annamaria that I was prepared to die for her, and I had told the truth, but my vow had come with the implicit promise that I would also not lead her to her death *before* I died for her. At least not in the same hour that I had solemnly sworn to be her protector.

Someone switched on the single bare bulb in the garage ceiling. The car was parked nose-in, which meant we were at the front of

the garage, farther from the stairs than anywhere else we could have hidden. The light proved too weak to penetrate to our dark little haven.

Mercedes' engineers could be proud of their skill at providing sound attenuation. If someone was poking around the garage, opening the door to the water-heater closet or peering behind the furnace, I could not hear him.

Silently I counted sixty seconds, then another sixty, and then a third set.

Timing our confinement proved to whittle my nerves, so I stopped counting minutes and waited, trying not to think about torture.

The interior of the old Mercedes smelled of well-worn leather, mentholated liniment, gardenia-based perfume, cat dander, and dust.

An urge to sneeze overcame me. In a spirit of Zen stoicism, I meditated on transforming the urge to sneeze into an itch between my shoulder blades, which I would have been more able to endure. When that did not work, I meditated on transforming the urge to sneeze into a benign colon polyp.

After tightly pinching my nose and breathing through my mouth for a while, I began to believe that the agents of the nefarious harbor department would have by now concluded that Annamaria and I had escaped. They must have gone away.

As I cautiously raised my head, intending to scope the garage, two male voices rose nearby, one deep-toned and the other full of wheedle. I dropped back into my hole as though I were a jack-in-the-box.

Annamaria reached out of the shadows and found my hand. Or maybe I reached out and found hers.

I could not discern what the men were saying. Clearly, however, one of them was angry, and the other was making excuses.

A loud crash followed by a diminishing clatter suggested that the deep-voiced one had knocked over something or had thrown a heavy object at the excuse-maker.

As the argument continued, I realized that Annamaria's hand in mine seemed to give me courage. My racing heart began to slow and

my teeth unclenched.

The two men proved to be closer than I had first realized. To make a point, the angrier one pounded a hand three times on the hood or on a front fender of the sedan in which we had taken refuge.

CHAPTER 17

THE DEEP-VOICED THUG, WHO MOST LIKELY HAD yellow eyes and a chin beard and a reservation for a bed of nails in Hell, pounded on the Mercedes again.

In our inadequate hidey-hole in the backseat of that very sedan, Annamaria squeezed my hand gently, reassuringly.

My eyes had adapted to the gloom. I could see her face just well enough to know that she was smiling as though to say that this would prove to be a temporary setback in our escape, that soon we would be skipping through meadows full of flowers, where iridescent butterflies would dance through the air to the sweet songs of larks and robins and bright yellow warblers.

I knew that she was not stupid, and I doubted that she would prove to be foolish. Consequently, I assumed that either she knew something that I did not or that she had more faith in me than my survival skills justified.

As the argument subsided, the voices grew quieter. Then they moved away from the Mercedes.

The garage light went off.

A door closed.

I could no longer see Annamaria's face. I hoped that she was not smiling at me in the dark.

Although it is not a full-blown phobia, I am made uncomfortable by the thought of people smiling at me in the dark, even people as benign—and even as good-hearted—as this woman seemed to be.

In the movies, when a character in a pitch-black place strikes a match and finds himself face to face with someone or something that is grinning at him, the someone or something is going to tear off his head.

Of course, movies bear virtually no resemblance to real life, not even the kind that pile up awards. In movies, the world is either full of fantastic adventure and exhilarating heroism—or it's a place so bleak, so cruel, so full of treachery and vicious competition and hopelessness that you want to kill yourself halfway through a box of Reese's miniature peanut-butter cups. There's no middle ground in modern movies; you either save a kingdom and marry a princess or you are shot to death by assassins hired by the evil corporation that you are trying to bring to justice in the courtroom of a corrupt judge.

Outside, a truck engine started. The noise ebbed, and silence flowed back into the night.

I remained slouched in the dark car for a minute, perhaps being smiled at, perhaps not, and then said, "Do you think they're gone?"

She said, "Do *you* think they're gone?"

Over dinner, I had agreed to be her paladin, and no self-respecting paladin would decide on a course of action based on a majority vote of a committee of two.

"All right," I said, "let's go."

We climbed out of the sedan, and I used the flashlight to find our way to the man-size door in the south wall. The hinges creaked when it swung open, which I had not noticed previously.

In the narrow passage between the garage and the tall hedge, no one waited to tear off our heads. So far so good. But they would be waiting elsewhere.

After dousing the flashlight, I hesitated to lead her out to the driveway and the street, for fear that a sentinel had been stationed there.

Intuiting my concern, Annamaria whispered, "At the back, there's a gate to a public greenbelt."

We went to the rear of the building. Passing the steps that led to her apartment, I glanced up, but no one was looking down at us.

We crossed the foggy yard. Slick yellow leaves littered the wet grass: fall-off from sycamore trees that held their foliage longer on this stretch of the central coast than elsewhere.

In a white fence with scalloped pickets stood a gate with carved torsades. Beyond lay the greenbelt. A sward of turf vanished into the mist to the south, west, and north.

Taking Annamaria's arm, I said, "We want to go south, I think."

"Stay near the property fences here along the east side," she advised. "The greenbelt borders Hecate's Canyon to the west. It's narrow in some places, and the drop-off can be sudden."

In Magic Beach, Hecate's Canyon was legendary.

Along the California coast, many ancient canyons, like arthritic fingers, reach crookedly toward the sea, and any town built around one of them must unite its neighborhoods with bridges. Some are wide, but more of them are narrow enough to be called defiles.

Hecate's Canyon was a defile, but wider than some, and deep, with a stream at the bottom. Flanking the stream—which would become a wilder torrent in the rainy season—grew mixed-species junk groves of umbrella pine, date palm, *Agathis*, and common cypress, gnarled and twisted by the extreme growing conditions and by the toxic substances that had been illegally dumped into the canyon over the years.

The walls of the defile were navigable but steep. Wild vines and thorny brush slowed both erosion and hikers.

In the 1950s, a rapist-murderer had preyed on the young women of Magic Beach. He had dragged them into Hecate's Canyon and forced them to dig their own graves.

The police had caught him—Arliss Clerebold, the high-school art teacher—disposing of his eighth victim. His wispy blond hair had twisted naturally into Cupid curls. His face was sweet, his mouth was made for a smile, his arms were strong, and his long-fingered hands had the gripping strength of a practiced climber.

Of the previous seven victims, two were never found. Clerebold refused to cooperate, and cadaver dogs could not locate the graves.

As Annamaria and I walked south along the greenbelt, I dreaded encountering the spirits of Clerebold's victims. They had received

justice when he had been executed in San Quentin; therefore, they had mostly likely moved on from this world. But the two whose bodies had never been found might have lingered, yearning for their poor bones to be reinterred in the cemeteries where their families were at rest.

With Annamaria to protect and with the responsibility to thwart whatever vast destruction was on the yellow-eyed hulk's agenda, I had enough to keep me busy. I could not afford to be distracted by the melancholy spirits of murdered girls who would want to lead me to their long-hidden graves.

Concerned that even thinking about those sad victims would draw their spirits to me, if indeed they still lingered, I tried to elicit more information from Annamaria as we proceeded cautiously through the nearly impenetrable murk.

"Are you originally from around here?" I asked softly.

"No."

"Where are you from?"

"Far away."

"Faraway, Oklahoma?" I asked. "Faraway, Alabama? Maybe Faraway, Maine?"

"Farther away than all of those. You would not believe me if I named the place."

"I would believe you," I assured her. "I've believed everything you've said, though I don't know why, and though I don't understand most of it."

"Why do you believe me so readily?"

"I don't know."

"But you do know."

"I do?"

"Yes. You know."

"Give me a hint. Why do I believe you so readily?"

"Why does anyone believe anything?" she asked.

"Is this a philosophical question—or just a riddle?"

"Empirical evidence is one reason."

"You mean like—I believe in gravity because if I throw a stone in the air, it falls back to the ground."

“Yes. That’s what I mean.”

“You haven’t been exactly generous with empirical evidence,” I reminded her. “I don’t even know where you’re from. Or your name.”

“You know my name.”

“Only your first name. What’s your last?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Everybody has a last name.”

“I’ve never had one.”

The night was cold; our breath smoked from us. She had such a mystical quality, I might have been persuaded that we had exhaled the entire vast ocean of fog that now drowned all things, that she had come down from Olympus with the power to breathe away the world and, out of the resultant mist, remake it to her liking.

I said, “You had to have a last name to go to school.”

“I’ve never gone to school.”

“You’re home-schooled?”

She did not reply.

“Without a last name, how do you get welfare?”

“I’m not on the welfare rolls.”

“But you said you don’t work.”

“That’s right.”

“What—do people just give you money when you need it?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. That would be even less stressful than the tire life or shoe sales.”

“I’ve never asked anyone for anything—until I asked you if you would die for me.”

Out there in the dissolved world, St. Joseph’s Church tower must have remained standing, for in the distance its familiar bell tolled the half-hour, which was strange for two reasons. First, the radiant dial of my watch showed 7:22, and that seemed right. Second, from eight in the morning till eight in the evening, St. Joe’s marked each hour with a single strike of the bell and the half-hour with two. Now it rang three times, a solemn reverberant voice in the fog.

“How old are you, Annamaria?”

“In one sense, eighteen.”

“To go eighteen years without asking anyone for anything—you must have known you were saving up for a really big request.”

“I had an inkling,” she said.

She sounded amused, but this was not the amusement of deception or obfuscation. I sensed again that she was being more direct than she seemed.

Frustrated, I returned to my former line of inquiry: “Without a last name, how do you get health care?”

“I don’t need health care.”

Referring to the baby she carried, I said, “In a couple months, you’ll need it.”

“All things in their time.”

“And, you know, it’s not good to go to term without regularly seeing a doctor.”

She favored me with a smile. “You’re a very sweet young man.”

“It’s a little weird when you call me a young man. I’m older than you are.”

“But nonetheless a young man, and sweet. Where are we going?” she wondered.

“That sure is the million-dollar question.”

“I mean right now. Where are we going now?”

I took some pleasure in answering her with a line that was as inscrutable as anything that she had said to me: “I have to go see a man with hair like wool-of-bat and tongue like fillet of fenny snake.”

“*Macbeth*,” she said, identifying the reference and robbing me of some of my satisfaction.

“I call him Flashlight Guy. You don’t need to know why. It’s liable to be dicey, so you can’t go with me.”

“I’m safest with you.”

“I’ll need to be able to move fast. Anyway, I know this woman—you’ll like her. No one would think of looking for either of us at her place.”

A growling behind us caused us to turn.

For an instant it seemed to me that the hulk had followed us and, while we had been engaged in our enigmatic conversation, had by some magic separated himself into three smaller forms. In the fog were six yellow eyes, as bright as road-sign reflectors, not at the height of a man's eyes but lower to the ground.

When they slunk out of the mist and halted just ten feet from us, they were revealed as coyotes. Three of them.

The fog developed six more eyes, and three more rangy specimens arrived among the initial trio.

Evidently they had come out of Hecate's Canyon, on the hunt. Six coyotes. A pack.

CHAPTER 18

HAVING LIVED WHERE PRAIRIE MET MOJAVE, IN Pico Mundo, I had encountered coyotes before. Usually the circumstances were such that, being skittish about human beings, they wanted to avoid me and had no thought of picking my bones.

On one late-night occasion, however, they had gone shopping for meat, and I had been the juiciest item in the display case. I barely escaped that situation without leaving behind a mouthful of my butt.

If I had been Hutch Hutchison and had found myself on the menu of a coyote pack twice within seventeen months, I would have viewed this not as an interesting coincidence but as irrefutable scientific proof that coyotes as a species had turned against humanity and were intent on exterminating us.

In the fog, on the greenbelt, alongside Hecate's Canyon, the six prime specimens of *Canis latrans* had none of the appeal of any of the various species and breeds that pet shops put in their windows.

This was unusual, believe it or not, because coyotes sometimes can have a goofy charm. They are more closely related to wolves than to dogs, lean and sinewy, efficient predators, but with feet too big for their bodies and ears too big for their heads, they can appear a little puppylike, *at least* as cute as Iran's homicidal dictator when he puts on a leisure suit and has his photo taken eating ice-cream cones with grade-school children whose parents have volunteered them to be suicide bombers.

With narrow faces, bared fangs, and radiant-eyed intensity, these current six coyotes confronting Annamaria and me did not have what it took to be featured in a Purina Puppy Chow commercial. They looked like fascist jihadists in fur.

In most perilous moments, I can put my hands on a makeshift weapon, but on this empty greensward, the only possibility seemed to be a wooden fence pale if I could break one of them loose. No rocks. No baseball bats, buckets, brooms, antique porcelain vases, frying pans, shovels, pop-up toasters, or angry cross-eyed ferrets, which had proved to make effective impromptu weapons in the past.

I began to think I really needed to get over my gun phobia and start packing heat.

As it turned out, I had a weapon of which I was unaware: one young, pregnant, enigmatic woman. As I urged her to back slowly away from the toothy pack, she said, "They are not only what they appear to be."

"Well, who is?" I said. "But I think these guys are *largely* what they appear to be."

Instead of cautiously retreating from the beasts and hoping to discover an unlocked gate in a fenced backyard, Annamaria took a step toward them.

I said what might have been a bad word meaning excrement, but I hope that I used a polite synonym.

Quietly but firmly, she said to the coyotes, "You do not belong here. The rest of the world is yours...but not this place at this moment."

Personally, I did not think it was good strategy to tell a pack of hungry carnivores that would-be diners without the proper attire would not be served.

Their hackles were raised. Their tails were tucked. Their ears were flat to their heads. Their bodies were tense, muscles tight.

These guys were up for a meal.

When she took another step toward them, I said nothing because I was concerned my voice would sound like that of Mickey Mouse, but I reached after her and put a hand on her arm.

Ignoring me, she said to the coyotes, "I am not yours. He is not yours. You will leave now."

In some parts of the country, coyotes are called prairie wolves, which sounds much nicer, but even if you called them fur babies, they would not be cuddly bundles of joy.

"You will leave now," she repeated.

Astonishingly, the predators seemed to lose their confidence. Their hackles smoothed down, and they stopped baring their teeth.

"Now," she insisted.

No longer willing to meet her eyes, they pricked their ears and looked left, right, as though wondering how they had gotten here and why they had been so reckless as to expose themselves to a dangerous pregnant woman.

Tails in motion, ducking their heads, glancing back sheepishly, they retreated into the fog, as if they had previously been foiled by Little Red Riding Hood and now *this*, leaving them deeply unsure of their predatory skills.

Annamaria allowed me to take her arm once more, and we continued south along the greenbelt.

After some fruitless reflection on the meaning of what had just transpired, I said, "So, you talk to animals."

"No. That's just how it seemed."

"You said they were not only what they appeared to be."

"Well, who is?" she asked, quoting me, which will never be as enlightening as quoting Shakespeare.

"What were they...in addition to what they appeared to be?"

"You know."

"That's not really an answer."

She said, "All things in their time."

"That's not an answer, either."

"It is what it is."

"Yes, I see."

"Not yet. But you will."

"I never saw the White Rabbit, but we've fallen out of the world into Wonderland."

She squeezed my arm. “The World itself is a wonderland, young man, as you well know.”

Off to our right, visible only now and then as shadowy forms along the edge of Hecate’s Canyon, the coyotes skulked parallel to us, and I called them to her attention.

“Yes,” she said, “they will be persistent, but do they dare look toward us?”

As we proceeded, I watched them for a while, but not once did I glimpse the faintest flicker of a radiant yellow eye in the murk. They seemed to be focused strictly on the ground before them.

“If you can handle a coyote pack,” I said, “I’m not sure you really need me.”

“I have no influence over people,” she said. “If they wish to torture and murder me, and they are determined to shatter all my defenses, then I will suffer. But coyotes—even beasts like these—don’t concern me, and they shouldn’t worry you.”

“You seem to know what you’re talking about,” I said. “But I’m going to worry a little about the coyotes anyway.”

“ ‘Virtue is bold, and goodness never fearful.’ ”

I said, “Shakespeare, huh?”

“*Measure for Measure.*”

“I don’t know that one.”

“Now you do.”

As much as I admired the Bard of Avon, it seemed to me that goodness needed to be fearful of those slouching shapes in the fog if goodness wanted to avoid being chewed up and swallowed.

CHAPTER 19

A FEW BLOCKS BEFORE WE ARRIVED AT THE Cottage of the Happy Monster, our skulking escorts faded away into the fallen clouds and did not return, although I suspected that we had not seen the last of them.

The house stood alone at the end of a narrow lane of cracked and runneled blacktop. Huge deodar cedars flanked the road, their drooping branches seeming to carry the fog as if it had the weight of snow.

With a thatched and dormered roof, cedar-shingle walls, trumpet vines espaliered along the roof line, and a bougainvillea-covered porte-cochere, the large cottage could have been copied from one of the romantic paintings of Thomas Kinkade.

Like curious spooks, pale shapes of curdled mist pressed to the casement windows, gazing in, as though deciding whether the rooms inside were conducive to haunting.

A dark amber glow of considerable appeal shone through those phantom spirits. As we drew closer, I saw that this cheerful light glimmered and twinkled along the beveled edges of the diamond-shaped panes of glass, as though a person of magical power resided within.

As we had approached along the lane, I had prepared Annamaria for Blossom Rosedale, with whom she would be staying for an hour or two. Forty-five years ago, when Blossom had been six years old,

her drunk and angry father dropped her headfirst into a barrel in which he had been burning trash primed with a little kerosene.

Fortunately, she had been wearing tightly fitted glasses, which spared her from blindness and saved her eyelids. Even at six, she'd had the presence of mind to hold her breath, which saved her lungs. She managed to topple the barrel and quickly crawl out, though by then aflame.

Surgeons saved one ear, rebuilt her nose—although not to the extent that it resembled a normal nose—and reconstructed her lips. Blossom never had hair thereafter. Her face remained forever seamed and puckered with keloid scars too terrible to be addressed by any surgical technique.

Out walking a week previously, I had encountered her as, with a flat tire, she pulled to the side of the road. Although she insisted that she could change the tire herself, I did the job because Blossom stood under five feet, had only a thumb and forefinger on her burned left hand, and had not been dressed for the rain that threatened.

With the spare tire in place, she had insisted that I come with her for coffee and a slice of her incomparable cinnamon-pecan cake. She called her home the Cottage of the Happy Monster, and though the place was a cottage and she was a deeply happy person, she was no more a monster than was Spielberg's E.T., whom she somewhat resembled.

I had visited her once again in the week since we had met, for an evening of five-hundred rummy and conversation. Although she had won three games out of three, with stakes of a penny for every ten points of spread, she and I were on the way to becoming good friends. However, she did not know about the supernatural side of my life.

Now, when she opened the door in answer to my knock, Blossom said, "Ah! Come in, come in. God has sent me a sucker to fleece at cards. Another prayer answered. I'll have my Mercedes yet."

"You won fifty cents the last time. You'll need to beat me every day for a thousand years."

“And won’t that be *fun!*” Blossom closed the door and smiled at Annamaria. “You remind me of my cousin Melvina—the married Melvina, not the Cousin Melvina who’s an old maid. Of course, Cousin Melvina is crazy, and presumably you are not.”

I made introductions while Blossom helped Annamaria out of her coat and hung it on a wall peg.

“Cousin Melvina,” Blossom said, “has a problem with a time traveler. Dear, do you believe time travel is possible?”

Annamaria said, “Twenty-four hours ago, I was in yesterday.”

“And now here you are in today. I’ll have to tell my cousin about you.”

Taking Annamaria by the arm, Blossom walked her toward the back of the cottage.

“Cousin Melvina says a time traveler from 10,000 A.D. secretly visits her kitchen when she’s sleeping.”

As I followed them, Annamaria asked, “Why her kitchen?”

“She suspects they don’t have cake in the far future.”

The cottage was magically lit by Tiffany-inspired stained-glass lamps and sconces, the shades of which Blossom had crafted herself.

“Does Melvina have a lot of cake in her kitchen?”

“She’s a positive fanatic for cake.”

On a living-room wall hung a colorful and intricately detailed quilt of great beauty. Blossom’s quilts sold in art galleries; a few museums had acquired them.

“Perhaps her husband is having midnight snacks,” Annamaria said.

“No. Melvina lives in Florida, and her husband, Norman, he lives in a former Cold War missile silo in Nebraska.”

From a kitchen cabinet, Blossom took a container of coffee and a package of filters, and gave them to Annamaria.

As Annamaria began to prepare the brewer, she said, “Why would anyone want to live in an old missile silo?”

Opening a tin of cookies, Blossom said, “To avoid living with Melvina. She’d go anywhere with him, but not into a missile silo.”

“Why wouldn’t there be cake in the far future?” Annamaria asked.

With pastry tongs, Blossom transferred cookies from the tin to a plate. “Melvina says maybe they lost all the best recipes in a world war.”

“They had a war over cake?”

“Probably the war was for the usual reasons. Cake would have been collateral damage.”

“She does sound kind of crazy.”

“Oh, yes,” said Blossom, “but not in a bad way.”

Standing in the open door, I said, “Annamaria is in a little trouble —”

“Pregnancy isn’t trouble,” Blossom said, “it’s a blessing.”

“Not that. Some bad guys are looking for her.”

“Bad guys?” Blossom asked Annamaria.

“Nobody’s inherently bad,” said Annamaria. “It’s all about the choices we make.”

“And the Deceiver,” said Blossom, “is always there to whisper the wrong choice in your ear. But I believe remorse can lead to redemption.”

“Some people,” I said, “the only way they get around to remorse is after you break a baseball bat over their head.”

“When he sobered up, my father regretted what he did to me,” said Blossom.

“Some people,” I testified, “they lock you in a car trunk with two dead rhesus monkeys, put the car in one of those huge hydraulic crushers, push the SQUISH-IT button, and just laugh. They don’t even know the word *regret*.”

“Did you forgive your father?” Annamaria asked.

“He’s eighty-two,” Blossom said. “I pay his nursing-home bills. But I don’t see him.”

“Some people,” I said, “they lose their temper and you have to take a gun away from them, and you give them a chance to rethink what they did, and they *say* they were wrong, they’re remorseful, but then they let you walk into a room where they *know* there’s a crocodile that hasn’t been fed in a week.”

Both women gave me the kind of look you usually reserve for a two-headed man walking a blue dog.

“I’m not saying everyone,” I clarified. “Just *some* people.”

To Blossom, Annamaria said, “But you forgave your father.”

“Yes. A long, long time ago. It wasn’t easy. The reason I don’t see him is because he can’t take it. Seeing me tears him apart. The guilt. It’s too hard on him.”

Annamaria held out a hand, and Blossom took it, and then they hugged each other.

I said, “So, these bad guys looking for Annamaria and me—I need to poke around, learn more about them. I thought she’d be safe here with you for a couple hours, if you’re cool with that.”

To Annamaria, Blossom said, “We could play cards or Scrabble or backgammon or something.”

“I like backgammon,” Annamaria said. “Do you ever add a little vanilla to your coffee when you brew it?”

“Sometimes vanilla, sometimes cinnamon.”

“Cinnamon. That sounds good.”

“Cousin Melvina—not the one married to Norman in the missile silo, the other one—she likes to add a half-teaspoon of cinnamon and a full teaspoon of cocoa to a twelve-cup pot.”

“That sounds good to me. Let’s do that. Why would parents name both daughters Melvina?”

“Oh,” said Blossom, fetching the can of cocoa powder, “they aren’t sisters. They’re cousins to each other. They were both named after our maternal grandmother, Melvina Belmont Singleton, who was famous in her time.”

“Famous? For what?”

“For living with gorillas.”

“What gorillas did she live with?”

“Oh, anywhere they had gorillas, sooner or later, she went there to live with them.”

“What was she—a naturalist or an anthropologist?”

“No, she wasn’t any of that. She just thought the world and all of gorillas, couldn’t get enough of watching them, and the gorillas didn’t seem to mind.”

“I’d think they would mind,” Annamaria said.

“Well, when scientists move in to study them, the gorillas sometimes give them a lot of grief, but they didn’t object to Grandma Melvina.”

“She must have been a formidable person.”

“We have strong women in our family,” said Blossom.

“I can see that,” said Annamaria, and they smiled at each other.

Blossom said, “Grandma Melvina taught a gorilla named Percy to write poetry.”

Annamaria said, “Free verse, I imagine.”

“No sane person would have paid for it,” Blossom said, and they both laughed.

I wanted to hear more about Grandma Melvina and the gorillas, but I needed to have a serious talk with Flashlight Guy. Blossom and Annamaria were having such a good time, I didn’t interrupt to tell them that their Odysseus was about to set sail on his warship.

Crossing the living room, I noticed that the mantel clock read one minute till midnight.

According to my wristwatch, the time was 7:52.

At the mantel, I put one ear to the clock, but it seemed to have spent its treasure of time, and it did not pay out a single tick.

Throughout my life, when the supernatural had become apparent to me in the natural world, it had always been through my paranormal senses, shared by no one else: the ability to see the lingering spirits of the dead, the frustrating gift of enigmatic predictive dreams, and psychic magnetism.

The stopped clock in Annamaria’s one-room apartment had not been a vision but a reality, seen not just by me, but visible to her as well. I had no doubt that if I were to call her and Blossom from the kitchen, they would see what I saw on the mantel.

One clock frozen at a minute until midnight is nothing more than a broken clock. In this night of fog and spellbound coyotes and porch swings that swung themselves, however, meaning could not be denied upon the discovery of a second timepiece with its hands fixed at the very minute of the same hour.

The supernatural had entered the natural world in ways new to my experience, and this development struck me as ominous.

I could think of only one interpretation to be made of broken but synchronized clocks. Only a little more than four hours remained for me to prevent the many deaths and the vast destruction planned by the yellow-eyed giant and his associates.

CHAPTER 20

A DOVE DESCENDING THROUGH CANDESCENT air, a bush bursting into fire and from the fire a voice, stars shifting from their timeless constellations to form new and meaningful patterns in the heavens...

Those were some of the signs upon which prophets historically had based their predictions and their actions. I received, instead, two stopped clocks.

If I am not just a freak whose extrasensory perceptions are the result of a few mutated synapses making strange connections in my brain, if my gift has a giver other than indifferent Nature and comes with a purpose, then the angel in charge of the Odd Thomas account must be operating on a shoestring budget.

Making my way through Magic Beach, toward the address I had found in the wallet of Sam Whittle—alias Sam Bittel, known to me affectionately as Flashlight Guy—I felt as if the fog drowning the town had flooded into my head. In that internal mist, my thoughts were as disconnected as, in the outer world, houses on the same block seemed to be separate islands, each a stranger to the other, in a white sea.

More traffic rolled through the quiet night than I had seen earlier.

Some of the vehicles were at such a distance, passing across the streets on which I traveled, that I could make out little more than the submerged glow of their headlights. Perhaps some were driven by ordinary men and women engaged upon the mundane tasks of

daily life, with neither an unworthy thought nor an evil purpose among them.

At the first sight of any vehicle that shared a street with me, I hid behind the nearest cover and, from concealment, watched as it drifted past. One after another proved either to be labeled HARBOR DEPARTMENT or to be a police car.

Perhaps the police had put their entire motor pool on the streets because the cloaking fog facilitated burglary and other crimes. Call me paranoid, but I suspected the authorities were out in force only to support certain friends in the harbor department.

Through windshields and side windows, I glimpsed a few faces barely and queerly revealed in the glow of instrument panels and computer screens. None looked suitable for a poster celebrating the friendliness and selflessness of our public servants.

I felt as though extraterrestrial seeds, come quietly to Earth behind the curtains of fog, had grown swiftly into large pods that had been busily disgorging men who were not men.

Sam Whittle lived on Oaks Avenue, which was not grand enough to warrant being called an avenue, and was not shaded by oaks. Formerly called Founders Street, it had been renamed in honor of John Oaks, a sports star who never lived in Magic Beach or even visited, but whose cousin—or a woman who claimed to be his cousin—served on the city council.

Whittle lived in a bungalow as unremarkable as a cracker box, graced by no ornamental millwork, as plain as the fog that embraced it. The front porch was unfurnished, the yard devoid of landscape lighting, and the back porch as empty as the front.

No light brightened any window. No vehicle stood in the carport.

At the back door, I took a laminated driver's license from Sam Whittle's wallet and used it to loid the lock. The deadbolt had not been engaged, and when the license pressed back the latch, the door swung inward with a faint creak of hinges.

For a moment I remained on the porch, letting the fog precede me, searching the perfect darkness within, listening for the telltale sound of an impatient adversary shifting his weight from one foot to the other as he waited for the fly to come into the web.

Warily I stepped across the threshold. I left the door open for the moment, to facilitate sudden flight.

The digital clocks on the oven and the microwave had not frozen at a minute until midnight, but neither did the green glow of those numbers alleviate the gloom.

I smelled some kind of whiskey, and I hoped that it didn't come to me on the exhalations of a man with a gun.

When I held my breath, I heard nothing—except perhaps another man holding his breath.

Finally I committed. I closed the door behind me.

Had someone been in the room, he would have switched on a light just then, and I would have seen my fate in the muzzle of his gun.

Perhaps I had done more damage to Flashlight Guy than he had done to me, requiring him to visit a hospital emergency room for a few stitches in the scalp. The suturing would not have taken long, but the emergency-admissions clerk would have required him to fill out, read, and sign six pounds of paperwork, including ninety legal disclaimers and liability-release forms; thereafter, they might keep him an hour or two for observation. In any case, he would be home soon.

Counseling myself to be out of this house in five minutes or less, I switched on Annamaria's flashlight, with which I had led the way from her apartment into the garage below it.

Narrowing the beam with two spread fingers, I sectioned the room—a kitchen—left to right. The blade of light, in the fourth slice, found the source of the whiskey smell.

A bottle of Jack Daniel's and a glass stood on the dinette table. The cap was off the bottle, and the glass held bourbon that appeared to have been watered down, perhaps by melted ice.

Another glass lay on its side. A small puddle of spilled bourbon glistened on the table.

The evidence suggested Whittle had returned home after regaining consciousness, and had left again in too much of a hurry to clean up the spill.

Two chairs stood away from the table. Before leaving, the drinkers had not taken time to tuck the chairs where they belonged.

A pair of unlaced men's shoes were under the table, one lying on its side. Whittle could have changed shoes before leaving. Or he might still be here.

Because vinyl blinds had been drawn down tight at every window, I stopped pinching the flashlight beam and let it flourish.

A narrow hallway led from the kitchen past a living room full of lifeless furniture, where the draperies were drawn shut and where no art adorned the walls.

I had been in the house approximately one minute.

Across the hall from the living room lay a study with a couch, a desk, a chair, bookshelves. Here, too, the blinds allowed no view of the night.

The desk top had been swept bare. The bookshelves were empty.

I suspected that this place had been rented furnished and that Sam Whittle had not lived here more than a few weeks, having made no plans to settle in long-term.

Nevertheless, I wanted to search the desk drawers, although not until I determined Whittle was not here, either awake or sleeping.

In the final room, the bedclothes were disheveled. A pillow had fallen to the floor.

On the carpet, a damaged earthworm slowly writhed. It must have been brought in on someone's shoe or pants leg. If it had been there more than a little while, it would already have died.

Outside, a truck engine growled in the distance and swiftly approached. I switched off the flashlight, although the windows were covered.

The vehicle seemed to take forever to pass, but eventually the engine noise faded.

When I switched on the flashlight, the dying earthworm had nearly finished flexing.

Although the house was small, I felt that I was a long way from an outside door and a quick escape.

I clicked off the light again, drew open a set of draperies, and unlatched the double-hung window. Concerned that the wood might

be swollen in the humid night, I was relieved when the bottom sash slid up with little noise.

I closed the window but did not lock it. I pulled the draperies across the window before switching on the flashlight again.

Two minutes.

The sliding doors of the closet were shut. I disliked turning my back on them.

Yet intuition drew me toward the bathroom. The gap at the base of that door admitted no light from the other side; but I have not survived by ignoring intuition.

When I put my hand on the knob, a shiver of trepidation climbed my spine, from sacrum to topmost vertebrae, and it seemed like a worm wriggled in the very axis on which my head turned.

Without realizing what I was doing, I had raised my left hand to my chest. Through the sweatshirt and the T-shirt, I could feel the thimble-size bell that hung from the silver chain around my neck.

I turned the knob. The door opened inward. No one flung himself at me or struck out.

The flashlight played across the surfaces of a bathroom from the 1940s: a field of glossy white ceramic tiles on the floor, enhanced with inlays of small pastel-green tiles, the grout cracked with age and dirty; a reversal of that scheme on the walls, a pale-green field punctuated by white inlays.

From directly ahead came a silvery splash of flashlight flaring off a mirror, then my reflection uplighted by the beam bouncing off the floor.

To my left a shower stall featured a frosted-glass door in an aluminum frame crusted with white corrosion.

To my right lay a bathtub, and in the tub a dead man languished, he who had been Flashlight Guy.

The shock of such a discovery would provide the ideal moment for an assailant to strike. Glancing at myself in the mirror, I saw with relief that no one loomed in the bedroom behind me.

Sharing this small space with a corpse, I wanted more light than the flashlight could provide. A shutter covered the only window in the bathroom, so I risked switching on the overhead light.

Sam Whittle had died in a sitting position. He remained that way because his shirt collar was snared on the hot-water faucet. His head lolled to the left.

Duct tape sealed his mouth, and something—most likely a rag—bulged behind it. They had gagged him because they had not killed him quickly.

His wrists had been taped together in front of him, and his shoeless feet had been fettered at the ankles with tape, as well.

Bathed in blood, he apparently had been shot once in each leg, once in each arm, and—after writhing not unlike a dying worm—had finally been shot in the forehead.

In the cauldron tub, he was as fearsome as any witch's brew.

A starburst hemorrhage obscured his left eye, but the right stared at me, wide in the expression of disbelief with which he must have regarded his murderer. He had not expected death to come in the form of whoever had killed him.

No matter how many dead bodies one has discovered—and I have found more of them than has the average fry cook—the sight instantly focuses the mind, draws the nerves taut, and puts a sharp point on instinct.

Almost three minutes.

When I glanced at the mirror again and saw a man behind me, I ducked and turned and punched.

CHAPTER 21

THE PUNCH LANDED BUT HAD NO EFFECT, FOR the man behind me was Sam Whittle, who had been shot five times. His bullet-riddled body sat in the bathtub, and his lingering spirit implored rather than threatened me.

Although he had manifested without the bullet wounds, he stood before me in a state of high agitation. He exhibited none of the rage that is the mark of a potential poltergeist. The desperation that gripped him was so intense that he possessed no remaining emotional capacity for anger.

He grabbed at me, and I seemed to feel as solid to him as he felt to me, but he could not gather fistfuls of my shirt. His hand, when cupped around the back of my neck, could not pull my head toward him and compel my attention.

Although he could pass through walls and closed doors and all that had substance in this world, he could not pass through me, yet neither could he so much as muss my hair. By sight and touch, the form and substance of his spirit were real to me, as they would be real to no one else on the earth, but Sam Whittle could not have any physical effect on me.

When he realized his limitations, Whittle spoke urgently but produced no sound. Perhaps he heard himself and thought that I could hear him, because I had to speak up and tell him that his voice would never reach me regardless of the force with which he shouted.

I suspect that lingering spirits are restrained from speech because they know in fullness the true nature of death and at least something about what lies beyond this world. This is knowledge that might corrupt the living and misdirect us in one way or another if we were to receive it.

Denied speech, Whittle quickened into an even more frantic state of desperation, moving past me into the bathroom, to stand before his corpse. The spirit beat its fists against its chest, against its temples, as if to argue that it felt solid to itself and thus could not believe that it was in fact only a disembodied soul, that all life had bled out of its earthly shell.

Wild-eyed, Whittle surveyed the room, as though seeking a route of escape, a return door to life. Across his face writhed a series of expressions, each more despairing and more anguished than the one that preceded it.

Desperation is energized despair, and despair is the abandonment of hope. Without hope, he had no defense against fear, which quickly swelled into a purity of terror from which I had to look away.

Over the years I have had reason to believe that most of the lingering dead are those who are destined for a better world than this one, if only they will receive it. They resist moving on for a variety of reasons, none of them rational.

Elvis had loved his mother so profoundly and had lost her so early, that after his death he longed to leave this world and to be in her company once more. But because he felt that he had not lived his life in a manner that she would have approved, because he was loath to face her judgment of his drug use and his promiscuity and his general dissolution, he had lingered here until at last he became convinced that what waited for him was forgiveness that surpassed understanding.

Those whose lives had included insufficient acts of kindness and good will to outweigh the evil they had done, or who had done nothing but evil, did not often linger here after death. And those of their kind who did linger were not here for years, but usually for days or hours.

Because they never believed in hope while alive, I assumed their hopelessness stayed with them after death. Maybe they traveled into darkness eternal without protest because they lacked the imagination to envision anything else.

Another possibility was that, upon death, they had a debt to pay. I could envision a collector of those debts who had no patience for lingering debtors.

Whittle's behavior suggested that he faced something worse than an easy passage into peaceful darkness. As he accepted mortality and could no longer deny the corpse in the bathtub, his terror escalated.

Perhaps half a minute or forty seconds had passed since he had first appeared in the bathroom doorway.

What happened next happened fast, and it was a center-stage moment worthy of Second Witch, she who had no other name in *Macbeth*.

Whittle moved around the bathroom with the frenzied urgency of a bird that, having flown in through an open window, could not detect the draught that would lead it back to freedom.

In the play, Second Witch had stood over a cauldron, squeezing drops of her blood into the brew: *By the pricking of my thumbs...*

Desperately circling the room, Whittle made no sound equivalent to the swoop-and-flutter of a bird, and in fact no sound whatsoever. Yet I half thought there were wings that I *should* hear if only I knew how to listen.

By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.

Enter a player more terrible than Macbeth.

The bathroom light dimmed as if a great machine had surged on elsewhere in town, drawing power from the grid.

In half-light halved again, shadows swelled and swooned, and I thought I felt the wings that I could not hear, the rhythmic pulses of pressure from air beaten by great pinions.

I cannot testify with certainty to what I saw, because it defied interpretation both by my five senses as well as by those perceptions of mine that might be called extrasensory. I had never seen anything like it before—and hoped never to see its like again.

The spirit of Sam Whittle might have thrown itself against the mirror above the sink, but I think not. What seems more true is that the mirror reached out to seize the spirit of Sam Whittle.

Further: that the mirror was for a moment more than a mirror, that it unfolded from the wall, that the glass unfurled like fabric, forming mercurial membranes full of dark reflections of both the bathroom and of some more fantastical place.

Also: that those undulant plumes were simultaneously as reflective as polished silver and yet dark with tarnish, that they embraced Whittle's spirit and swept it up into the chaos of images that swarmed across their fluttering surfaces.

And finally: that his spirit was gathered into the membranes, that the membranes furled into the mirror, and that as the mirror quivered into stillness like a pond after swallowing a stone, there was for only an instant a face peering out at me, not Whittle's face but another so hideous that I cried in alarm and reeled back.

The Presence appeared so briefly that I cannot remember the grisly details of it, so briefly that it was only my reflection at which I shouted, from which I stumbled backward.

I almost fell, reached for something to steady myself, and grabbed the handle of the shower door. The latch released. The door came open. I stood face to face with another corpse.

CHAPTER 22

FOUR MINUTES.

In the kitchen, the man's shoes had been under that side of the table on which the glass of bourbon had been overturned. This woman must have been drinking from the other glass.

The killers had cinched a braided-leather belt around her neck and had hung her from the shower head. Her feet dangled two inches off the floor.

Ceramic tiles had cracked under the strain of her suspended weight. Ancient grout had crumbled to the floor of the shower stall. The water pipe had bent, but no leak had sprung.

Fortunately, I didn't have to examine the victim to see how she had died. Her face was a ghastly portrait of strangulation. Perhaps her neck had broken, too.

In life, she must have been attractive. She might have been in her twenties; but in one brutal minute, she had aged a decade.

Like Whittle, she had been bound with duct tape at the ankles and the wrists, and also gagged.

The line of sight between the tub and the shower stall made it likely that Sam Whittle had been forced to watch them hang the woman.

I had seen enough, too much.

The irrational conviction arose that if I looked at the cadavers again, their eyes would roll in their sockets to fix on me, and they would smile and say, "*Welcome.*"

Above the sink, the streaked mirror appeared to be an ordinary looking-glass, but it had transformed once, so might transform again.

I was alive, not a lingering spirit, but I could not be sure that the collector who had taken Whittle lacked the power to take me.

Leaving the bathroom, I did not turn off the lights, but pulled the door tight shut.

For a few seconds I stood in the bedroom with the flashlight extinguished, less afraid of the dark than of the sights that light could show me.

They would not have killed Flashlight Guy merely because he had failed to subdue me on the beach when I had swum to shore from the inflatable dinghy. Whittle and the woman must have disagreed with the other conspirators about something, and must not have foreseen the ferocity with which their associates would settle a difference of opinion.

Usually I am pleased when bad guys fall out with one another, because disharmony in their ranks can make them easier to defeat. But if this crew was planning many deaths and vast destruction such that the sky and sea would burn with bloody light, as in my dream, I would feel better if they were not also hair-trigger hotheads in addition to being criminal scum.

I switched on the flashlight and hurriedly searched the dresser drawers. They contained only clothes, and not many of those.

Although I had been in the house no more than five minutes, the time had come to get out. Maybe these murders had been impromptu; if so, the killers might return to remove the bodies and clean up the evidence of violence.

Twitching as if electrical impulses short-circuited through the frayed fibers of my nerves, I thought that I heard stealthy noises elsewhere in the house.

Chastising myself for being too easily spooked, I nevertheless decided not to leave by the way I had entered.

Dousing the flashlight, I swept aside the draperies. The window sash slid up as smoothly as it had moved previously.

From the back of the bungalow came the crash of a door being kicked open, and an instant later the front door was booted in as well.

I had spoken of one devil, and another had arrived. Murderers, returning to the scene of a crime, intent on removing the evidence, would never call attention to themselves by kicking down the doors any more than they would arrive blowing party horns.

From within the house, men shouted: "*Police!*"

I slipped out of the bungalow as quickly and as quietly as an experienced sneak thief, which is perhaps not a skill that I should trumpet with pride.

As though it were a living entity that could reproduce itself, the fog seemed to have fathered new generations of fog, crowding the night more completely than when I'd gone inside five minutes earlier.

The police had arrived without sirens and also without switching on the emergency-light arrays on their patrol cars. No revolving red or blue beacons stained the fog.

Again I thought of seed pods from outer space disgorging men who were not men. Although I didn't believe that the Magic Beach Police Department was staffed by extraterrestrials passing for human, I did suspect that at least some of them were less than exemplars of law enforcement.

Because I had taken Sam Whittle's wallet on the beach but had not taken his money, they had thought I might look him up to ask a few questions. They had entered the bungalow as if they knew two bodies were stashed there—which meant I had been lured inside to take the fall for the murders.

As I came out the window, the police were entering the bungalow by the front and the back. Not all of them would go inside.

Foiled by the density of the fog, a flashlight appeared at the front corner of the house.

The beam could not reach me. While I was still unable to see the officer behind the light and while I was likewise invisible, I moved blindly away from him, across a lawn.

Another flashlight quested through the murk at the back of the bungalow.

Turning from that one, as well, I headed toward what I thought must be the property next door, although I could see no house lights. The men inside the bungalow would soon find the window that I had left open, and upon making that discovery, they would focus all their resources in this direction.

When I walked boldly into a chain-link fence that marked the property line, the shaken barrier seemed to sing *here he is, here he is, here he is.*

CHAPTER 23

IN DEFENSE OF MY SNEAK-THIEF REPUTATION, I must point out that no shrubs fronted the fence to warn me of it. No climbing vine grew on it, the tendrils of which might have brushed my face, halting me inches short of the collision. The steel chain was pretty much the color of the fog.

I am not one who believes that life is unfair or that we are all victims of a cruel or indifferent universe, but *this fence* struck me as unfair to the extent that I might have sat down and pouted about it if my freedom and possibly even my life hadn't been in jeopardy.

As soon as the chain-link announced my ineptitude, one of the men behind me said "What was that?" and the other one said "Yancy, is that you?" and both flashlights probed toward the source of the chain song.

I had nowhere to go but up, so I climbed, strumming a harpist-from-Hell tune from the chain-link, hoping I would not encounter coils of lacerating razor wire at the top.

Behind me, entirely comfortable with clichés, a cop shouted, "Stop or I'll shoot!"

I doubted they could see me yet, and I didn't believe they would lay down a barrage of random fire in a residential neighborhood.

As I climbed, however, I tightened my sphincter muscles against the prospect of a bullet in the spine, because you never know what might happen in a universe that, at a critical moment, throws an invisible chain-link fence in front of you.

Sometimes when people are shot in the spine and take more than an instant to die, they lose control of their bowels. I tightened my sphincter so that my corpse would not be an embarrassment to me or to those who had to deal with it. While I am ready to die if I must, I have an aversion to dying filthy.

Good fences make good neighbors, and these were apparently good enough that they had not felt the need for razor wire at the top. I crested the fence, threw myself into the yard beyond, fell, rolled to my feet, and ran with the expectation of being garroted by a taut clothesline.

I heard panting, looked down, and saw a golden retriever running at my side, ears flapping. The dog glanced up at me, tongue lolling, grinning, as though jazzed by the prospect of an unscheduled play session.

Because I did not think a dog would run head-on into a fence or into the side of a house, or into a tree, I sprinted boldly through the clotted clouds, eyes directed down at my guide, acutely alert to his body language. I broke left and right each time that he did, keeping him close, though it occurred to me that if he was a dog with a sense of humor, he would race past a tree with no room to spare and leave me with my face embedded in bark.

Dogs do laugh, as any true dog lover knows. In my blind run, I took courage from the knowledge that dogs do not have a cruel sense of humor. They will laugh at human folly and stupidity, but they will not encourage it.

To my surprise, as I ran with the retriever, through my mind flew a fragment of my conversation with Annamaria as we had walked the greensward along Hecate's Canyon, when she had tried to help me understand why I believed everything she told me even though I had not understood most of it:

Why do you believe me so readily?

I don't know.

But you do know....

Give me a hint. Why do I believe you so readily?

Why does anyone believe anything?

With the retriever, I ran headlong into a white opacity because I trusted in the essential goodness and the instincts of dogs. *Trust*. I also trusted Annamaria, which was why I believed what she told me, as cryptic and evasive as her words sometimes seemed.

Trust, however, could not be the answer. If trust was the reason I believed her, that raised a subsequent question equal to the first: If I believed her because I trusted her, then why did I trust her, considering that she was a virtual stranger and that she seemed to be calculatedly mysterious?

The golden retriever was having so much fun that I wondered if he might be running me in circles around his master's house. But my trust in him proved well placed when he brought me to a gate in the chain-link fence.

I tried to keep him from getting out of the yard, but he proved too agile to be blocked. Free, he did not sprint away into the night but stayed nearby, waiting to see what fun thing I might want to do next.

To the south, swords of light dueled in the fog, seeking me. The dog and I went north.

CHAPTER 24

A UNIVERSAL SOLVENT Poured through the world, dissolving the works of man and nature.

Shapes like buildings loomed in vague detail. Geometric fence rows separated nothing from nothing, and their rigid geometry melted into mist at both ends.

Portions of trees floated into and out of sight, like driftwood on a white flood. Gray grass spilled down slopes that slid away as though they were hills of ashes too insubstantial to maintain their contours.

The dog and I ran for a while, changed direction several times, and then we walked, out of nil and into naught, through vapor into vapor.

At some point I became aware that the weather was something more than mere weather. The stillness and the fog and the chill were not solely the consequences of meteorological systems. I began to suspect and soon felt certain that the condition of Magic Beach on this night was a presentiment, a symbolic statement of things to come.

The dog and I journeyed through a dreamscape where thick smoke smoldered from fires long extinguished, and the fumes had no odor in a world purged of every stink and fragrance.

The air pooled in stillness because the winds had died and would never breathe again, and the silence betold a world of solid stone, where the planetary core had gone cold, where no rivers ran and

seas no longer stirred with tides, where no clocks existed because no time remained to be counted.

When the dog and I stopped and stood entirely still, the white *nada* settled under us, no longer disturbed by our passage, and the pavement began to disappear beneath my feet, beneath his paws.

Such a terror rose in me that I exhaled explosively with relief when the sudden swish of his tail disturbed the bleached void and revealed, after all, the texture of the blacktop.

Yet a moment later, I felt that I had entered the Valley of Death and at once had passed into some place beyond even that, into an emptiness of such perfection that it contained no atom of the world that had been, not even a memory of nature or of the things of man, a place that lacked the substance to be a place, that was more accurately a condition. Here no hope existed for the past or for a future, no hope of the world that had been or of the world that might have been.

I was not *having* a premonition; instead, I was walking through a night that had *become* a premonition. Black is the combination of all colors, and white is the utter absence of color. The fog foretold the nullity of nonbeing, a vacuum within a vacuum, the end of history following the ultimate annihilation.

So much death was coming that it would be the end of death, such absolute destruction that nothing would escape to be destroyed hence. The terror that the dog's tail briefly brushed away returned to me and would not be dispelled again.

For a while I was aware of proceeding from nothing into nothing, my mind a deep well from the bottom of which I tried to scream. But like the lingering dead who came to me for assistance, I was not able to make a sound.

I could only pray silently, and I prayed to be led to a haven, a place with shape and color and scent and sound, a refuge from this awful nothingness, where I could press back the terror and be able to *think*.

Like a dreamer aware of dreaming, I knew that a geometric shape half resolved out of the amorphous clouds. And I was conscious of the exertion of climbing steps, though I never saw them.

I must have found the heavy door and pulled it wide, but even after I had crossed the threshold into shadow and light, with the golden retriever still at my side, and even after I had closed out the foreboding mist, I did not immediately realize the nature of the refuge into which I had been led by providence or by canine.

After the whiteness that denied all senses, the fragrances of wood polish and candle wax were so poignant that they brought tears to my eyes.

I passed through a low-ceilinged, wood-paneled room into a much larger and somewhat brighter space before realizing that I had gone from the narthex into the nave of a church.

Beside me, the dog panted with thirst, anxiety, or both.

The side aisles were softly lighted, but the main aisle lay in shadow as I followed it to the chancel railing.

Although I intended to sit in the front pew until my braided nerves untwisted, I settled on the floor because the dog needed to have his tummy rubbed. He had earned all the affection—and more—that I could give him in my current distracted state of mind.

When I am battered and oppressed by the world that humanity has made—which is different from the world that it was given—my primary defense, my consolation, is the absurdity of that world.

The given world dazzles with wonder, poetry, and purpose. The man-made world, on the other hand, is a perverse realm of ego and envy, where power-mad cynics make false idols of themselves and where the meek have no inheritance because they have gladly surrendered it to their idols in return not for lasting glory but for an occasional parade, not for bread but for the promise of bread.

A species that can blind itself to truth, that can plunge so enthusiastically along roads that lead nowhere but to tragedy, is sometimes amusing in its recklessness, as amusing as the great movie comedians like Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, and the many others who knew that a foot stuck in a bucket is funny, that a head stuck in a bucket is funnier, and that trying stubbornly to move a grand piano up a set of stairs obviously too steep and narrow to allow success is the hilarious distillation of the human experience.

I laugh with humanity, not at it, because I am as big a fool as anyone, and bigger than most. I style myself as a paladin for both the living and for the lingering dead, but I have been stuck in more than my share of buckets.

At that moment in the church with the dog, recalling the dead bodies in the bungalow bathroom, worrying about the meaning of the premonition of total destruction, I could not work up a smile.

I might have fallen into depression; but experience had taught me that another foot-and-bucket moment would come along soon.

When after a few minutes the dog continued panting, I told him to stay, and I went in search of water.

A glance toward the back of the nave confirmed that no holy-water font stood at the entrance.

Behind the altar hung a big abstract sculpture that might have been a winged spirit soaring, but only if you cocked your head to the left, squinted, and thought about Big Bird from *Sesame Street*.

I opened the gate in the chancel railing and stepped into the sanctuary.

To the right stood a plain marble baptismal font. It was dry.

On reflection, I realized that appropriating ceremonial water for a thirsty dog might be disrespectful if not even sacrilegious.

I moved deeper into the sanctuary, toward a door that I assumed opened into the sacristy, where the vestments were kept and where the minister prepared before a service. In St. Bartholomew's Church in Pico Mundo, where Stormy Llewellyn's uncle had been the priest, the sanctuary had included a small lavatory with a sink.

When I opened the door, I surprised a fiftyish man who seemed to be ordering the contents of a closet. Chubby but not fat, well barbered but not in an affected way, possessed of quick reactions but not of good balance, he startled backward at the sight of me, stepped on his own foot, and fell on his rump.

I apologized for frightening him, and he apologized for using foul language, but he must only have cursed me in his mind because he had said nothing in his startlement except *ook*.

By the time I had helped him to his feet and he had twice nearly pulled me off mine, I explained that I was seeking water for my dog,

and he identified himself as Reverend Charles Moran. His eyes were merry, and when he assured me that his fall had not been as terrible as Satan's, I saw that he amused himself, and I liked him for that.

From a mini-refrigerator, he withdrew a bottle of water and from the closet a shallow dish. Together we went to the golden retriever, where he lay obediently in front of the chancel railing.

Reverend Moran did not suggest that I had been wrong to bring the dog into the church, but only asked his name. I didn't know the name and didn't want to explain how the retriever and I had come to be together, so I said his name was Raphael.

For an instant, I did not understand why I had chosen Raphael instead of Fido. Later, I would realize what had inspired the name.

When asked *my* name, I said it was Todd.

This was not exactly a lie. My parents insisted that they meant to name me Todd but a mistake had been made on my birth certificate—which did not explain why they had called me Odd forever thereafter.

Besides, when I say that my name is Odd, a series of tiresome misunderstandings and explanations ensues. After my adventures since late afternoon, I did not have the patience to thread the needle of my true name for the minister.

We knelt by the dog as he drank, and Reverend Moran asked if I was new in town.

I said that I had been there about a month, and he asked if I was looking for a church to join. I told him that I had stopped in this evening to pray because my life had taken a wrong turn.

The reverend proved discreet enough not to press me about the nature of my troubles, trusting in his counseling skills to tease my story from me in the course of easy conversation.

Although I had come to Magic Beach alone—but for Boo and Frank Sinatra—I was incomplete without a family of close friends. I am no good alone. I need bonds, vows real if unspoken, shared laughter, and people who depend on me as I depend on them.

Hutch was turned too far inward to be more than a casual friend. I had not known the wonderful Blossom Rosedale long enough to share the truest things with her.

At ease on the floor with the dog, the reverend had a relaxed manner and an open heart. Speaking with him for a few minutes made me feel less alone.

I did not tell him more about myself, but somehow we got around to the subject of Armageddon. That was not surprising. These days, with most people, doomsday seemed to crop up in conversation more than it once did.

Eventually Reverend Moran asked if Raphael might be as hungry as he had been thirsty, and I said maybe so, but I did not want him to bother himself about it. He said it was no bother, he had a dog of his own, and he went away to get some biscuits from the pantry in the rectory.

Charles Moran's companionship had taken the edge off the fear that my premonition of total destruction had aggressively sharpened.

The dog solicited more attention, and I was pleased to respond, because in the human-dog relationship, both are therapists.

After a few minutes, however, Raphael scrambled to his feet. His ears lifted as much as a retriever's ears could lift. He stood alert, staring at the sacristy door at the back of the sanctuary.

I assumed that Reverend Moran must be returning with biscuits and that the dog had smelled them at a distance.

When Raphael shifted his attention from the sacristy door to the back of the church, peering toward the narthex, toward the main door through which we had earlier entered, I got up from the floor.

EVERYONE A NEIGHBOR, EVERY NEIGHBOR A FRIEND.

Maybe the community motto did not apply to newcomers until they had been in residence a year. I had not read the fine print on the sign that welcomed visitors at the town limits. Maybe during your first year, you were fair game.

Life had not taught me to distrust ministers, but it had taught me to trust no one more than dogs.

I went to the third pew on the right. A long wooden pocket on the back of the second-row pews held hymnals for use by those who sat in the third row.

From my left hip pocket, I fished out Sam Whittle's wallet, the possession of which would be incriminating now that he lay dead in his bathtub. Hymnals were lined up in the holding pocket, but there were spaces between them. I dropped the wallet in one of those gaps.

Nothing would be gained by revealing more about myself than the name Todd. I fished my wallet from my other hip pocket and secreted it with Whittle's.

I returned to the dog and stood with him, glancing from the sacristy door to the narthex, sacristy to narthex....

The first two police officers came through the main entrance, crossed the narthex, and stepped into the nave. They did not draw their pistols, but they approached along the center aisle with their hands on the butts of those weapons.

A policeman also stepped out of the sacristy, onto the altar platform. He was in his late forties, a decade older than the two officers in the center aisle. His prematurely gray hair was shorn close on the sides, as flat on top as brush bristles.

He possessed an air of authority that had nothing to do with his uniform. If you encountered him in his undershorts, you would still call him sir and do what he told you to do—or be prepared to pay a high price for disobedience.

Reverend Charles Moran followed Brush Cut out of the sacristy. He met my gaze and did not look away, but his eyes were not as merry as they had been earlier.

I asked him why, and when he did not answer, I asked him again, but the reverend seemed not to hear me, and he would not speak to me, though we were both alive and neither of us governed by the law of silence imposed on the lingering dead.

CHAPTER 25

I HAD RIDDEN IN A SQUAD CAR BEFORE, BACK IN Pico Mundo. Although this was not my first time, it was still kind of cool.

Police headquarters—which included a small jail—was a Greek Revival building that stood adjacent to the courthouse, on the park, in one of the most picturesque parts of town. Now it beetled in the fog like a medieval fortress.

The watch officer's desk, the booking station, and all of that would be on the main floor at the front of the building. The two young officers parked in an alleyway behind the building and took me in through a back door.

Earlier at the church, they had searched me for weapons. Here, I expected them to take my wristwatch and the silver-bell pendant, and ask me to sign a receipt acknowledging that they had confiscated no additional items of value.

I also expected them to fingerprint me and take my photo. And it was my understanding that they might allow me to call an attorney if not book an appearance on a reality-TV courtroom show.

Instead, they escorted me along a hallway with depressing blue-speckled linoleum and walls the color of tubercular phlegm, through a door, down two flights of stairs, along another hallway with an intriguingly stained concrete floor, through another door, and into a bleak windowless room that smelled of a pine-scented disinfectant strong enough to kill asthmatics and, under that, subtly of vomit.

This chamber measured about twelve by fifteen feet. A concrete floor, concrete walls, and a low concrete ceiling offered little to work with for even the most talented interior designer.

A square metal table and two chairs stood in the center of the room.

A third chair had been placed in a corner. Maybe that was where they would make me sit if I didn't behave.

One of the officers pulled out a chair for me, which seemed to be a hopeful sign that they were respectful of a prisoner's innate human dignity.

But then the other guy shackled my right ankle to a ringbolt that was built in to the table leg. Although he did not handle me roughly, he did seem to be contemptuous of me.

Without informing me of what crime I was suspected of having committed, not bothering to explain the system for ordering a snack if I should want one, they went out and closed the door, leaving me alone.

Coming in, I had noticed that the door was so thick it must have been designed by a paranoid. It closed with the solid clunk of one thousand pounds of steel.

They had left me with nothing to do except contemplate my pain threshold and my mortality, which was probably their intention.

The table to which I had been shackled seemed heavy but not immovable. I felt sure that I could drag it around my windowless prison, but as the room offered nothing to see or do, I remained seated.

When I peered under the table, I noted an eight-inch-diameter drain with a slotted grille. Considering that Magic Beach had no history of floods, I supposed that this design feature facilitated the hosing-out of the room after unfortunate accidents.

This was one of those sobering circumstances in which my overheated imagination, if I were not careful, could cause a portion of my cerebellum to melt down, and set my hair on fire. I counseled myself that I remained in the United States, which was not Cuba or Venezuela, or even Mordor.

I consulted my watch—8:56. I still had a few minutes more than three hours to save the world or a significant portion thereof. No problem.

Because I had firm control of myself, I did not care when nothing happened by 8:57 or by 8:58, although I was within seconds of shouting strident demands for justice when the door finally opened at 8:59.

One man entered the room, but he was enough. At the church, I had thought of him as Brush Cut, but I had since learned that his name was Hoss Shackett and that he was the chief of police.

Hoss must have been the short form of a longer name, but I didn't know what that might be. I had asked the younger officers in the car but they had twice refused to answer me; and the third time that I asked, they had advised me to perform an act of reproduction with myself.

After closing the blastproof door—of which Norman must have several in his Cold War missile silo in Nebraska—the chief came to the table and stood staring down at me. He didn't say anything. He just stared.

I smiled and nodded. He didn't.

After I had busied myself for a while staring at my hands and wondering what they would look like after being smashed with a tire iron, the chief pulled out the other chair and sat down across the table from me.

When I looked up, ready to parry his questions, he still did not speak. He continued to stare at me.

He had ugly green eyes colder than those of a snake, although I would not have made this observation to his face or, for that matter, within one hundred miles of his jurisdiction.

I am not a stickler for etiquette, but I did not feel that it was my place to initiate our conversation.

After a while, I could not bear to stare into his venomous eyes any longer. Either I had to look away from him, which he would take as a sign of weakness, or I had to say something that would force him to speak.

“I imagine,” I said with a relaxed affability that surprised me, “you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

He neither replied nor broke eye contact.

“I have never been in trouble with the law,” I told him.

He remained fixated on me and was so still that I could not be sure that he breathed—or needed to.

If there was a Mrs. Hoss, she was either psychological wreckage or one tough mama.

“Well,” I said, and could think of nothing to add.

At last he blinked. It was a slow blink, as if he were an iguana dazed by desert sun.

He held out his right hand and said, “Take my hand.”

I knew what this was about, and I wanted no part of it.

His hand remained above the table, palm up. He had hands big enough to play professional basketball, although the most sporting thing he had probably ever done with them was bash suspects’ heads together.

Over the years, I had read thrillers in which the authors wrote things like “the air was full of violence” and “the pending violence hung over the scene like black thunderheads.” I had always judged this to be clumsy writing, but maybe they should have won Nobels and Pulitzers.

“Take my hand,” Hoss Shackett repeated.

I said, “I’m already dating someone.”

“What’s the point of dating if your pecker’s broken off?”

“It’s a platonic relationship, anyway.”

My hands were folded on the table. Viper-quick, he struck, seizing my left hand, folding it tight enough in his to make me wish I’d had my knuckles surgically removed.

The grim concrete cell vanished, and I stood once more on Armageddon Beach, in a tempest of crimson light.

Chief Hoss Shackett was not a man who lightly revealed what he was feeling or thinking. But when he dropped my hand, returning me to reality, and leaned back in his chair, I could tell from a slight widening of his pupils that he had shared my nightmare vision.

“So,” I said, “what was *that* about?”

He did not reply.

“Because,” I said, “that has only happened to me once before, and it freaks me out.”

He had a hard strong face that Stalin would have envied. His jaw muscles were so knotted at the hinges that he appeared able to crack walnuts in his teeth.

“Nothing like this—sharing a dream—has ever happened to me before,” I assured him. “It’s every bit as awkward for me as it is for you.”

“Sharing a dream.”

“I had this dream, and now people touch me and I’m thrown back into it. What is this—the Twilight Zone?”

He leaned forward, a small move, but it was like being in a Jurassic meadow when the *T. rex* that has its back to you casually looks over its shoulder.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I have no idea.”

“I won’t keep asking nice like this.”

“Sir, I appreciate how nice you’ve been. I really do. But I’m serious. I have amnesia.”

“Amnesia.”

“Yes.”

“That’s pathetic.”

“It really is. Not knowing my past, my name, where I’m from, where I’m going. It’s totally pathetic.”

“You told Reverend Moran your name was Todd.”

“Sir, I swear, it was just a name to tell him. I could have said Larry or Vernon, or Rupert, or Ringo. I could be anybody. I just do not know.”

He did the staring thing again. It was as effective as it had been previously. Second by second, I became increasingly convinced that if I didn’t spill everything about myself, he would bite off my nose. For starters.

Although he would infer weakness if I looked away from him, I had to break the stare before his eyes sucked out my soul. I

examined my left hand to confirm that he had returned it with all my fingers.

With the solemnity of Darth Vader, the chief said, “You aren’t carrying any identification.”

“Yes, sir. That’s right. If I had some identification, I’d know who I was.”

“I don’t like people in my town not carrying ID.”

“No, sir, you wouldn’t like that, you being a man of the law. I wouldn’t like it if I were in your shoes, even if there’s nothing in the Constitution that requires a person to carry ID.”

“You’re a constitutional scholar, are you?”

“No. Well, I guess I could be. I won’t know until I recover my memory. What I think happened was somebody mugged me.”

Gingerly I felt the lump on the side of my head, which Whittle had raised with his flashlight earlier in the night.

The chief watched me rub the lump, but he said nothing.

“Whoever mugged me and gave me amnesia, he must have taken my wallet.”

“When were you mugged? Tonight on the beach?”

“On the beach? Tonight?” I frowned. “No, sir. I think it must have been a lot earlier in the day.”

“People don’t get mugged in my town in broad daylight.”

I shrugged.

Clearly, he did not like the shrug. I couldn’t take it back.

“So you’re saying you were mugged before you jumped off the pier this afternoon?”

“Yes, sir. In fact the first thing I remember is walking along the boardwalk toward the pier, wondering who I am and where I am and whether I had lunch or not.”

“Why did you jump off the pier?”

“Since being mugged unconscious, sir, my behavior hasn’t been entirely rational.”

“Why did you tell Utgard that a thirty-foot tsunami was coming?”

“Utgard?”

“Utgard Rolf.”

“Is that a person, sir?”

“You’ll remember him. A walking mountain with a chin beard.”

“Oh, yes. He seemed nice. Excellent taste in Hawaiian shirts. I don’t remember telling him about a tsunami, though. I must have been delirious from the mugging.”

“Utgard put a hand on your shoulder—and saw the very thing I just saw when I touched your hand. He described it to me.”

“Yes, sir. You and him. It happened twice now. It’s the dream I had while I was mugged unconscious, before I found myself on the boardwalk, heading toward the pier.”

“Tell me about your dream.”

“There’s not much to tell, sir. You saw it. The red sky, the sea full of light, the sand so bright, very scary.”

The pupils of his eyes grew wider, as if he intended to switch off the lights and hunt me down like a serpent chasing a mouse.

“Very scary,” I repeated.

“What do you think it means?”

“Means? The dream, sir? I’ve never had a dream mean anything. That’s for those old movies with Gypsies.”

Finally he looked away from me. He stared so long at the third chair in the corner that I turned my head to look at it.

Mr. Sinatra sat there. I don’t know how long he had been in the room. He pointed at me as if to say *Looking good, kid*.

Hoss Shackett did not see the Chairman of the Board. He was staring into space, perhaps envisioning my evisceration.

The chief bent his fingers and studied his well-manicured nails as though checking to be sure that no dried blood remained under them from his most recent interrogation session.

He gazed at the massive door for a while, and I suppose he was recalling how effectively it had contained the screams of those who had been in this room before my visit.

When he shifted his attention to the oppressively low ceiling, he smiled. He had the kind of smile that, if he turned it on the sky, would cause birds to fall dead in flight.

He looked down at the steel top of the table. He leaned forward to consider his blurry image in the surface, which had been burnished by years of wear and by a multitude of sweaty hands.

His reflection was not recognizable as his face or as a face at all. It was a series of smears, dark whorls, lumpy and distorted.

He seemed to like himself that way, however, because he smiled once more.

Chief Hoss was making me so crazy that I wished he would look at me again.

My wish was answered. He met my eyes.

He said, “Kid, what do you say—let’s you and me be friends?”

I said, “That would be swell, sir.”

CHAPTER 26

CHIEF HOSS SHACKETT UNDERWENT A CHANGE worthy of one of those intelligent alien machines in that toy-based movie, *Transformers*, that can morph from an ordinary period Dodge into a giant robot with a hundred times the mass of the vehicle from which it unfolded.

I do not mean that the chief suddenly filled the cell and left me without elbow room. He metamorphosed from Mr. Hyde, if Mr. Hyde had been a sadistic warden in a Soviet gulag, into the benign Dr. Jekyll, if Dr. Jekyll had been a folksy sheriff from a small town where the biggest crime in twenty years had been when Lulamay copied Bobbijune's rhubarb-jam recipe and passed it off as her own in the county-fair competition.

The eat-your-liver-with-fava-beans grin melted into the smile of any grandfather in any TV commercial featuring cute little kids frolicking with puppies.

The knotted muscles in his face relaxed. The tension went out of his body. As if he were a chameleon moving from gray stone to a rose, a touch of pink appeared in his skin.

Amazingly, the venomous green shade of his eyes changed, and they were now Irish eyes, happy and full of delight. Even his eyes were smiling, his lips and his eyes, his entire face, every line and plain and dimple of his countenance marshaling into a spectacle of sublime good will.

The previous Hoss Shackett could never have become the chief of police of Magic Beach, which was an elected position. Before me now was Hoss Shackett, the politician.

I was dismayed that he wasn't up for election this year, because I wanted to go out right this minute and work in his campaign, put up some signs, canvass a few neighborhoods, help paint his portrait on the side of a four-story building.

Mr. Sinatra came to the table to stare more closely at the chief. He looked at me, shook his head in amazement, and returned to the corner.

Slumped in his chair, so relaxed that he seemed to be in danger of sliding onto the floor, Chief Hoss said, "Kid, what do you want?"

"Want, sir?"

"Out of life. What do you want out of life?"

"Well, sir, I'm not sure I can answer that question accurately since at the present time I don't know who I am."

"Let's suppose you don't have amnesia."

"But I do, sir. I look in the mirror, and I don't know my face."

"It's your face," he assured me.

"I look in the mirror, and I see that actor, Matt Damon."

"You don't look anything like Matt Damon."

"Then why do I see him in the mirror?"

"Let me hazard a guess."

"I'd be grateful if you would, sir."

"You saw those movies where he has amnesia."

"Was Matt Damon in movies where he had amnesia?"

"Of course, you wouldn't remember them."

"Gone," I agreed. "It's all gone."

"*The Bourne Identity*. That was one of them."

I considered it. Then: "Nope. Nothing."

"Kid, you're genuinely funny."

"Well, I'd like to think I might be. But there's as good a chance that when I find out who I am, I'll discover I'm humorless."

"What I'm saying is, I'm willing to stipulate that you have amnesia."

"I sure wish I didn't, sir. But there you are."

“For the purpose of facilitating our discussion, I accept your amnesia, and I will not try to trip you up. Is that fair?”

“It’s fair, sure, but it’s also the way it is.”

“All right. Let’s suppose you don’t have amnesia. I know you *do* have it, I know, but so you can answer questions with more than gone-it’s-all-gone, let’s just suppose.”

“You’re asking me to use my imagination.”

“There you go.”

“I think I might’ve been a guy with a good imagination.”

“Is that what you think, huh?”

“It’s just a hunch. But I’ll try.”

This new Chief Hoss Shackett radiated affability so brightly that being in his company too long might involve a risk of melanoma.

He said, “So...what do you want out of life, son?”

“Well, sir, I imagine a life in tire sales might be nice.”

“Tire sales?”

“Putting people back on good rubber, getting them rolling again, after life threw a blow-out at them. That would be satisfying.”

“I can see your point. But since we’re just imagining here, why don’t we imagine big?”

“Big. All right.”

“If you had a big dream in life, what would it be?”

“I guess maybe...having my own ice-cream store.”

“Is that as big as you can go, son?”

“My best girl at my side and an ice-cream shop we could work in together all our lives. Yes, sir. That would be terrific.”

I was serious. That would have been some life, me and Stormy and an ice-cream shop. I would have loved that life.

He regarded me pleasantly. Then: “Yes, I see, with a little one coming along, it would be nice to have a business you could rely on.”

“Little one?” I asked.

“The baby. Your girl is pregnant.”

Bewilderment is, for me, a natural expression. “Girlfriend? You know my girlfriend? Then you must know who I am. You mean... I’m going to be a father?”

“You were talking to her this afternoon. Utgard saw you. Before you jumped off the pier.”

I looked disappointed, shook my head. “That was crazy—jumping off the pier, talking tsunamis. But the girl, sir, I don’t know her.”

“Maybe you just don’t remember knowing her.”

“No, sir. When I came on the pier after being mugged, and I had amnesia, I saw her and thought, well, maybe I often went to the pier and she would know who I was.”

“But she didn’t know you.”

“Not a clue.”

“Her name’s Annamaria,” he said.

“That’s a pretty name.”

“Nobody knows her last name. Not even the people letting her live above their garage rent-free.”

“Rent-free? What lovely people they must be.”

“They’re do-gooder morons,” he said in the nicest way, with his warmest smile yet.

“The poor girl,” I sympathized. “She didn’t tell me that she had amnesia, too. What’re the odds of that, huh?”

“I wouldn’t take the bet. The thing of it is—the same day, here you are with no first name or last, and here she is with no last name.”

“Magic Beach isn’t a big city, sir. You’ll help us find out who we are. I’m confident of that.”

“I don’t believe either of you is from around here.”

“Oh, I hope you’re wrong. If I’m not from around here, how will I find out where I’m from? And if I can’t find out where I’m from, how will I find anyone who knows who I am?”

When the chief was in his charming-politician mode, his good humor was as unshakeable as the Rocky Mountains. He kept smiling, though he did close his eyes for a moment, as if counting to ten.

I glanced at Mr. Sinatra to see how I was doing.

He gave me two thumbs up.

Hoss Shackett opened his warm Irish eyes. Regarding me with delight, as if I were the leprechaun he had longed all his life to

encounter, he said, “I want to go back to the big-dream question.”

“Still an ice-cream parlor for me,” I assured him.

“Would you like to hear my big dream, son?”

“You’ve accomplished so much, I’d guess your big dream already came true. But it’s good always to have new dreams.”

Chief Hoss Shackett the Nice remained with me, and there was no sign of Chief Hoss Shackett the Mean, though he resorted to the silence and the direct stare with which he had regarded me when he had first entered the room.

This stare had a different quality from the previous one, which had been crocodilian. Now the chief smiled warmly, and as Frankie Valli sings in that old song, his eyes adored me, as though he were looking at me through a pet-shop window, contemplating adopting me.

Finally he said, “I’m going to have to trust you, son. Trust isn’t an easy thing for me.”

I nodded sympathetically. “Being an officer of the law and having to deal every day with the scum of the earth...Well, sir, a little cynicism is understandable.”

“I’m going to trust you totally. See...my big dream is one hundred million dollars tax-free.”

“Whoa. That is big, sir. I didn’t know you meant *big* big. I feel a little silly now, saying an ice-cream parlor.”

“And my dream has come true. I have my money.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m so happy for you. Was it the lottery?”

“The full value of the deal,” he said, “was four hundred million dollars. My cut was one of the two largest, but several others here in Magic Beach have become very rich.”

“I can’t wait to see how you’re going to spread the good fortune around, sir. ‘Everyone a neighbor, every neighbor a friend.’ ”

“I’m adding four words to the motto—‘Every man for himself.’ ”

“That doesn’t sound like you, sir. That sounds like the other Chief Shackett.”

Sitting forward on his chair, folding his arms on the table, virtually sparkling with bonhomie, he said, “Happy as I am to be stinking rich, I’m not without problems, son.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Such a wounded look of disappointment came over his face that you would have wanted to hug him if you had been there.

“*You* are my biggest problem,” he said. “I don’t know who you are. I don’t know *what* you are. That *dream*, the vision, whatever it was that you passed to me and Utgard.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry. It’s a very disturbing little dream.”

“And so spot-on accurate. Clearly you know too much. I could kill you right now, bury you somewhere like Hecate’s Canyon, and nobody would find you for years.”

In his Chief Hoss Shackett the Nice persona, he had brought to the moment such a spirit of camaraderie and such fine intentions that the low concrete ceiling had seemed to expand into a high vault. Now it so suddenly crashed down again that I ducked my head a little.

Once again I could detect the smell of vomit under the pine disinfectant.

“If I have a vote, sir, I’m opposed to the kill-and-bury-in-Hecate’s-Canyon solution.”

“I don’t like it, either. Because maybe that fake-pregnant girlfriend of yours is expecting you to report in.”

“Fake-pregnant?”

“That’s what I suspect. Good cover. The two of you come into town like vagrants, the kind nobody looks at twice. You’re like some surf bum, she’s like a runaway. But you work for somebody.”

“Sounds like you have someone in mind.”

“Maybe Homeland Security. Some intelligence agency. They have a slew of them these days.”

“Sir, how old do I look to you?”

“Twenty. You might look younger than you are, might be twenty-three, twenty-four.”

“A little young to be an undercover spy, don’t you think?”

“Not at all. Navy SEALs, Army Rangers, the best of the best—some of them are twenty, twenty-one.”

“Not me. I have a gun phobia.”

“Yeah. Right.”

I had leaned on the table, as well. He reached out and patted my arm affectionately.

“Suppose you don’t check in with your partner, this Annamaria, at the appointed hour, and she gets on the horn to your controllers back in Washington or wherever.”

Amnesia no longer served me well. I would do better being a cool and deadly government agent. I said only, “Suppose.”

“In a spirit of trust, which I sincerely hope you genuinely do appreciate, I’ll tell you—the job that made me rich, my part of that is done tonight. In two weeks, I’ll be living in another country, under a new identity so tightly guarded I’ll never be found. But leaving the right way, the careful way, is going to take two weeks.”

“During which you’re vulnerable.”

“So I have only three options I can see. One—I have to find your Annamaria real quick, before she squawks, and kill you both.”

I consulted my watch, as if in fact I had a pending report time with my undercover co-agent. “You won’t be able to pull that off.”

“That’s what I figured. Option two—I kill you here, now. When you don’t report to Annamaria, she sends the alarm, your agency comes storming into town. I play dumb, tough it out. Never saw you, don’t know what happened to you.”

I said, “I’m sorry to hear...this must mean Reverend Moran is in this with you.”

“He’s not. He found you in his church, you said your life had taken a wrong turn. Then you started talking Armageddon, the end of the world, you made him nervous. You told him the retriever’s name was Raphael, but he knew who owned the dog, and its name is Murphy.”

I said, “Gee, a troubled young man worried about the end of the world, maybe on drugs, has a dog isn’t his...I’d think a preacher would try some counseling and prayer before turning me in.”

“He feels comfortable calling me about small stuff, and don’t pretend you don’t know why.”

“Are you a member of his parish?” I guessed.

“You know I am.”

I hesitated, then nodded. “We know.” I made the *we* sound like eight thousand bureaucrats in a block-square building near the CIA. “And don’t forget—the reverend knows you arrested me.”

He smiled and dismissed my concern with a wave of his hand. “That doesn’t matter if before morning the reverend kills his wife and commits suicide.”

“I gather you’re not a *believing* member of the parish.”

“Do I sound like a Christian to you?” he asked, and laughed softly, not as if he were remarking on his ruthless criminality but as if *Christian* were a synonym for *brain-dead troglodyte*.

I said, “Back to your second option. You remember that?”

“I kill you now, play dumb, say I never met you.”

“Won’t work,” I told him. “They know I’m here right now.”

“They who?”

“My handlers in...the agency.”

He looked dubious. “They can’t know.”

“Satellite tracking.”

“You aren’t carrying a transponder. We searched you at the church.”

“Surgically implanted.”

A little venom seeped into his twinkling Irish eyes. “Where?”

“Very tiny, efficient device. Could be my right buttocks. Could be my left buttocks. Could be in an armpit. Even if you found it, cut it out, and crushed it, *they already know I’m here.*”

He sat back in his chair and gradually repaired the politician demeanor that had begun to break down. He took an Almond Joy from his shirt pocket and began to unwrap it. “You like half?”

“No.”

“You don’t like Almond Joy?”

“You were going to kill me.”

“Not with poison candy.”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” I said.

“You don’t take sweets from men who threaten to kill you.”

“That’s right.”

“Well...more for me.” After he had enjoyed a bite of the Almond Joy, he said, “So there’s only option three. This is where I figured

we would wind up. Which is why I had to trust you and tell you my situation. I can make you very rich.”

“What happened to ‘Every man for himself?’”

“Son, I like you, I do, and I see my best option is co-opting you, but I wouldn’t in a million years give you a piece of my cut. I’m surprised I offered you half of the candy bar.”

“I appreciate your honesty.”

“If I’m to trust you, then you’ve got to have good reason to trust me. So from now on, only truth between us.”

Because he smiled at me so sincerely and because it would have been rude not to reciprocate, I returned his smile.

In the spirit of frankness that the chief encouraged, I felt it necessary to say, “In all honesty, I don’t believe that Utgard Rolf is the kind of generous fellow who would share *his* cut with me.”

“You’re right, of course. Utgard would kill his own mother for a thousand dollars. Or maybe it was five thousand.”

He ate more candy, and I digested the proposition that he had made to me.

After what seemed enough time for serious consideration, I said, “So, supposing I have a price—”

“Everyone has a price.”

“Who would meet mine?”

“The men backing this operation have some of the deepest pockets on the planet. They have a contingency fund. At this late hour, with so much on the line, if you join us *and* share what your agency knows or suspects, tell us the reason you were sent here, and if you feed them false information, you can be a very rich man, too, living in a wonderful climate under a name no one will ever discover.”

“How rich?”

“I don’t know the size of the contingency fund. And I would have to speak with a representative of our financiers, but I suspect they would consider you so valuable to this enterprise that they would find twenty-five million for you.”

“What about my partner? Annamaria?”

“Do you have a thing for her?”

“No. We just work together.”

“Then you tell us where she is, we kill her tonight. We put the body through a meat grinder, dump the sludge at sea, gone forever.”

“Let’s do it.”

“That was quick.”

“Well,” I said, “I don’t see an alternative, because I’m not giving her a piece of *my* cut.”

“No reason you should.”

“In the right part of the world,” I said, “twenty-five million is like a hundred million here.”

“Live like a king,” the chief agreed, finishing his candy. “So, my new rich friend, what’s your name?”

“Harry Lime,” I said.

He held out his hand. I reached across the table and shook it.

I was not thrown back into the dream. Evidently, it happened only on first contact with one of these conspirators.

The chief said, “I’ve got to go talk to the money man, close the deal. I’ll be back in five minutes. One thing he’ll want to know.”

“Whatever. We’re partners.”

“How the hell did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“How did you pass the dream to Utgard and me? The dream, the vision, whatever you want to call it.”

“I don’t know exactly how. You triggered it, I think. Because you’re the people going to make it come true.”

Wide-eyed, a third Hoss Shackett sat before me now, neither the hard-case sadist nor the charming politician. This chief possessed a capacity for wonder that neither the baby-killer nor the baby-kisser shared.

This chief might have had the ability to commit a selfless act or an uncalculated kindness, because wonder admits to the existence of mystery, and the recognition of mystery in the world allows the possibility of Truth. The other two wouldn’t let this chief surface often. I was surprised that they had not already drowned him forever.

He said, “What are you, anyway? Some kind of psychic? I never believed in psychics, but what you put in my head, that was for damn sure real.”

Recognizing that we live in a distressed culture where anything like a conspiracy theory will be embraced by more people than will the simple and obvious truth, I tried to make it easier for Hoss Shackett to accept my otherness:

“The government has a drug that facilitates clairvoyance,” I lied.

“Sonofabitch.”

“It doesn’t work with everyone,” I said. “You have to carry a certain combination of genes. There aren’t many of us.”

“You see the future?”

“Not really, not directly. Things come in dreams. And they’re never complete. Just pieces of a puzzle. I have to do police work, just like you, to fill in what’s missing.”

“So you saw Magic Beach in your dream, and the nukes.”

Trying not to react to the word *nukes*, I said, “Yeah.” I suppose I had known all along.

“But in the dream, you didn’t see me or Utgard?”

“No.”

“What you put in my head, the sea all red and the sky—it seemed like the nukes were going off right here on the beach. That’s not how it’ll be.”

“The dreams are fragmentary, sometimes more symbolic than full of real details. Where will the bombs be detonated?”

He said, “Where it matters. In cities. In a few weeks. All on the same day. We’re just bringing them ashore and distributing. The major seaports and airports, they’re blanketed with radiation detectors.”

In addition to lingering spirits of the dead, I once in a while see other supernatural entities, about which I have written in the past. Ink-black, with no facial features, fluid in shape, sometimes catlike, sometimes wolflike, they can pass through a keyhole or through the crack under a door.

I believe they are spiritual vampires and possess knowledge of the future. They swarm to places where extreme violence or a natural

catastrophe will soon occur, as though they feed on human suffering, to which they react with frenzied ecstasy.

Now I realized why none of these creatures had appeared in Magic Beach. The suffering would occur elsewhere. Already, legions of those ghoulish entities must be swarming through the target cities, relishing the prospect of the death and misery to come.

As Shackett rose from the table, I said, "Good thing for me that I had a price. Sounds like, a month from now, this'll be a country nobody will want to live in."

He said, "How do you feel about that?"

I could not tell which of the three Hoss Shacketts regarded me at the moment.

Playing to the savagery of the sadist, to the megalomania of the politician, to the bitterness in both of them, I invented something that he would believe. Remembering my advice to Hutch, I strove not to let my performance become fulsome, to keep it subdued and real.

"They lied to me about the effects of the drug. They said it facilitated clairvoyance for twelve to eighteen hours. But they knew. One dose is all you ever need. They knew it would change me forever. I rarely have a night of restful sleep anymore. Visions, nightmares, more vivid than reality. There's a thousand kinds of hell on earth that could be coming. Sometimes I can't wake from them. Hour after hour in those horrors. When at last I wake up, my bed is soaked with sweat, I'm swimming in it. Throat raw from screaming in my sleep."

Through all of that, I had met his stare, daring him to see any lie in my eyes. Evil men are often easy to mislead, because they have spent so long deceiving that they no longer recognize the truth and mistake deception for it.

Now I gazed at the ceiling, as if seeing beyond it a nation that had betrayed me. Line by line, my voice grew quieter, less emotional, even as my words grew more accusatory.

"They lied to me. Now they say that after I've served them for five years, they'll give me the antidote. I don't believe there is one. They

lie not just for advantage but for sport. Five years will become ten. They can all go to hell.”

I met his eyes again.

He was silent, not because he suspected deception but because he was impressed.

He was, after all, a man who would sell out his country to terrorists, who could conspire to murder millions of innocents in a nuclear holocaust and to condemn millions more to death in the chaos that would follow the day of detonations. A man who could believe in the rightness of such a scenario was one who could believe anything, even my little exercise in science-fiction paranoia.

At last he said, “You’re a good hater, kid. That’ll take you a long way in life.”

“What now?”

“I go talk to the man, get our deal confirmed. Like I said—five minutes, ten at most.”

“My leg is half numb. How about unshackling me from the table so I can walk around while I wait.”

“As soon as Utgard and I get back with the polygraph,” he said. “We’ll have to unshackle you for that.”

As if I had anticipated that they would want to confirm the sincerity of my conversion by any means available to them, I did not react to the word *polygraph*. Lie detector.

“You have a problem with that?” the chief asked.

“No. If our situations were reversed, I’d play it the same way you are.”

He left the room and closed the half-ton door behind him.

The silence of tranquility lies light upon a room, but this was the silence of apprehension, heavy enough to press me down on the chair in paralytic stillness.

So saturated was the air with the stink of pine disinfectant that I could taste the astringent chemical when I opened my mouth, and the underlying scent of other prisoners’ vomit was not conducive to a calm stomach.

The concrete walls were not mortared blocks, but solid, poured in place, reinforced with rebar, as was the ceiling.

One vent, high in a wall, brought air to the room and carried it away. No doubt any sound that passed through the vent would diminish as it followed a long insulated duct, and would be stifled entirely in whatever machine exchanged the air.

When I turned to look at Mr. Sinatra, he was sitting in the third chair, bent forward at the waist, elbows on his thighs, his face buried in his hands.

I said, "Sir, I'm in a real pickle here."

CHAPTER 27

BECAUSE MY FETTERED ANKLE WOULD NOT allow me to go easily to Mr. Sinatra, he came to me. He sat in the chair that Chief Hoss Shackett had occupied, across the table from me.

In the ceiling, the light fixture was recessed behind a flush-mounted sheet of plastic. That panel was frosted, a blind eye.

The only place in the room where a camera could have been concealed was in the duct that provided fresh air. Through the slots in the vent grille, I could not see any telltale gleam of a lens.

Considering the brutal interrogations that the chief had surely conducted in this room and that he would soon conduct again, I did not believe he would have installed a camera. He would be concerned that it would accidentally—or by the intention of a whistle-blower—record crimes that might lead to his imprisonment.

For the same reason, I doubted that the room was fitted with listening devices. Besides, as far as the chief knew, I had no one to whom I could talk.

Mr. Sinatra had lost his cocky air. He appeared distraught.

Throughout his life, he had been a patriot, in love with America both for what she was and for her potential. The plot that he had heard described in this room had clearly devastated him.

In December 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, “the Voice” had been drafted. But at his physical, he was rejected and classified 4-F because of a punctured eardrum that he had suffered during birth. Subsequently, he tried four times to enlist. He used every

person of influence he knew—they were numerous—to get the army to reclassify him and to accept him for service, but he never succeeded.

Although he weighed 135 pounds in those days, he had been a scrapper from childhood, quick to defend himself or a friend, making up in heart and temper for what he lacked in size. He never walked away from a fight and would have made a good soldier, though he might have been a discipline problem from time to time.

I said, “When you were born in your parents’ Hoboken tenement, you weighed thirteen and a half pounds. Your grandma Rose was an experienced midwife, but she’d never seen a baby as big as you.”

He looked puzzled, as though he wondered if I was in denial of what I had heard from Hoss Shackett.

“The physician in attendance had never seen a baby so big, either. Your mother, Dolly, was under five feet tall, petite, and because of your size, the doctor had trouble delivering you.”

Frowning with impatience, Mr. Sinatra waved a hand dismissively, as though brushing aside the subject of his entry into the world, and he pointed to the steel door to focus my attention on what mattered.

“Sir, I’m going somewhere with this,” I promised him.

He looked dubious but remained attentive.

Because the circumstances of his birth were family legend, he knew what I told him: “The doctor used forceps, and didn’t use them well. He ripped your ear, cheek, and neck, puncturing your eardrum. When he finally got you out of your mother, you weren’t breathing.”

His grandmother took him from the doctor, rushed him to a sink, and held him under cold running water until he gasped for air.

“The doctor would likely have certified you as born dead. You entered the world fighting, sir, and you never really stopped.”

I glanced at my watch. I had a lot to achieve in five minutes, but Mr. Sinatra’s fate and my life depended on getting it done.

Because his parents had worked and because his mother had been a committeewoman for the Democratic party, with many outside interests, young Frank was a latchkey kid before the term was

coined. From the age of six, he often made his own dinner—and sometimes had to scavenge for it when his mom had been too busy to go food shopping.

Lonely, almost desperately so at times, he drifted to the homes of other family members and friends. People said he was the quietest kid they knew, content to sit in a corner and listen to the adults.

“In your teens, your mother was in your life more. Always she was demanding. She set high standards, had a dominant personality.”

She belittled his hope of a singing career, and was not entirely convinced even after he became the most famous singer in the world.

“But, sir, you’re not like Elvis. You aren’t lingering here because you’re reluctant to face your mother in the next world.”

A combative expression hardened his features, as if, ghost or not, he would punch me for ever thinking that his beloved mother *might* have been the reason he lingered in this world.

“Your mom could be exasperating, contentious, opinionated—but loving. Eventually you realized that your ability to stand up for yourself arose from the need to hold your own in arguments with her.”

Mr. Sinatra glanced at the door and made a hurry-up gesture.

“Sir, if I’m going to die here tonight, at least I’m going to help you move on from this world before I leave it myself.”

That was indeed my motive for this short session of straight talk. But I also had another.

Although Dolly’s steel will led to contention between them, Mr. Sinatra honored her without fail and took good care of her. Unlike Elvis’s mother, Dolly lived a long life. The Chairman was sixty-one when she died, and he had no reason to regret anything between them.

He had adored his gentle father, Marty, who died eight years before Dolly passed. If anything, his deep love for his dad should have made him rush away into the next life.

“No disrespect, sir, but you could sometimes be a bastard, hot-headed and even mean. But I’ve read enough about you to know

those faults were more than balanced by loyalty and generosity.”

In sickness and in hard times, friends received his devotion, not just significant money sent unsolicited but also daily calls for weeks, to give emotional support. He was capable of reaching out to a deserving stranger and changing a life with a generous gift.

He never mentioned these kindnesses and was embarrassed when his friends spoke of what he had done. Many of these stories surfaced after his death; the number of them is both inspiring and humbling.

“Whatever waits beyond this world, sir, is nothing you need to fear. But you fear it, and I think I know why.”

The suggestion that he feared anything whatsoever annoyed him.

Acutely aware of how little time remained before Shackett would return, I said, “Almost died at birth. Lived in a bad neighborhood, they called you a wop. Walking home from grade school, you had to fight. Always had to struggle for what you got. But, sir, you got it all—fortune, fame, acclaim, more than any entertainer in history before you. And now what keeps you in this world is *pride*.”

My statement compounded Mr. Sinatra’s annoyance. With one cocked eyebrow and a gesture, he seemed to say *So what’s wrong with pride?*

“Nothing is wrong with pride based on accomplishment, and your life was packed full of accomplishments. But justifiable pride can sometimes mutate into arrogance.”

Mouth tight, he stared at me. But then he nodded. He knew that in life he had sometimes been guilty of arrogance.

“I’m not talking about then. I mean now. You don’t want to move on to the next world because you’re afraid you won’t be special over there, that you’ll just be equal to everyone else.”

Although he resisted moving on, he wanted to make the journey, as do all of the lingering dead. He seriously considered my words.

I needed to channel him from polite consideration to a strong emotional response. I regretted what I was about to do, but his soul and my neck were on the line. Extreme measures were required.

“But it’s worse than that. You’re *afraid* to move on because you think maybe you’ll be starting over from nothing, with nothing, just

a nobody, and all the struggle will begin again. You're as scared as a little boy."

His face knotted with offense.

"Your first breath was a struggle. Will it be again? To win any respect, you had to fight. You can't stand the idea of being a nobody again, but you don't want to fight your way to the top like you had to do the last time."

He put up his fists.

"Sure, threaten to fight me. You know I can't hurt a ghost, what courage does it take to threaten me?"

He rose from the chair and glared down at me.

"You want all the respect you won in this world, but you don't have the guts to earn it again, if that's the way it is over there."

Never would I have believed that those warm blue eyes could have produced such an icy stare as the one with which he skewered me.

"You know what you've become in death? You're a scared little *punk* like you never were in life."

In anger, hands fisted at his sides, he turned away from me.

"Can't handle the truth, huh?"

Treating him with such disrespect, when in fact I respected him, was difficult, and I was particularly afraid of revealing the falsity of my contempt by using the word *sir*.

I believed that I had in fact arrived at the reason that he lingered in this world, but I did not despise him for it. In other circumstances, I would have led him gently to accept the truth and to see that his fears were ungrounded.

Certain that Hoss Shackett would come through the door at any moment, I said witheringly, "Chairman of the Board, Old Blue Eyes, the Voice, famous big-shot singer, big cheese of the Rat Pack—and now all you are is another gutless punk from Hoboken."

He turned toward me once more.

His mottled face, his dead-cold stare, his lips skinned back from clenched teeth, his head lowered like that of a bull that sees not one red cape but a hundred: As lingering spirits go, this one was as pissed off as any I had ever seen.

The steel door opened.

Chief Hoss Shackett entered. Utgard Rolf followed him, rolling a cart on which was mounted the polygraph.

CHAPTER 28

IN MY ROOM AT HUTCH'S HOUSE, WHEN MR. Sinatra had levitated all the biographies of him and had spun them slowly around the room, out of my reach, he had shown poltergeist potential.

In my experience, only deeply malevolent spirits had been able to conjure the dark energy necessary to cause havoc. Mr. Sinatra had his moods, but he harbored no true malevolence.

Judging by the evidence of his life, however, his was a powerful spirit that might be able to bend the rules as I knew them.

The thing most certain to light a short fuse with Mr. Sinatra was unfairness. From his early years as an unknown singer, he had been angered by bigotry and had taken risks with his career to open doors and gain opportunities for black musicians in a era when many white performers were cool with the status quo.

The attack I had launched on him—calling him a gutless punk—qualified as grossly unfair. My first hope was that he would seethe as hotly when he was the target of unfairness as he did when he saw it being directed against others.

My second hope was that I had not cranked him so hard, so fast that he would blow like Vesuvius while I remained locked to the table.

As Utgard Rolf closed the steel door behind him and wheeled the polygraph, Mr. Sinatra turned his furious glare from me to the chin-bearded hulk.

“Spoke to the man,” Chief Shackett told me. “The money’s yours, as long as the machine says you’re the real deal.”

Because being shackled to the table would raise my stress levels and affect the reading, the chief kept his promise to free me. The cuff fell away from my ankle.

As Utgard readied the polygraph and the chief went around to the other side of the table, I said, “What do you think of Sinatra?”

“Think of what?” the chief asked.

Getting to my feet, I said, “Sinatra, the singer.”

The tone of Utgard’s bearish voice suggested that he did not like me, did not trust me, and did not want me in their game, no matter how much top-secret intelligence from Homeland Security I might be able to share with them: “What the hell do you care what we think?”

“Sinatra,” the chief said dismissively. “Who listens to that crap anymore?”

The Voice, voiceless since death, pivoted toward Shackett.

“I had this girlfriend,” I said, “she swooned for Sinatra, but I say he was just a gutless punk.”

“They’re all punks,” the chief said. “Fact is, they’re all pansies.”

“You think so?” I asked.

“Sure. The big rock stars, the heavy-metal idiots, the lounge lizards like Sinatra, they all act tough, want you to believe they’re true wise guys who made their bones, but they’re all light in the loafers.”

Here was contempt, bigotry, and insult served up steaming on a platter, and I was so grateful to the chief that I almost cried.

“In World War Two,” I told Shackett, “Sinatra dodged the draft.”

Mr. Sinatra snapped his head toward me so fast that had he been alive, he would have broken his neck. He knew that *I* knew this was a lie, which made my attack on his character especially unfair. His face contorted so extremely that it conveyed both astonishment and rage at the same time.

“Of course he dodged,” the chief said. “What would he have done if he’d come up against Nazi badasses—slap them with his perfumed handkerchief?”

Concentric rings of power, visible only to me, began to radiate from Mr. Sinatra's fists.

"So," I said to Hoss Shackett as, in blissful ignorance of the building storm, he settled on his chair, "then you think maybe he and Dean Martin were more than just friends?"

Utgard Rolf stepped around the polygraph, scowling. "What're you going on about?"

In the corner, the third chair began to rock slowly side to side as the pulses of power from Mr. Sinatra disturbed it.

"I'm just saying he was a gutless punk," I replied, wishing I could think of a new insult.

"Anyway," the chief volunteered, "that old music—Rod Stewart sings it better."

"That should just about do it," I said.

Utgard's yellow eyes were not half as scary as Mr. Sinatra's blues had become. Looming over me, he said, "Why don't you shut up?"

"Why? Are you a big Rod Stewart fan or something?"

He was such a solid package of bone and beef that most punches he took probably resulted in shattered hands for those who threw them.

With the menace of a grizzly suffering a toothache, he growled, "Sit down."

"Hey, pal, take it easy, okay? We want the same thing. Don't you want this stinking country nuked to its knees?"

Perhaps one of Grandma Melvina Belmont Singleton's gorillas had been an ancestor of Utgard's, because the big man's instincts were closer to the jungle than were the chief's. He knew something about me was wrong, and he acted on it.

Utgard backhanded me across the face so quick I hardly saw his arm move, and so hard that gorillas in Africa would be looking up in surprise from their bananas when the crack of the blow reached them at the speed of sound.

I thought I had taken the hit without losing my footing, but when I tried to run, I discovered that I was sprawled on the floor.

Licking my lips, tasting blood, I shouted inspiration to Mr. Sinatra: "God bless America!"

Denied the chance to fight for his country in World War II, Old Crazy-Whirling-Blue Eyes seized this opportunity. He went ballistic.

He opened his fists and held his arms out straight, palms bared, fingers spread. Pulses of power, pale-blue rings, flew from him and animated the inanimate.

In the corner, the third chair started spinning on one leg, striking from the concrete a shriek as shrill as a drill bit might have made.

Instead of decorating my face with repeated impressions of his shoe tread, Utgard turned toward the whirling chair.

Chief Hoss Shackett, about to face the consequences of comparing Rod Stewart and Mr. Sinatra to the latter's disadvantage, rose from his chair in astonishment.

As a first strategic step toward the door, toward freedom, toward the hope of living to eat another bacon cheeseburger, I crawled under the table with the expectation that it would provide a temporary shelter while I calculated my next move.

The whirling chair exploded to the ceiling, ricocheted off the concrete, and bounced off the table with a *boom!* that made me feel as if I had taken refuge inside a drum.

A greater clatter arose, and I figured all three chairs must now be whacking around the room, a disturbing amount of crazed furniture in such a small space.

Hoss Shackett cursed, and Utgard topped him in the potty-mouth competition, and the chief followed his expletive with a grunt of pain that suggested justice was sometimes done in this world, after all.

As the metal table began to levitate off the floor, I scuttled on my hands and knees between its turning legs, which an instant later began to revolve so fast that they cut the air with a whirring worthy of a descending plague of locusts.

I abandoned my half-formed plan to reach the door in cautious stages, and I crawled as fast as a cockroach, eager to escape before the heavy table and the heavier wheeled polygraph began to carom from wall to wall with lethal enthusiasm.

Behind me, the chief spat out several astonishing words strung together in an order that was too imaginative for me to recall with

accuracy, and Utgard Rolf shouted a bizarre knot of syllables that I had never heard before, though I knew at once that this, too, was not very suitable for print. I heard less anger than terror in their cursing.

As I reached the door, something slammed into the plastic panel that covered the ceiling fixture. The panel cracked, and the slamming something slammed again. Light bulbs shattered, and the interrogation room went dark.

Clawing up the slab of steel, I found the handle, levered it down, and pushed on the door. Ball-bearing hinges carried the great weight with ease, and I opened the door only wide enough to slip into the basement hallway.

I had some sympathy for Hoss and Utgard, although not nearly enough to hold the door open for them. In fact, I leaned against that steel barrier to shut it quickly, closing them in the perilous dark. I would have locked it, too, except that it locked from the outside only with a key.

In spite of the care the chief had taken to isolate noise within the room, the fusillade of furniture grew thunderous, especially when a chair or the table struck the steel door. I could hear the two men shouting, as well, because neither of them had a gag in his mouth and duct tape across his lips, as I would have had after failing the lie-detector test.

The basement hallway with the interestingly stained concrete floor was not a place I wanted to be discovered by whoever responded to the racket in the interrogation room. I hurried toward the stairs, down which the two young officers had earlier conducted me.

CHAPTER 29

AS I REACHED THE STAIRS THAT LED UP FROM the basement of the police station, the muffled clatter-clang from the interrogation room erupted into a full-fledged cacophony as the steel door came open.

Glancing back, I saw neither Hoss Shackett nor Utgard Rolf. Mr. Sinatra did not appear, either.

Through the open door and into the hall came a collection of badly abused public property for which the police department should have to answer to taxpayers when submitting its next budget request: a mangled metal chair, bent and twisted parts of other chairs, shards of frosted plastic, a once sturdy metal table now folded in half like a slice of bread....

The whirling vortex of trash scraped and rattled off the walls, remaining just outside the interrogation room for a moment—and then proceeded toward me.

Addressing this indoor tornado, I declared, “I didn’t say Rod Stewart. *He* said Rod Stewart.”

Realizing the folly of defending myself to a cyclone of debris, I raced up the two flights of stairs.

I had done so much racing, jumping, crawling, running, dodging, scuttling, climbing, and swimming that I ached from head to foot and felt my energy ebbing.

During the evening, I had developed considerable admiration for Matt Damon. In spite of his amnesia and in spite of being opposed

by numerous nefarious government goons with infinite resources at their command, he waded through squads of ruthless assassins, killing them or sometimes letting them live but making them wish they had never dedicated themselves to fascist ideologies, and he just kept going, indomitable and undiminished.

Here I was, a pathetic excuse for a paladin, complaining about exhaustion when I had not yet even been through a car crash. Already, Matt Damon would have been through six.

As I neared the top of the narrow stairs, a ferocious noise below indicated that into the stairwell had come the Office Furniture of Death. The crash-clang-shriek of the swiftly ascending junk storm suggested supernatural power so furious that it could have been summoned only by a Vegas headliner.

The stairhead door had not been locked when I had been escorted to the basement; and it was not locked now. I stepped into the long back hallway on the main floor.

Although I could not recall which door I'd been brought through from the alleyway, I thought it had been on the right. I opened the first that I came to, which was a storeroom. The second revealed a deserted office.

Whether they were responding to the escalating tumult, which had been heard at the front of the building, or to a frantic cell-phone call from Hoss Shackett, two uniformed officers appeared at the far end of the corridor. I had never seen them before, but they knew at once that I did not belong here, most likely because I was scuttling and furtive and looked harried.

One of them called out to me—Who was I, what was I doing here?—and I called back to them, “Just looking for the men’s room.”

They didn’t buy that even as I was saying it. One of them drew his gun, and the other told me to stop where I was, to lie facedown, but Matt Damon would never lie down on a floor that looked like blue-Slurpee upchuck, or on any floor whatsoever, for that matter, just because some guy with a gun told him to do it.

Fortunately, I did not have to improvise a deadly weapon out of my wristwatch or one of my shoes, because no sooner had the officer ordered me to lie down than the stairhead door behind me

flew open. I did not have to turn and look to know that the wreckage from the interrogation room had spun out of the stairs like some motorized work of modern art by one of those sculptors who regularly conned museums into giving display space to the contents of a Dumpster.

The officers' attention having been diverted from me, I dared to move forward, staying close to the wall, seeking the next door.

A new sound, a terrible ripping and slithering noise, grew in volume so rapidly that my curiosity got the best of me. I glanced back and saw that into the hallway had come Polterfrank.

From his hands radiated pulses of power that stripped the blue linoleum tiles off the floor and whirled them into the air like a wind devil gathering drifts of autumn leaves to itself. The vinyl squares, in their wild waltz, whispered and clicked against one another.

Because the officers paralyzed by this sight could not see Mr. Sinatra, they were merely startled and frightened by the spectacle before them. They were not propelled at once into a state of blind terror because they were not able to appreciate the phenomenon in its terrible fullness. Had they been able to see the singer in all his glorious wrath, they would have thrown down their weapons in surrender and fled to their mothers.

Here he came, a punctured eardrum no longer an obstacle to his service to his country. He was feisty Private Angelo Maggio in *From Here to Eternity*, tough Tom Reynolds in *Never So Few*, courageous and determined Joseph Ryan in *Von Ryan's Express*, and the righteous Sam Loggins in *Kings Go Forth*, but most of all he was Mr. Francis Albert Sinatra with a mad-on for the enemies of his country and the ignorant critics of his impeccable singing.

Spinning metal furniture and parts of furniture seemed to remain the primary danger in the tornado, because the vinyl tiles appeared too flexible and too soft to inflict serious damage. On the other hand, they were stiffened by the mastic with which they had been glued to the floor; and when a critical velocity had been achieved, every edge of every thin tile might be stropped into a lacerating blade.

Like a cresting wave, the floor peeled toward me, and from this tsunami of potentially lethal linoleum came an awful skirling like a thousand busy flensing knives scraping bone.

Spooked, the cops bolted from the corridor, back the way they had come.

The next door on the right led to the men's restroom. The escalating tempest convinced me that I did not have time to explore farther.

I stepped into the lavatory and backed away from the door, which closed between me and the haunt from Hoboken.

As the tidal wave of churning vinyl and clanging metal scraped past the restroom door, the noise became so disturbing that I clapped my hands over my ears.

Although Mr. Sinatra had been angry with me when I poked and prodded him toward an outburst, I trusted his intelligence to lead him to the realization that I had meant nothing I said and that I had acted out of desperation. Nevertheless, I was relieved when the storm of debris roared by and receded along the corridor.

An operable casement window offered an escape route, but I did not at once flee the restroom. First, I needed to pee.

Here is another difference between me and the indefatigable Matt Damon. He never has either the time or the need to visit a lavatory unless he has to go there to engage in a fight to the death with an agent of the fascist conspiracy.

After washing my hands, I dropped from the window into the alleyway behind the police station. As far as I could tell in the fog, I was alone.

I proceeded east for two hundred feet and then turned south into the covered and lighted walkway between the police department and the courthouse, where the fog did not rule. I hurried, not sure how long Mr. Sinatra could sustain his fury.

No one but the cleaning crew would be working in the courthouse at that hour; and the police in the adjacent building were too busy dealing with an *X-Files* moment for any of them to step outside for a quick smoke.

I ran to the end of the walk and into Civic Center Park, which—in opposition to Magic Beach tradition—was actually surrounded by the government buildings that justified its name.

The dark skirts of huge evergreens dripped with condensed mist. Fallen pine cones crunched underfoot, and others tried to roll me off my feet.

Concrete park benches, like caskets in a winding procession, appeared periodically, forcing me to dodge left, dodge right.

Windows began to explode in the building from which I had fled. One, two, three, a half-dozen. The tintinnabulation of glass raining on stonework was as charming as an orchestra of fairy bells, which I was able to enjoy because I had gotten safely beyond the zone of raining shards.

Shouting drew my attention to the north where, even in the fog, dimly visible figures could be seen hurriedly descending a broad and brightly lighted set of stairs to a public plaza. Although I was not a psychic primed for clairvoyant espionage by mad scientists employed by power-crazed intelligence agencies, I somehow knew that these figures were police officers fleeing their headquarters.

From afar rose sirens, surely incoming squad cars, perhaps also fire engines or ambulances.

In spite of the inhibiting murk, I ran faster, wishing I could summon the golden retriever again as a kind of Seeing Eye dog. A few minutes later, having put sufficient distance between myself and Civic Center Park, I slowed to a walk for two blocks.

Only then did I think to check my wristwatch—9:38.

At midnight if not before, Chief Hoss Shackett and Utgard Rolf intended to bring nuclear weapons onto United States soil by way of Magic Beach Harbor.

If the chief and the hulk had been killed or at least disabled in the chaos at the station, perhaps the plot would collapse. But I did not think I could count on that. If more than four hundred million dollars had been provided for bribes alone, this operation would have been developed with more than one contingency plan.

Supposing that two stopped clocks constituted an omen, my guess was that the nukes would not be delivered to the harbor at a minute

till midnight, but that they would instead be picked up at sea before that hour. The numbers on the clocks more likely signified the last minute that the plan could be foiled: the time when the bombs were taken from the harbor and placed aboard one truck or several, when they would be moved out of Magic Beach and might subsequently be transferred again to other vehicles bound for doomed cities unknown.

CHAPTER 30

SINCE THE ENCOUNTER WITH UTGARD AND THE redheaded gunmen on the pier, so much had happened that I'd had little time to think. I had been barely coping with the torrent of events, allowing myself to be guided largely by instinct and by those paranormal gifts that make my journey through life so interesting, so complicated, and at times so heartbreaking.

I needed fifteen minutes for calm deliberation, a quarter of an hour during which neither my life nor the life of anyone depending on me was in immediate jeopardy. Things had happened this night that I had never experienced previously, moments of a supernatural nature that mystified me. They required a quality of reflection that I could not achieve while sprinting from a mortal threat or verbally fencing with a sadistic police chief in a windowless room that resembled an abattoir.

Slowing from a fast walk, gradually catching my breath, I sought a place to rest, where I was not likely to be disturbed. Usually a church would have appealed to me, but not after Reverend Moran.

My lower lip felt swollen at the right corner of my mouth. When I explored gingerly with my tongue, I found a split that stung, and I prudently decided not to lick it again. The bleeding seemed to have stopped.

Considering the force of Utgard's backhand blow, I was lucky not to have spat out a tooth or two.

The blinding mist transformed even familiar neighborhoods into strange precincts. Shrouded objects looked not like what they turned out to be, but like unearthly flora and alien structures on a world circling a star other than our own.

I found myself in a commercial district that I didn't recognize, not the one near the pier nor the one around the harbor, nor the one in the vicinity of the civic center.

Ornate lampposts of cast iron were so old that they might have hailed from the era of gaslight and been converted to electricity. Their glass panes poured forth a sour yellow light that had about it no quality of romance but instead an industrial grimness that brewed the fog into smoke and lent to every shadow the character of a cloud of soot.

The concrete sidewalk was cracked, canted, stained, and strewn with litter that our tourist town usually did not tolerate. In the breathless night, the larger wads of crumpled paper occasionally resembled the corpses of birds, and the smaller scraps reminded me of dead insects.

At this hour, the stores were closed. Most of their windows offered a browser only darkness, although a few were colored by all-night neon that spelled names and services in blown-glass script.

Blue, green, red—for some reason the neon enlivened nothing. The colors were wrong, inducing dyspepsia, giving rise to thoughts of bottom-feeding carnivals where something too freakish for any freak show waited in the ultimate tent.

Some shabby storefronts housed businesses I was surprised to find in Magic Beach, which for the most part was an upscale coastal town. Here was a pawnshop, there another one. Here a tattoo parlor had gone out of business; and here an operation with dirty windows offered payday advances.

Behind the plate glass of a secondhand-clothing store that advertised a one-dollar bin, eight dressed mannequins—as secondhand as the clothes they wore—watched the street with dead eyes and joyless faces.

Traffic had been light elsewhere in town. In this neighborhood, no vehicles whatsoever traveled the streets. I saw no pedestrians,

either, no shopkeepers working late.

In the apartments above the stores, few lights glowed. No faces could be seen at either the dark or lighted windows.

When I came to an open-air bus stop, I sat on the bench to think. At the sound of an engine or the first sight of headlights, I could retreat to a serviceway between buildings and wait until the vehicle had passed.

I love novels about road trips, about characters who walk out of their lives, who get on a bus or in a car and go. Just go. They leave the world behind and find something new.

In my case, such a solution would never work. No matter how far I went or how long I kept moving, the world would find me.

On the worst day of my life, I disabled one man and killed another who went on a well-planned shooting spree in my hometown, Pico Mundo. Before I got the second gunman, they had wounded forty-one people and had killed nineteen.

They had parked a truck bomb under the mall as final punctuation to their rampage. I found it and prevented it from detonating.

The media called me a hero, but I didn't agree. A hero would have saved everyone. Everyone. A hero would have saved the one person in the world who most mattered to him and who trusted him without reservation.

That day of carnage, I was just a fry cook in over my head. Almost a year and a half later, in Magic Beach, I was still a fry cook in over my head.

Now more than ever.

Wyatt Porter, the chief of police in Pico Mundo, was not only a friend of mine but also one of my father figures. He had taught me how to be a man when my real father proved not to be much of one himself and incapable of showing a son the way. I had unofficially assisted Chief Porter on several difficult cases, and he knew about my paranormal senses.

If I called him and told him what had happened, he would believe everything I said. His experiences with me had taught him that no

matter how unlikely a story of mine sounded, it would prove to be true in all details.

I doubted that every police officer in Magic Beach would prove to be corrupt. The great majority would be fine men doing good work, flawed humans of course but not monsters. Hoss Shackett would have recruited a cell of traitors as small as the job required, to ensure against discovery.

Wyatt Porter, however, lived a long way south and east of here. He did not know any of the players in Magic Beach. He would have no way of identifying a straight arrow among the bent ones in the local police department.

He might be able to contact the FBI and report information about a delivery of nuclear weapons through the harbor at Magic Beach, but federal agents were slow to take small-town cops seriously. And when Wyatt had to identify the source of his report as his supernaturally gifted young friend, he would forfeit all credibility.

Besides, only a little more than two hours remained until the deed would be done, the bombs off-loaded and shipped to various points of the compass. I was entering Act 3 of the drama, and I had the feeling that God had pushed the FAST FORWARD button.

Gradually I became aware of a continuous susurruration, like the soft voice of a thin flow of water sliding over a lightly textured surface.

I surveyed the dreary stores behind me. No source for the sound was evident.

The mannequins had not moved in the window of the used-clothing shop. As I made that observation, I wondered why I had expected that they might have changed positions.

The store awnings were tattered and not as taut as they ought to have been. They swagged like funeral bunting, but no water drizzled from them.

The mysterious sound swelled into something more like numerous whispering voices echoing through a cavernous space.

Although the fog denied me a clear view of the shops across the street, I was pretty sure this noise originated closer at hand.

In front of me, in the gutter, light rippled from right to left, and right to left again: Halloween light here in January, like the flickering orange of a candle reflecting off the carved flesh inside a jack-o'-lantern's hollow head.

They said that curiosity killed the cat, and I had seen enough feline road kill to confirm that diagnosis. Nevertheless, I got up from the bench and took a step forward to the curb.

In the pavement, a large rectangular grate covered a drain. It dated from an era when even public works had style. The parallel iron bars joined to a four-inch iron ring in the center of the rectangle. Captured within the ring, a stylized iron lightning bolt angled from right to left.

The susurrations issued from the grating. Although the source lay in the drain, the sound no longer suggested water in motion. Now I thought it was also less like people whispering than it had been, and instead like the shuffling of many feet.

The elegance of the encircled lightning bolt appealed to me, but I wondered if it represented something other than foul weather, if it was the logo of the maker, that it should have been incorporated in a drain cover.

Grinning-pumpkin light flickered below the patterned ironwork, through the culvert that lay under the street. For a moment, the drain cover seemed like a perforated furnace door.

Standing, I was too far from the grating to discern the source of the quick spasms of luminosity. I stepped off the curb and knelt beside the ironwork.

Shoe leather sliding on concrete might have made such a sound, a platoon of weary soldiers dragging their heavy feet, bound from one battle to another—if this had been a war zone and if soldiers had been in the habit of traveling underground.

I lowered my face closer to the grating.

A faint cool draft rose from below and with it an odor, not one that I recalled having smelled before, not offensive, but peculiar. Foreign. A curiously dry scent, considering from where it came. I took three deep breaths, trying to identify the source—then realized that the odor had raised the fine hairs on the back of my neck.

When the orange light came a third time, I expected to see what, if anything, moved through the culvert. But each throb chased twisted shadows across the curved walls, and those leaping phantoms confused the eye, obscuring whatever cast them.

Perhaps I unconsciously worried my split lip with my tongue or bit it. Although it had not been bleeding, a fresh drop of blood fell on the back of my right hand, which rested on the grating beside the ring that encircled the lightning bolt.

Another drop passed through a gap and fell into the dark storm drain.

My hand seemed to have found its way to the grating without my conscious guidance.

Once more the light pulsed below, rapid diastole and systole, and the grotesque shadows appeared to swell larger than before, to thrash with greater agitation, although their provenance remained concealed.

When the fluttering light gave way to blackness again, I saw that the fingers of my right hand were straining to reach through the grate.

I registered this fact with concern, but I felt powerless to retract my hand. Something more than curiosity drew me, and I felt as perhaps a light-sodden moth feels as it beats its wings against the flame that will destroy them.

As I considered resting my brow against the ironwork, the better to see the truth that lay below when next the light came, I heard a sigh of brakes. A car, to which I had been oblivious, stopped in the street, immediately behind me.

CHAPTER 31

AS IF COMING OUT OF A TRANCE, I ROSE FROM the drain grating and turned, expecting a squad car and a couple of officers with hard smiles and harder truncheons.

Instead, before me stood a 1959 Cadillac Sedan DeVille that could have rolled off the showroom floor an hour previously. Massive, black, loaded with chrome detail, featuring big tail fins, it looked suitable for either interstate or interstellar travel.

The driver peered at me through the front passenger window, which she had put down. She appeared to be half again as old as the car, a heavysset, blue-eyed, pink-cheeked lady with a huge church-choir bosom. She wore white gloves and a little gray hat with a yellow band and yellow feathers.

“You all right, child?” she asked.

I leaned down to the open window. “Yes, ma’am.”

“You lose somethin’ through the grating?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I lied because I had no idea what had happened—or had almost happened. “But it wasn’t anything important.”

She cocked her head, studied me for a moment, and said, “It wasn’t unimportant, neither. You seem like a boy needs a friend.”

Below the nearby lightning-bolt grate, the storm drain remained dark.

“What happened to your lip?” the woman asked.

“A disagreement over singers. Rod Stewart or Sinatra.”

“Sinatra,” she said.

“That was my position, ma’am.” I glanced at a pawnshop, then at the mannequins in used clothing. “The fog has me confused. I don’t recognize this part of town.”

“Where you goin’?”

“To the harbor.”

“I’m goin’ that way,” she said. “Give you a lift?”

“You shouldn’t pick up strangers, ma’am.”

“Folks I know all have cars. Most won’t walk to the end of the block to see a parade of elephants. I don’t pick up strangers, who am I gonna pick up?”

I got in the car, closed the door, and said, “I was almost trampled by an elephant once.”

Putting up the power window, she said, “They go mad sometimes. Just like people. Though they don’t tend to shoot up classrooms and leave crazy videos behind.”

“This wasn’t the elephant’s fault,” I said. “A bad man injected Jumbo with drugs to enrage him, then locked the two of us in a barn.”

“I’ve known bad men in my time,” she said, “but none that ever schemed to do homicide by elephant. Why do they always have to name them Jumbo?”

“A sad lack of imagination in the circus, ma’am.”

She took her foot off the brake, and the car drifted forward. “Name’s Birdena Hopkins. Folks just call me Birdie. What do folks call you?”

“Harry. Harry Lime.”

“A nice clean name. Crisp. Conjures nice thoughts. Pleased to meet you, Harry Lime.”

“Thank you, Birdie. Likewise.”

On both sides of the street, the shops appeared to recede into the fog, as though they were ships outbound from Magic Beach to even stranger shores.

“You from around here?” Birdie asked.

“Visiting, ma’am. Thought I might stay. Not so sure now.”

“Not a bad town,” she said. “Though way too many tourists come for the spring harvest festival.”

“They harvest something in the spring around here?”

“No. Used to be two festivals, they combined them into one. Now each spring at plantin’ time, they celebrate the harvest to come in the autumn.”

“I didn’t think this was farm country.”

“It’s not. What we do is we celebrate the *concept* of harvest, whatever that means. Town’s always been run by an inbred bunch of fools, our foundin’ families.”

The buildings had sailed beyond sight. Here and there, a blush of neon remained, but those signs were incoherent now, the glass words having shattered into meaningless syllables of nebulous color.

Birdie said, “What’s your line of work, Harry?”

“Fry cook, ma’am.”

“Fell in love with a fry cook once. Beans Burnet, short-order wizard. A dream, that man.”

“We fry cooks tend to be romantic.”

“In Beans’s case, not enough. He loved his pancakes and home fries more than women. Worked all the time.”

“In his defense, Birdie, it’s an enchanting occupation. You can lose yourself in it.”

“Sure liked the way he smelled.”

“Beef fat and bacon grease,” I said.

She sighed. “Fried onions and green peppers. You don’t measure up to Beans in smell, Harry.”

“I’ve had a different kind of job the past month, ma’am. I’ll be back at the griddle eventually. I sure do miss it.”

“Then came Fred, my life mate, and I forgot all about fry cooks. No offense.”

Birdie changed streets at a shrouded intersection of which I had been unaware until she pulled the steering wheel to the right.

Having been engineered to isolate the driver from the roughness of the pavement, the big sedan rode like a boat. Sloshing tides of fog enhanced the perception that, with wheels retracted, the Cadillac wallowed along Venetian canals.

Although Birdie Hopkins drove below the speed limit, we were moving too fast for the dismal visibility.

“Ma’am, should we really be driving blind?”

“You might be *ridin’* blind, child, but I’m drivin’ with sunny-day confidence. Been cruisin’ this town almost sixty years. Never had an accident. Weather like this, we have the streets to ourselves, so they’re even safer. When the sick and sufferin’ need me, I don’t say they gotta wait till mornin’ comes or till the rain stops.”

“Are you a nurse, ma’am?”

“Never had time for school. Me and Fred were in garbage.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Collection, I mean. Started with two trucks and no fear our hands might get dirty. Ended with a fleet, sole contractor for six towns along the coast. Garbage is like sunrise—never stops comin’.”

“So true.”

“You can get rich doin’ work others won’t. Garbage was gold.”

“A lot of times,” I said, “when a restaurant’s really busy, there’s a lot of stress being a fry cook.”

“Don’t doubt that for a second.”

“I’ve thought about switching into tire sales or shoes. Is the garbage business stressful?”

“Sometimes for management. For a route driver, it’s so the same day after day, it gets to be like meditation.”

“Like meditation, yet you’re providing a good service. Sounds real nice.”

“Fred died seven years ago, I sold out two years later. You want, child, I can still open doors in the garbage world.”

“That’s generous, ma’am. I might take you up on that one day.”

“You’d be a good route driver. Can’t look down on the job and be any good. I can tell you don’t look down on anyone.”

“That’s kind of you to say. The reason I wondered if you were a nurse is, before garbage, you mentioned the sick and suffering.”

As if receiving directions beamed from a MapQuest satellite to her brain, Birdie turned left into a billowing white wall, and the Cadillac wallowed into a new canal.

She glanced at me, turned her attention to the invisible street, reached one hand up to adjust her feathered hat, glanced at me again, pulled to the curb, and put the car in park.

“Harry, somethin’ about you is too different. I can’t do this the usual way. Feel like I should get right to it, say I didn’t come to you by chance.”

“You didn’t?”

She left the engine running but switched off the headlights.

Fathoms of fog pressed upon the car, so it seemed as though we rested on the floor of a sea.

“You were a twinge before you were a face,” Birdie said. “For all I knew, you’d be another Nancy with cancer or like a Bodi Booker makin’ hot cocoa for suicide.”

She waited for me to reply, so at last I said, “Ma’am, I think maybe the fog got in my head, because I can’t see any sense in what you just told me.”

“What I think,” she said, “you’re in worse trouble than just a Swithin flat busted from bad romance.”

CHAPTER 32

BIRDIE HOPKINS TOOK OFF HER WHITE GLOVES. She slipped one over the gearshift knob and one over the turn-signal lever, so that the Cadillac seemed to be waving at me.

“Seventy-eight years old, still a hot flash now and then. But it’s not the slowest change of life in history. Been done with all that long ago. Has something to do with the twinges.”

From the large purse that stood on the seat between us, Birdie withdrew a Japanese fan, unfolded it, and fanned her plump face.

“Fred died, it started.”

“Seven years ago,” I said.

“Love somebody from when you’re nineteen, one day he’s the same as ever, next day dead. So many tears, they seem to wash somethin’ out of you, they leave this emptiness.”

“Loss is the hardest thing,” I said. “But it’s also the teacher that’s the most difficult to ignore.”

Her fanning hand went still. She regarded me with an expression that I took to be surprised agreement.

Because Birdie seemed to expect me to elucidate, I fumbled out what I thought she might want to say herself: “Grief can destroy you—or focus you. You can decide a relationship was all for nothing if it had to end in death, and you alone. Or you can realize that every moment of it had more meaning than you dared to recognize at the time, so much meaning it scared you, so you just lived, just took for granted the love and laughter of each day, and didn’t allow yourself

to consider the *sacredness* of it. But when it's over and you're alone, you begin to see it wasn't just a movie and a dinner together, not just watching sunsets together, not just scrubbing a floor or washing dishes together or worrying over a high electric bill. It was everything, it was the *why* of life, every event and precious moment of it. The answer to the mystery of existence is the love you shared sometimes so imperfectly, and when the loss wakes you to the deeper beauty of it, to the sanctity of it, you can't get off your knees for a long time, you're driven to your knees not by the weight of the loss but by gratitude for what preceded the loss. And the ache is always there, but one day not the emptiness, because to nurture the emptiness, to take solace in it, is to disrespect the gift of life."

After a moment, she fanned her face again, and closed her eyes.

I gazed through the windshield at the desolation of fog, which might have been the waste and void from the time before time, when mankind did not exist or any beast, when there was only darkness on the face of the deep.

Birdie said, "What you said. All of it. Same for me. So one day my emptiness was filled. First twinge came. Tuesday afternoon in May, it was. Not a physical twinge. Just a feelin', like why don't I drive one of the old garbage-collection routes. Wound up at Nancy Coleman's place, former employee of ours. Husband left her a year earlier. Four hours before I show up, she gets a cancer diagnosis. Scared, alone. That year, I drove her to chemo, doctors' appointments, shoppin' for a wig, spent so much time together, more laughin' than either of us would have thought at the start."

She closed the fan and returned it to her purse.

"Another time, I need to drive, wind up at Bodi Booker's house. Insurance agent, lifelong bachelor. Says he's busy, I talk my way in. He's makin' hot chocolate. So we start talkin' Fred. He and my Fred were bowlin'-team buddies, went fishin' like the son Fred and I never could have. Half an hour, he tells me the hot cocoa was to wash down a bottle of pills, to kill himself. Year later, Nancy Coleman doesn't have cancer anymore, she has Bodi, they married."

She retrieved her white gloves and worked her hands into them.

"What about Swithin busted from bad romance?" I asked.

“Swithin Murdoch. Good man, made a fool of himself over this girl. Leanna cleaned out his bank accounts, took a powder. Swithin almost lost his house, business, the works. I made a loan, he paid it back. So why you, Harry Lime?”

“I think something bad would have happened to me at that storm drain if you hadn’t showed up.”

“Bad like what?”

Although her journey since Fred had shown her that under the apparent chaos of life lies a strange order, the truth of me would be more than she could absorb in the time that it would take her to drive the rest of the way to the harbor.

“I don’t know, ma’am. Just a feeling I have.”

She switched on the headlights and shifted the car out of park.

“For true, you don’t know?”

Whatever event had been pending at the storm-drain grate, it had been related to the peculiar behavior of the coyotes and to the porch swing that had swung itself. I did not understand what linked those three experiences, nor what power or purpose lay behind them, so I could answer honestly.

“For true,” I assured her. “How far to the harbor?”

Piloting the Cadillac back into the fog-flooded street, she said, “Three minutes, four.”

My wristwatch and her car clock agreed—9:59.

After a silence, Birdie said, “What’s so different about you, child?”

“I don’t know, ma’am. Maybe...because I spent seven months as a guest at a monastery. The serenity of the monks kind of rubbed off on me.”

“Nothin’ rubbed off. Your difference is all yours.”

Anything I could say would be a lie or an evasion, and because she had somehow saved me, I did not want to lie to her more than necessary.

Birdie said, “You sometimes sense somethin’ big is comin’?”

“Big like what?”

“So big the world changes.”

“Watching the news too much can make you crazy,” I advised.

“Don’t mean the kind of bushwa newsmen jabber. Not war or plague, not water gives you cancer or here comes a new ice age.”

“Then what kind of bushwa?” I asked.

“Some kind nobody would ever expect.”

I thought of the absolute whiteout through which the golden retriever and I had traveled, but if that had been not just weather but also a premonition, I did not know the meaning of it.

“I can’t have done right by you yet,” she said.

“I appreciate the ride.”

“Wasn’t twinged out of my cozy home just to be a taxi. What you need, child?”

“Nothing, ma’am. I’m good.”

“Place to stay?”

“Comes with my job. Nice ocean-view room.”

“Lawyer?”

“Have nothing against them, but I don’t need one.”

“Got a bad feelin’ for you.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Some need you’ve got. I feel it.”

Considering Hoss Shackett and Utgard Rolf and the kind of men who would be aligned with them, I had a long list of things I needed, starting with a platoon of Marines.

“Money?” she asked.

“No, ma’am.”

Solemnly, quietly, she said, “Gun?”

I hesitated before I replied. “I don’t like guns.”

“Might not like them, but you need one.”

Sensing that I had said too much, I said no more.

“It’s in the purse,” she told me.

I looked at her, but she kept her attention on the street, where the headlights seemed to bake the batter of fog into a solid cake.

“Why would you have a gun?” I asked.

“Old lady in an ugly time—she has to take precautions.”

“You bought it legally?”

“I look like Clyde’s Bonnie to you?”

“No, ma’am. I just mean, anything I did with it would be traced back to you.”

“A few days, I report it stolen.”

“What if I rob a bank with it?”

“You won’t.”

“You can’t be sure. You hardly know me.”

“Child, have you been listenin’ to me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What was it with Nancy Coleman?”

“Well...she had cancer.”

“What was it with Bodi Booker?”

“Planning suicide.”

“Swithin Murdoch?”

“Flat busted from bad romance.”

“I could name more. None needed help robbin’ a bank. Just good people in trouble. You think I’ve gone to the dark side?”

“Not for a minute.”

“You’re good people in trouble. I trust you.”

“This is more than trust,” I said.

“It might be. Look in the purse.”

The weapon was a pistol. I examined it.

“No safeties,” she said. “Double action. Ten rounds in the magazine. You know how to use such a thing?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m no Bonnie’s Clyde, but I won’t shoot my foot, either.”

I thought of Annamaria saying that she didn’t work, that people gave her a free place to live and even money when she needed it.

Now a gun came to me when I most needed one.

Something more was happening in Magic Beach than just a plot to smuggle nuclear weapons into the country and my attempt to thwart it.

This place was the still point of the turning world, and this night was the still point between the past and the future. I felt monumental forces gathering that I either could not comprehend or was afraid to contemplate.

My cursed life, my blessed life, my struggles with grievous loss and my striving toward wonder had often seemed to me to be the random path of a flippered pinball, from post to post and bell to bell and gate to gate, rolling wherever I might be knocked.

Instead, all the while, from childhood, I had been moving toward Magic Beach and toward a moment when, with full free will, I would either take upon myself a tremendous burden—or turn away from it. I did not know what the burden might prove to be, but I could feel the weight of it descending, and my moment of decision drawing near.

All things in their time.

Birdie Hopkins pulled the Cadillac to the curb and stopped once more.

Pointing, she said, “Harbor’s one block that way. Maybe you’d rather walk the last part to...whatever it is.”

“I’ll use the gun only to defend myself.”

“Thought different, I wouldn’t give it.”

“Or an innocent life.”

“Hush now. It’s like you said.”

“What did I say?”

“This is more than trust.”

The fog, the night, the future pressed at the windows.

“One more thing I might need.”

“Just say.”

“Do you have a cell phone?”

She took it from the purse, and I accepted it.

“When you’re safe,” she said, “will you let me know?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you for everything.”

I started to open the door, then hesitated.

Unshed tears stood in Birdie’s eyes.

“Ma’am, I shined you on about something earlier. What you feel coming isn’t from watching the news too much.”

She bit her lower lip.

I said, “Something big is coming. I sense it, too. I think I’ve sensed it all my life.”

“What? Child, what is it?”

“I don’t know. So big the world changes—but like you said, some kind of change nobody would ever expect.”

“Sometimes I’m so afraid, mostly in the night, and Fred not here to talk me through to a quiet heart.”

“You don’t ever need to be afraid, Birdie Hopkins. Not a woman like you.”

She reached out to me. I held her hand.

“Keep safe,” she said.

When she was ready to let go of my hand, I got out of the sedan and closed the door. I slid her cell phone into a pocket of my jeans, and I tucked the pistol in the waistband so that the sweatshirt would cover it.

As I walked to the corner, crossed the intersection, and headed toward the harbor, the big engine of the Cadillac idled in the night until I went too far to hear it anymore.

CHAPTER 33

ALONG THE SOUTHERN HORN OF THE NARROW-MOUTHED bay, toward the seaward end, the vessels in the small commercial-fishing fleet tied up where they could come and go with the least disturbance to the bayside residents and to the noncommercial boat traffic.

Where I stood on the quay, along the crescent shore of the northern horn, I could not see those distant trawlers, seiners, and clippers through the thousand white veils of the night. From their direction, however, once every thirty seconds, came the low mournful bleat of the foghorn out on the southern arm of the harbor-entrance breakwater.

Here in the north, the marina offered protection from the storm surges that, in bad weather, muscled in through the entrance channel. Four hundred slips were occupied by a variety of pleasure craft: small electric-motor bay cruisers, sportfishers with metal lookout towers rising above their bridges, sailing yachts with canvas furled, motor yachts, and racing boats. The largest of these craft were sixty feet, and most were smaller.

As I descended a short flight of stairs from the sea wall to the wharf, I could see only a few of the closest craft through the soup. Even those appeared to be ghost vessels, moored in a dream.

Regularly spaced dock lamps receded into the mist, a necklace of radiant pearls, and under them the wet planks glistened darkly.

I remained alert for the sound of voices, for footsteps, but no one seemed to be out and about in the chilly mist.

Some of the sailing yachts were full-time residences. Their lighted portholes were as golden as scattered coins, faux doubloons that shimmered and, as I walked, paled away into the murk.

Avoiding the dock lamps was easy enough, for the feathered air constrained their reach. I made my way through shadows, my sneakers squishing so faintly on the wet planks that even I could barely hear the noise I made.

The sea beyond the bay had been flatline all day; and the currents in the harbor were so gentle that the boats wallowed only slightly in their berths. They creaked and sometimes softly groaned, but the motion was not strong enough to clink halyards against metal masts.

As I walked, I took slow deep breaths of the briny air, and relying on psychic magnetism to pull me toward the conspirators, I concentrated on the images from my dream. Red sky. Red tide. Fiery phantoms of reflected flames swarming the beach.

At the west end of the marina, on the sea wall above the wharf, stood the building housing the harbor department, which was under the authority of the city police. Here below, the last several berths were reserved for department vessels.

Three were the twenty-foot, firehouse-red harbor-patrol boats that, among other tasks, chased down those who violated the five-mile-per-hour speed limit pertaining from the main channel to shore.

Of the other three craft, only one drew my interest: a seagoing tugboat, half again as big as the sturdy tug that worked only in the bay. From it came the rhythmic laboring of a generator. Many of the portholes and the large windows of the bridge were aglow; a work lamp shone upon a small crane fixed to the long, low afterdeck; and the running lights were on, as if the boat would soon leave port.

The sudden scent of cigarette smoke warned me that someone shared the dock with me. The fog would have filtered out the smell if the smoker had been as far away as the tugboat.

I moved closer to the stone face of the quay and took shelter against a wharf shack, which had been painted red to indicate that

it stored firefighting gear.

When I peered around the corner of the shack, I could see the break in the dock railing where a gangway led down to the slip in which the tug was berthed.

After I had stared for a couple of minutes, and only when the eddying fog briefly opened a clearer line of sight for me, I saw the guard move. He was hunkered down this side of the entrance to the gangway, his back against the dock railing. The lamp above him had been broken, probably a short while ago, to provide a dark place where he could not be seen as long as he remained still.

At police headquarters, when Polterfrank had done his thing, Shackett must have thought that I, Harry Lime, federal psychic agent, had tapped a power of my own to escape.

Those events had occurred within the hour, so the conspirators would be at their highest alert, searching for me all over town but expecting that I might come to them. Panic would have seized them: the fear that with one phone call I would bring a hundred FBI agents, or others, down on them before they could take delivery of the nukes and get them out of town.

Evidently, loath to forfeit their newfound wealth, they hadn't canceled the rendezvous at which they would acquire possession of the deadly cargo. Judging by preparations at the tugboat, they intended to transship the weapons from another vessel at sea.

Now that I knew their intentions and I was on the loose, they might have decided that they dared not return to the harbor with the bombs. If they executed a contingency plan to bring the nukes ashore elsewhere along the coast, I had no chance of stopping the operation unless I stowed away with them.

To get aboard, I would have to take out the guard here on the dock, but I could see no way to do so quietly.

Besides, I had to cross a swath of open planking to reach him, and I had no doubt that he would be better armed than I was. A better marksman. A better fighter. Tougher than I was. More brutal. Probably a kung fu master. Wicked with knives and martial-arts throwing stars that would be secreted in six places on his superbly fit body. And if I was somehow able to disarm him of every

murderous implement, this guy *would* know how to make a lethal weapon from one of his shoes, either the left or right, he wouldn't care which.

As I worried myself toward paralysis, a man appeared on the long afterdeck of the tug. In spite of the fog, I could see him, a shadowy figure, because of the brightness of the big work lamp focused on the deck crane.

He called out to someone named Jackie, and Jackie proved to be the guard who was hunkered along the deck railing, waiting to kill me with either of his shoes. Jackie rose out of his shadowy lair and disappeared down the gangway to the slip in which the tug was berthed.

Crouched, I crossed the dock to the sentinel position that the guard had just vacated. Through a gap in the railing, I had trouble seeing Jackie on the unlighted slip below, but after a moment, he appeared as a shrouded form on a shorter gangway that led up to the low afterdeck of the tug.

He joined the other man at the deck crane, and together they attended to some final task before departure, sacrificing a kitten to Beelzebub or whatever deeply evil men did to ensure a safe sea journey.

Unlike the boat slip to which it led, the gangway was lighted, but it offered the only sensible approach to the berth below. The noise I would make by diving from here and swimming to the nearest finger of the slip would bring everyone aboard the tug to the open decks to discover if the fabled Harry Lime might be as bulletproof as he was psychic.

Both men at the crane had their backs to me.

All things in their time, and the time had come for reckless commitment.

Pulling the pistol from my waistband, I rose and went to the break in the railing. I descended the gangway boldly, hoping that even if someone stepped onto the foredeck or the bridge deck and saw me, they would see only a figure in the mist and would assume that I was one of them.

Echoing across the bay, the foghorn sounded like the plaintive call of a prehistoric behemoth, the last of its kind crying out in loneliness.

I reached the bottom without raising an alarm, and crossed the slip to the second gangway. The afterdeck had such a low profile that I could see the two men up there working at the small crane.

Their backs were still turned to me, and I risked setting foot on the second gangway. The first had been a permanent feature of the dock, and therefore solid; but this much shorter ramp was detachable and collapsible and, it seemed to me, fearsomely noisy. Nonetheless, I boarded the tug without drawing attention.

Jackie and his friend were no more than twelve feet away. The halogen lamp burned through the fog with such intensity that, if they turned, they would be able to see me clearly enough to know that I wasn't one of them.

The quickest route off this deck was up a set of six open stairs to the foredeck, immediately to my right. The higher deck encircled a portholed structure containing spaces that an experienced seaman would be able to identify but that were, to me, as mysterious as any female wrestler's boudoir—and just as scary.

Instinct told me that I would be less likely to encounter people if I went below decks. The bulkhead that separated the afterdeck from the forward structures featured a door that most likely would take me where I wished to go.

I had to walk across half the width of the afterdeck, behind the two laboring men, through the bright halogen backwash, but I reached the door, opened it, and stepped through without being shot in the back.

Beyond lay a landing at the top of an enclosed companionway. I descended the circular stairs to a narrow, low-ceilinged passageway with cabin doors on both sides and another door at the farther end, which was well aft of the bow.

Understandably, you may at this point be wondering *What is this bozo's plan?*

As usual, I had no plan. After the fact, it might sometimes appear to a celestial observer—if one happened to be tuned in to Channel

Odd—that I had performed according to a meticulously worked-out strategy, using well-rehearsed tactics executed to an operations schedule timed with a stopwatch. As you know, I make it up as I go along, heart in my throat and bowels quivering near a state of collapse.

Over the years, I have found that my seat-of-the-pants approach works well. Except when it doesn't.

By doing, I learn what to do. By going, I learn where to go. One day, by dying, I'll learn how to die, and leave the world and hope to land in light.

Pistol ready, I went forward along the passageway, ignoring doors to the left and the right, behind which might wait the lady or the tiger, neither of which I wanted. All I asked was that I be spared surprises, although in this world of six billion souls, all acting with free will and too many with audacity, surprises are inevitable, too few of them the kind that make you smile and that lift your heart.

Easing open the door at the end of the corridor, which bucked one of my cherished traditions by swinging smoothly on quiet hinges, I was pleased that I did not at once receive a bullet in the face. I stepped across the raised threshold into the engine room.

An extravagance of cool machinery and a maze of pipes crowded this compartment, a three-dimensional jigsaw fitted to perfection in the stingy space, a testament to the engineering skills of humanity. High maintenance standards resulted in a room that was cleaner than many kitchens, with fresh paint everywhere and not a spot of rust to be seen.

Evidently, not everyone in the harbor department was distracted by plots to destroy civilization.

Once in the compartment, I hesitated to close the door, though I seemed to be alone.

This was a tugboat, not a battleship or even a destroyer, so the engine room didn't have a lovable but tough Scottish-American warrant officer overseeing a jokey but dedicated team of sweaty enlisted men who—between poker games and harmonica interludes and sappy conversations about their girls back home—were forever tormented by boilers failing, boilers overheating, pipe joints

bursting from too much pressure, and a host of other crises. Nobody needed to be stationed in this compartment for the vessel to go about its work with efficiency, which is one reason why Hollywood never made a great World War II movie about a tugboat.

Because the lights had been on when I opened the door, however, I had to assume that someone had recently been here and intended to return.

As I was about to retreat and search for another hiding place, I heard a crewman descending the companionway. I closed the door behind me.

Although the equipment was tightly fitted, the layout allowed for repair. I snaked quickly through the service aisles, toward the point farthest from the entrance. Unfortunately, the farthest point was not far enough to make me feel safe from discovery.

Crouched behind shielding pumps and pipes, I had no view of the door, but I heard it open and close.

Someone had entered, though he did not seem to be doing anything but standing over there. The engines were not even idling yet, and the quiet in the compartment was such that I would have heard anyone moving around.

As I had admitted to Chief Hoss Shackett, when I was suffering from amnesia and unable to remember that I wasn't Matt Damon, I am a guy with a good imagination, which now kicked into overdrive. I envisioned the newcomer, in a gas mask, preparing to pull the release pin on a canister of poisonous chemicals, to kill me as if I were a cockroach.

Before I could elaborate this simple scenario into an opera, the door opened again, and I heard someone say, "What the hell happened to you?"

The reply came in the distinctive bearish voice of Utgard Rolf: "I fell down."

"Fell down what?"

"Some stairs," Rolf said.

"Stairs? How many stairs?"

"I didn't count them, idiot."

"Man, that's gotta hurt."

Utgard closed the door behind him. “Been a change of plans. We’ve got to cut some throats.”

CHAPTER 34

ON THE FARTHER SIDE OF THE ENGINE ROOM, which was nearer than I would have liked, Utgard Rolf said, “Listen, Joey, once we have the packages aboard, we won’t return to the harbor.”

“What? Why not?”

“There’s a guy, he’s onto the operation.”

“What guy?” Joey asked.

“A government sonofabitch.”

“Oh, man.”

“Don’t freak.”

“But we kept this so *tight*.”

“We’re gonna find him. He’s as good as dead.”

With sharp anxiety, Joey said, “He’s here in Magic Beach?”

“What do you think, I fell down some stairs in Washington?”

“This guy was the stairs?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“How big *is* the guy, he could do this to you?”

“He looks worse than I do.”

I resisted the urge to stand up and disprove that boast.

“If we don’t go back to the harbor,” Joey wondered, “where we gonna go?”

“You know the abandoned boatyard south of Rooster Point?”

“That’ll work,” Joey said.

“Damn right it will. The facilities there, the privacy, it’ll be an easier off-load than we’d have in the harbor.”

“The trucks know the new meet?”

“They know. But here’s the thing.”

“I see what’s comin’,” Joey said.

“We need five of us to take delivery at sea, but the way things are at the boatyard, three can handle the off-load.”

When boarding the tug, I’d had two main concerns, one of which was how I would be able to determine the number of crewmen I might be up against. Now I knew: five.

Joey said, “We were gonna drop those two, anyway. So we drop them sooner than later.”

Perhaps a falling-out among thieves had not occurred, as I had thought when I’d found Sam Whittle drilled five times in his bathtub. The initial entrepreneurs who set up this operation might always have intended, toward the closing of the business, to issue pink slips to those lesser partners whom they considered mere employees. A few bullets were a prudent alternative to generous severance payments.

“After the transfer,” Utgard said, “Buddy will pop Jackie. I’ll drop Hassan.”

The name Hassan was something of a surprise and a disappointment to me. Thus far Jackie, Joey, and Buddy had led me to believe that Utgard’s crew might be composed of retired Las Vegas comedians and that the final member could be named Shecky.

On the other hand, I was somewhat relieved that my second main concern had been partly addressed. I had wondered how I would be able to deal with the entire crew; now I would be required to deal with only sixty percent of it.

Joey said, “But don’t cut their throats.”

“What?”

“It’s too up-close. Dangerous. Shoot them in the head.”

“Of course,” Utgard agreed. “Pop them, drop them. That’s what I said.”

“Well, first you said you had to cut some throats.”

“That was just a way of saying it.”

“You said it, I thought you meant it.”

“We’ll shoot them in the head,” Utgard said.

“The *back* of the head.”

“How else? What the hell, Joey.”

“It’s the only smart way.”

“We’re on the same page now.”

“So they don’t see it comin’.”

“I understand,” Utgard said impatiently.

I have only a few times been in a position to overhear bad men conspiring to commit evil deeds, and on every occasion, they had been pretty much like Joey and Utgard. Those who choose to live criminal lives are not the brightest among us.

This truth inspires a question: If evil geniuses are so rare, why do so many bad people get away with so many crimes against their fellow citizens and, when they become leaders of nations, against humanity?

Edmund Burke provided the answer in 1795: *The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.*

I would only add this: It is also essential that good men and women not be educated and propagandized into believing that real evil is a myth and that all malevolent behavior is merely the result of a broken family’s or a failed society’s shortcomings, amenable to cure by counseling and by the application of new economic theory.

Beyond my sight but not beyond my hearing, Utgard said, “From when we leave the dock till we’re to Rooster Point, you man the radio room.”

“Like we planned.”

“You got to piss, get it done now.”

“I’ll be at the radio.”

“We can’t pull the transponder, that’ll just make the Coast Guard sit up and take notice.”

“I know what to say to them.”

“They get a GPS report we’re at sea this time of night, they’ll want to know why.”

Joey’s turn for impatience had come: “I know. Don’t I know?”

“Just don’t get cute with them. Play it like we planned.”

Joey recited the story to prove himself: “A guest aboard *Junie’s Moonbeam* ate some shellfish, had a real bad allergic reaction, needs

a hospital urgent. The yacht's too big, a hundred eighty feet, draws too deep for the bay. So they called us, and so we're just bringin' the sick bitch ashore."

"What're you doing?" Utgard demanded.

"Relax. I'm not gonna call her a sick bitch to the Coast Guard," Joey assured him.

"Sometimes I wonder about you."

"Sick bitch? Would I do that? Man, I'm just havin' some fun with you."

"I'm not in the mood for fun."

"I guess fallin' down a bunch of stairs will do that to you."

"Don't try to dress up the story," Utgard advised. "Keep it simple."

"Okay, okay. But what kind of name is *Junie's Moonbeam* for a major yacht, anyway?"

"What do I know? Why do you care? None of our business."

Joey said, "*Junie's Moonbeam* sounds like some half-assed put-put kind of boat."

So it is these days that men plotting the nuclear devastation of major cities and the murder of millions of innocents can be no more interesting than those most vapid of your relatives whom you wish you did not have to invite to this year's Thanksgiving dinner.

"Just park yourself at the radio," Utgard said.

"All right."

"We're out of here in three minutes."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

The door opened but didn't close.

I heard Utgard stomping along the passageway.

Joey waited. Then he switched off the light.

The door closed.

Apparently, unlike Utgard, Joey did not have a body mass equal to that of Big Foot, and I could not hear him walking away.

Because life has taught me to be suspicious, I waited motionless in the dark, not convinced that I was alone.

CHAPTER 35

WHEN THE ENGINES TURNED OVER AND MY COZY compartment filled with the drumming of the four-stroke diesels, with the throb of the pumps, with the rotational rata-plan of driveshafts, and with myriad other rhythms, and when we began to move, the boat yawing slightly as it had not done in its berth, I knew that I was alone, because Joey had committed to being in the radio room when we got under way.

Though I breathed more easily, I didn't relax. I knew that what was coming would be terrible, that even if I were not shot or cut, I would come through this night with wounds that would never heal.

I bear similar wounds from other such encounters. To protect the innocent, to avoid being one of Burke's good men who do nothing, you have to accept permanent scars that cincture the heart and traumas of the mind that occasionally reopen to weep again.

To *do* something, to do what you feel sure is right and in the aid of justice, you sometimes have to do things that, when recalled on lonely nights, make you wonder if in fact you are the good man that you like to believe you are.

Such doubts are high cards in the devil's hand, and he knows how to play them well, in hope of bringing you to despair and ennui, if not to self-destruction.

Ozzie Boone, my novelist friend and mentor in Pico Mundo, had instructed me, on the writing of the first of these accounts, that I keep the tone light. He says that only the emotionally immature and

the intellectually depraved enjoy stories that are unrelentingly grim and nihilistic.

As I have said and as I hope that you have seen, I am inclined to a love of life and to a sunny disposition even in the face of bleak skies and persistent storms. I can find a laugh or two in a split lip and even greater hilarity in the threats and posturings of a sadistic chief of police.

Fair warning requires the acknowledgment that some events resist the touch of a humorist, and what jokes may arise from certain acts can call forth only a less hearty kind of laughter. We are coming now to dark shoals in rough waters, to straits so narrow that virtue and wickedness voyage close together and may be at times more difficult than usual to differentiate from each other.

Across the bay and into open sea, I waited without light in the belly of the boat. In spite of noise that hammered effectively at concentration, I used the time to mull over what I had learned since coming aboard.

Junie's Moonbeam must have been only a few miles offshore, for the engines cut back sooner than I had expected and, after a thus far straight course, the big oceangoing tugboat began to maneuver. They were aligning the vessels to effect the transfer of the nukes.

The Pacific seemed to be nearly as calm here above the deeps as it had been all day nearer shore. With smooth water, their work would go faster.

I rose to my feet and eased through the pitch-black chamber, aware that surfaces previously safe to touch might be scalding hot. I kept an image of the compartment door in my mind, relying on psychic magnetism to lead me to it through the lightless maze.

Instinct told me to reach for a lever handle, and I found it after a minimum of fumbling.

When I cracked the door, I saw a deserted passageway. With the transfer of the shipment begun, Joey would be at his radio, while Utgard and the other three would have to be above, all hands needed to ensure a successful delivery.

I stepped to the first starboard compartment, tried the door, found it unlocked, and went inside fast, shouldering it open, the pistol in a

two-hand grip.

The room was dark, but light played on the porthole. Certain that no sleeper lay here to be awakened, I felt my way to the bright circle of glass.

Alongside the tugboat lay *Junie's Moonbeam*, its port side to our starboard, at a distance of perhaps ten or twelve feet. A white yacht in fog, it would have been a stealth vessel but for the hotel's worth of lighted portholes and windows that made it appear as festive as a luxury cruise ship.

From the main deck, the yacht's crew had slung down inflatable black-rubber bladders that would serve as protective bumpers when the boats drew close enough to knock hulls in a set of rogue waves.

Retreating to the passageway, I quietly pulled shut the door and crossed to the first portside compartment. I prepared to go in fast, as before, but the door opened on darkness.

Soft lamplight filled the aftmost port compartment. When I went inside, Joey looked up in disbelief from a photo spread in a copy of *Maxim* magazine.

Letting the door swing itself shut behind me, I took two steps and shoved the pistol in his face before the magazine fell out of his hands and slithered shut upon the deck.

CHAPTER 36

JOEY, THE CRITIC OF YACHT NAMES, SAT AT THE shortwave radio. For a moment, staring into the muzzle of the gun, he looked as though he might make a toilet of his chair.

When I saw that he regained control almost at once and that he began to calculate how to come after me, I lowered the pistol to his throat, the better to see his face and every nuance of expression.

“Get me the Coast Guard,” I said. “Call them up.”

“Me and them, we already had our chat.”

“Call them or I’ll put a bullet in your leg.”

“What’s the matter—you can’t use a shortwave?”

The moment I took the gun off him, he would come for me.

My mouth had flooded with saliva triggered by nausea, so I made use of it. I spat in his face.

As he flinched, his eyes were briefly shut, which gave me a chance to whip him across the face with the pistol. The forward sight scored his cheek, and a thin line of blood sprang up.

He put a hand to the hot laceration.

Although the anger in his eyes had with unsettling swiftness distilled to bitter hatred, he had gained a new respect for me and might not be so quick to make a move.

“Call them,” I repeated.

“No.”

He meant it. He would not be persuaded. The prospect of life in prison might have been worse than death to him.

Glancing at the door and then quickly at me, Joey hoped to imply that someone had entered behind me, but I knew that he was scamming, hoping I would glance back.

“Anyway,” he said, when I didn’t take the bait, “their nearest cutter is fifty nautical miles from here. We’re home free.”

The idling engines of the nearby yacht sent vibrations through the hull of the tugboat, and all the other noises of the pending transfer left me with no concern that a shot would be heard above the racket. I put one round in his left foot.

He cried out, I told him to be quiet, and I whipped him with the gun again to silence him.

Inside myself, I had opened a door to ruthlessness that I wanted to close again as soon as possible. But the fate of a nation and the lives of millions were at stake, and whatever must be done, I must do it without hesitation.

Pain had changed him. He was crying.

“I believe you about the cutter, fifty miles. So here are your options, Joey. You tell me some things about this operation, then I kill you quick and painless.”

He said a twelve-letter word that I won’t repeat, although I challenged him to repeat it.

When he didn’t take up the challenge, I said, “If you don’t tell me what I want to know, I’ll wound you in ways so painful you can’t conceive of your suffering. Wounds that leave you dying slow, unable to move or speak. You’ll be hours here on the deck, in agony, more tears than all the babies you would have killed in those cities, so many tears you’ll die of dehydration before you bleed to death.”

He wanted to sit on the deck and hold his wounded foot to damp the pain, but I would not allow it.

“Where do the bombs come from?”

I didn’t think he was ready to answer, but then in a voice shaken by pain and fear, he named a Middle Eastern country.

“How did they get on the yacht?”

“From a freighter.”

“Transshipped? Where?”

“Three hundred miles out.”

“At sea?”

“Yeah. Where the Coast Guard can’t monitor.” He inhaled with a hiss between clenched teeth. “This foot is killin’ me.”

“It won’t be the foot. How many nukes?”

“Four.”

“How many?”

“Four. I said. Four.”

“You better not be lying. What cities?”

“I don’t know.”

“*What cities?*” I demanded.

“I don’t know. I don’t. I didn’t need to know.”

“Who owns the yacht?”

“Some billionaire. I don’t know his name.”

“American?”

“Shit, yeah.”

“Why would an American want to do this?”

“If he can, why not?”

I hit him with the gun. An eyebrow ripped.

“*Why?*”

Pressing shut the torn skin with his fingers, his voice thin and higher pitched, as if time were running backward to his childhood, he said, “Hey, all right, hey, it’s like this—okay? truth? okay?—just before the bombs go off—okay?—there’ll be assassinations.”

“What assassinations?”

“President, vice president, lots of them.”

“And then the bombs. And after that?”

“They got a plan.”

“They who? What plan?”

“I don’t know. Really. See? Even this much, it’s more than I should know—okay?—stuff I found out they don’t know I know. Okay? There’s no more. I swear to God. There’s no more.”

I believed him, but even if I had not taken his protestations as the truth, I would have had no opportunity to question him further.

The knife must have been up the right sleeve of his shirt, in a sheath on his arm. How he released it, I don’t know, but it came under his cuff and into his hand. The blade flicked from the handle.

I saw the wink of light along the razor-sharp edge, but he thrust before I shot him in the throat.

The crack of the gun was not loud in the small cabin. The tug's engines, the boom and clatter from the work on the afterdeck, and the squeal of one boat's bumpers rubbing those of the other would have masked it easily.

Joey slid out of the chair and folded onto the floor, as if he had been a scarecrow with flesh of straw that couldn't fully support the clothes that now draped baggily around him.

The switchblade was so sharp that it had sliced open the thick fabric of my sweatshirt as though it had been silk.

I reached through the tear to feel my right side where it stung, above the lowest rib. He had cut me.

CHAPTER 37

I SAT ON THE RADIO OPERATOR'S DESK, WHERE no blood had showered.

In an arc across a bulkhead, ending in spatters on the round of glass, was his blood from the lethal shot, as if it were the spoor of a fleeing soul that had used a porthole as a portal out of this world.

My cut was shallow, the bleeding light, the pain less than that of loss but troubling. Left hand pressed over the wound, I closed my eyes and tried to dream into existence the blue lake of abiding hope.

Stormy Llewellyn and I, at eighteen, had gone to the lake to bake on beach blankets and to swim.

A sign warned that no lifeguard was on duty that day. Swimmers were advised to stay in the shallows close to shore.

The hard desert sun sprinkled diamonds in the sand and displayed a vast wealth of jewelry across the water.

The heat seemed to melt the mechanism of time, with the promise that she and I would never age or know a change of heart, or be apart from each other.

We took a boat out on the lake. I rowed into the blue, sky above and sky spread across the water.

I shipped the oars. On every side, the gently lapping blueness appeared to curve down and away, as though we had been given a small world of our own, where the horizon was nearer than on the former Earth.

We slipped from the boat and floated on our backs in the buoyant salt lake, kept afloat by the lazy winglike motion of our arms. Eyes closed against the sun, we talked.

All the talk was in essence about one thing. We were dreaming our future into existence.

From time to time, we noticed that the rowboat had drifted from us. We swam nearer to it and floated once more, dreaming aloud as before.

Later, as I rowed us back to the beach, she heard the cry and saw the drowning boy before I did.

He had been nine or ten and, showing off, had swum too far. His arms went weak, his legs cramped, and suddenly he could not keep himself afloat even in the brine.

Stormy went over the side, so lithe and swift, the arc of her stroke pulling the water away from her with determination.

On the sand, the mother and a sister, neither swimmers, became aware of the crisis only as Stormy side-stroked to shore with the boy in tow.

She swam faster than I could row. I beached the boat and ran to her, to assist, but resuscitation was not necessary. She had snared him before he had breathed the lake into his lungs.

This is a moment that will remain forever fresh in my memory: the coughing boy, the crying mother, the frightened sister—and Stormy tending to them in the way that each required.

She always was a savior of others. I know that she saved me.

Although I had thought that I had beached the boat securely when I had been eager to get to Stormy's side, I must have left it adrift, for when I looked, it bobbed beyond the shallows.

The lake is big, and the dynamics of deep water apply. While it appears placid on the surface, currents are always working.

I waded into the water and then swam, but at first the boat, in the influence of a current, moved farther away from me.

Perhaps the irrational fear that gripped me was inspired by the near-drowning of the boy, the reminder of ever-present death, also by the fact that Stormy and I had been dreaming our future together and, therefore, had been tempting fate.

For whatever reason, as the rowboat initially eluded me, my frustration rapidly escalated into dread. I became crazily convinced that if I could not catch the boat and board it, the future we had dreamed together would never come to pass, and that in fact the death from which the boy had narrowly escaped would be visited instead on one of us.

Because the boat was adrift and I was not, I reached it in due course. Aboard, I sat shaking, first with residual dread and then with relief.

I suppose now that in swimming to retrieve the boat, I might have experienced a dim presentiment of the shooter who, a couple of years later, would take Stormy from me.

Sometimes, I like to call into memory that day on the lake. The sky and the water. Safe in that sphere of blue.

I tell myself that I can still dream our future into existence: the two of us on a new Earth all our own.

Now and then, as we floated on our backs, the winglike motion of our arms brought our hands in contact beneath the water, and we gripped each other for a moment as if to say *I'm here, I'm always here*.

The tugboat yawed, and the rubber bumpers squealed between the vessels, and from above and aft came a solid thud that trembled the deck.

I slid off the radio operator's desk and got to my feet.

Having tumbled from his chair, the dead man lay on his side, his head twisted so that he faced the ceiling. His mouth hung open, and his eyes were like those of a fish on ice in a market.

That I had never seen Stormy's body in death, that in mercy she had been brought to me only as ashes in a simple urn, filled me with a gratitude beyond measure.

Leaving the radio room, I knew the time had not yet come for me to venture above. Once the transfer of the nukes had been completed and the crates lashed down, once *Junie's Moonbeam* sailed away into the fog, Utgard and Buddy would at once kill Jackie and Hassan. My best chance to succeed at this was to time my afterdeck appearance to that bloody moment.

Opening off the passageway was one room I had not explored, the aft compartment on the starboard side, across from the radio room. I tried the door, found a light switch, and stepped into a lavatory.

A red cross marked a white corner cabinet full of first-aid supplies.

After pulling off my sweatshirt and T-shirt, I spread the wound with my fingers. I poured rubbing alcohol into the shallow gash.

No stitches were needed. Bleeding, renewed by this attention, would eventually stop again.

Leaving the laceration open to the air and the rub of clothing, however, ensured a continuous stinging that distracted me. I had to work at an awkward angle, and I might not have a lot of time; so I used no gauze, only wide waterproof adhesive tape to seal the cut.

Stripping it off later, I would inevitably tear open the laceration. I didn't worry about that, because if the time came for me to peel away the tape, that would mean I had survived Utgard and his crew.

As I put on my sweatshirt, another heavy thud from the afterdeck shivered through the tugboat.

Although I did not think anyone would come below until the work was done, I turned off the light and stood in blackness. Should the door open, I could shoot as he reached for the switch.

The small lavatory had no porthole. The room would admit no thread of light around the door frame.

I thought of the mirror in Sam Whittle's bathroom, which had reached out to claim his lingering spirit.

The lavatory featured a spotted mirror above the sink. I could not see what might be forming in its dark reflective surface.

My usually fevered imagination could do nothing with this rich material.

Real violence had come. More was pending.

The door to ruthlessness that I had opened in my mind had not been closed. More than darkness and mirrors, I feared what could come out of that inner door.

Heavier vibrations translating through the sea into the tugboat hull were proof that the transfer had been completed and that

Junie's Moonbeam was getting under way once more. We began to roll in the wake of the departing yacht.

I left the lavatory and went to the aft companionway, moving counter to the deck to keep my balance.

At the top of the stairs stood the door through which I had originally come below. A porthole provided a view of the long fog-swept afterdeck, which was still brightened by the halogen work lamp.

Two crates, neither of which had been there when we had motored out of the harbor, lay toward the starboard quarter of the deck. The size of coffins, wrapped in fog as they were, these twin containers suggested that we had not taken aboard anything as fantastic and grotesque as weapons that could destroy whole cities, but instead merely the less unnatural cargo of Count Dracula and his bride, who were sleeping now on beds of Transylvanian soil inside sunproof caskets where soon they would wake.

Utgard Rolf—dressed in black nylon pants with elastic cuffs tight at the ankles and a matching jacket—and a man I had not seen before were conferring near the small crane.

Two other men were at work on the port side, stowing tools in a secured deck box.

Pulling pistols as they moved, Utgard and the man to whom he had been talking, no doubt Buddy, crossed the deck behind the other two men and shot them in the back. Both sprawled facedown, and their executioners bent to administer a final shot to each at the base of the skull.

CHAPTER 38

HESITATING BEHIND THE COMPANIONWAY DOOR, I thought that they would weight the dead men with chains before tossing them overboard.

Evidently, they were confident that from this distance the sea would not bring the bodies to shore for days—if ever—and that by then they would have vanished into their new lives in far corners of the world. They put away their guns, grabbed the cadavers by collars and belts, and began to drag them toward the portside deck wall.

Their backs were to me, but they would remain vulnerable only briefly. Bull strong, Utgard did not long drag his victim, but soon lifted him clear of the deck and carried him.

I dared not think about what was required of me here, but had to focus my mind on why I must not fail to act: the possibility of children seared to the bone by blast heat, of women crushed and torn by the detonation wave, of men atomized, buildings hammered to dust, museums in rubble, churches obliterated, blacktop streets boiling like rivers of lava, and square miles of ashes soaked with the blood of millions.

With no awareness of having pushed through the stairhead door, I found myself on the open deck, in motion.

The immediate fog was silver with halogen reflections, white overhead, and gray beyond the limits of the boat, the yacht lights

already having been swallowed as completely as Jonah and his lantern.

The chill wet air on my face was not as cold as the pit of my stomach, and the plume of my breath across my lips seemed cold as well.

With his burden, Utgard reached the port wall. He heaved the body overboard, but the dead man's feet hooked on the gunwale. For a macabre moment, he hung that way, until Utgard gave him a final push into the sea.

Fearing a fall, I nonetheless negotiated the wet and gently rolling deck as though born on a ship. In a two-hand grip, I brought the gun to bear.

The other man wrestled the second corpse halfway over the gunwale. Utgard grabbed one of the cadaver's arms to assist.

Seeing the difficulty of this disposal, I waited for them to finish the job.

A hero does not shoot his adversaries in the back. But *hero* is a title others have wrongly given to me, which I have never claimed for myself.

As the second corpse vanished into the night and fog, I shot Utgard twice in the back from a distance of less than eight feet. He fell forward against the gunwale, but did not tumble overboard.

The other man recoiled in shock but in the same instant went for the weapon in the paddle holster at his hip.

I squeezed off two rounds, trying for abdomen and chest, but I allowed the pistol to pull too high. The first round took him in the face, and the second only parted his hair.

The head shot was enough, and he went down dead.

In bad shape, supporting himself against the gunwale, Utgard turned toward me. Filled with halogen reflections, his demented coyote eyes were lanterns burning unholy oil.

His face was bruised, one eye swollen half shut, one ear crusted with blood—the consequence of events in the interrogation room.

As I stepped closer, he reached, and I shot him twice again.

He slid down the gunwale and toppled onto his side. His head knocked the deck hard enough to bounce.

For a while I took great deep breaths and blew them out, trying to exhale the tension that had suddenly begun to make my hands shake like those of a palsied old man.

Having watched them wrestle the corpses overboard, I changed my mind about eliminating these two in the same way. Disposing of them would make no sense if I left Joey dead in the radio room, and I did not believe that I could also manage to drag him topside for burial at sea.

A way might present itself in which I could get the tugboat and the nukes into the hands of responsible authorities without making the delivery personally. If I remained anonymous, never coming face to face with them, I would not have to explain the killing that I had done.

I turned my back on the dead and crossed the deck toward the coffinlike crates that were stored on the starboard quarter.

Movies condition us to expect that a villain shot repeatedly, appearing to be dead, will reliably rise once more at the penultimate moment, with shrieking violins as background. But reality has no symphonic soundtrack, and the dead stay dead. Only the spirit rises.

I was alone aboard the tugboat, and I doubted that the collector holding the contract on Utgard's spirit would allow him to linger as a poltergeist.

With killing on my mind, I had crossed the deck in surefooted haste, but with the killing done, my balance seemed more precarious. As I moved and as my feet tripped on obstacles that did not exist, I reached out to grab supports that were not at hand.

A vastness of fog above and all around, an immensity of sea to every quarter of the compass, and a watery abyss below imposed upon me a loneliness almost unbearable because of its intensity and also because of what shared the boat with me. I mean the dead men, yes, but not only the dead; I mean primarily the bombs, four cities' worth of death condensed and packed into containers that were symbolic urns full of the ashes of all humanity.

The crates transshipped from *Junie's Moonbeam* were built not of plywood but of steel. The hinged lids were held down by four evenly spaced bolt latches.

I slid open the four bolts on the first crate. After a brief hesitation, I lifted the lid.

The halogen light reached far enough to show me two compartments with a large device in each. They appeared to be of cast and machined steel, of formidable weight, bending the light seductively, liquidly, at every curve, each mysterious detail and each fitting ominous in design. In its entirety, the thing was not merely a weapon, but the quintessence of evil.

The crate had been welded together around an armature that kept the bomb immobile. Special tools would have been needed to free it from the shipping case.

At what might have been the core of each device, a four-inch-diameter hole appeared to have been crafted to receive a mated plug.

I stared at the hole for a while before realizing that also bolted to the armature was a box separate from the bomb. This had a hinged lid held shut by a single bolt.

Inside I discovered a double-walled felt bag that filled the space. I lifted out the bag and found within it the plug to match the hole, which weighed four or five pounds.

From the look of it, I guessed that once inserted into the core, it would lock in place with a twist. One end featured an LED readout currently blank and a keypad for data input.

The trigger.

Returning the plug to the soft bag, I put it on the deck. I collected the other three.

After closing the two crates, I carried all four detonators, in their sacks, up the open stairs to the foredeck, which consisted of a narrow walkway around a central structure. I went through a door into a compartment that served as a combination dining space and lounge.

In a closet, I found rain slickers and other foul-weather gear, as well as a well-worn leather satchel, which was empty.

All four triggers snugged in the satchel without distorting it. I was able to close the zipper.

As I pulled the zipper shut, the hand holding the bag and the hand gripping the tab looked like the hands of a stranger, as if I had just awakened in a body that was not mine.

Since the day on which Stormy had died, I had been called upon to do terrible things with these hands. When she had been taken from me, a portion of my innocence had been stolen, as well. But now it seemed to me that these hands had actively thrown away what innocence had not been robbed from me.

I knew that what I had done was right, but what is right is not always clean, and does not always feel good. In even a clear heart, some righteous acts of the harder kind can stir up a sediment of guilt, but that is not a bad thing. If allowed to be, the heart is self-policing, and a reasonable measure of guilt guards against corruption.

To dispel the apprehension that I had become someone different from the person I had once been, I turned my right hand palm up. My birthmark is a half-inch-wide crescent, an inch and a half from point to point, milk-white against the pink flesh of my hand.

This was one of the proofs that Stormy and I were destined to be together forever, because she'd had a mark that matched it.

Birthmarks and memories of the blue lake of abiding hope: They confirm that I remain Odd Thomas—perhaps different from what I once was, yet paradoxically the same.

I carried the bag out to the foredeck, where the fog was as thick as ever and the night colder than I remembered.

Here on the starboard side, a steep flight of narrow stairs led up to the top deck, where the bridge was located.

Entering the bridge, I looked up as the woman at the helm turned to stare at me, her hands remaining on the wheel.

I should have realized that with no one at the helm, the tugboat would have been subject to the actions of tides and currents, which would tend to turn it in a lazy vortex. While I had killed Utgard and Buddy, while I had opened the shipping crates, while I had gathered the bomb triggers, the boat had mostly held steady.

I knew at once who she must be.

CHAPTER 39

OVER WHITE SLACKS AND AN EXQUISITE BEADED sweater, she wore a gray coat of supple leather with fox fur at the collar, along the front panels, and at the cuffs.

Setting the satchel on the floor, I said, “No doctor is going to believe you’ve been suffering from a bad shellfish reaction.”

No older than twenty-five, she was beautiful not in the way that women in Joey’s copy of *Maxim* might have seemed beautiful to him, but as women in a Neiman Marcus catalog might be regarded as beautiful: sensuous but not common, elegant, a generous mouth, fine facial bones, large limpid blue eyes, and not a hard edge to her.

Taking one hand from the wheel, she patted a pocket of her coat. “I’ve got a little bottle of nasty brew to drink before we dock. It fakes some of the classic symptoms.”

Because the Coast Guard had been told that we had put to sea to retrieve a yacht passenger suffering a serious allergic reaction to shellfish, they might follow through with the local hospital to see if in fact such a patient had been admitted.

The dialed-down ping of the radar drew my eyes to the screen. A few pips were revealed at the outermost azimuth rings. The only nearer pip, moving away, must be *Junie’s Moonbeam*.

“Who’re you?” she asked.

“Harry,” I replied.

“The Harry. I didn’t know there was one.”

“My mother would like to hear it put that way. She thinks I’m the only Harry there is or ever was.”

“It must be nice to have a mother who’s not a bitch.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Valonia.”

“I’ve never heard that one before.”

“It’s from the Latin for *acorn*. I guess my mother thought I would grow into a great hulking tree. Where’s Utgard?”

From the bridge, she had no view of the afterdeck.

I said, “He’s finishing with...things.”

She smiled. “I’m not a fragile flower.”

I shrugged. “Well.”

“He told me that he would be winnowing the crew.”

“Winnowing. Is that what he called it?”

“You don’t approve of his word choice?”

“I approve that I’m not one of the winnowed.”

“I suppose it matters more to you.”

“Why should it?”

“You knew them, they’re your mates,” Valonia said. “I didn’t know them.”

“You didn’t miss much.”

She liked the ruthlessness. She regarded me with greater interest than before.

“What role do you play in the cast, Harry?”

“I’m a Guildenstern, I guess.”

She frowned. “A Jew?”

“It’s a reference to Shakespeare.”

The frown sweetened into a delicious pout. “You don’t seem like a boy who would live in dusty old books.”

“You don’t seem like a girl who would blow up cities.”

“Because you don’t know me well.”

“Is there a chance I might get to?”

“Right now, I’d say fifty-fifty.”

“I’ll take those odds.”

Because I could not sense whether she was suspicious of me to any extent, I had not ventured closer to Valonia. The more relaxed

she became with me, the easier I would be able to subdue her without breaking any pretty thing. She would be a trove of information for the authorities.

Leaning against the doorjamb, I said, "What's your last name, Valonia?"

"Fontenelle. Remember it."

"That's no problem."

"I'll be famous one day."

"I've no doubt you will be."

"What's your last name, Harry?"

"Lime."

"Tart," she said.

"Actually, I'm pretty much monogamous."

Her laugh was nicer than I had expected, girlish yet robust, and genuine.

I didn't want to like her laugh. I dreaded hearing in it this trace of merriment that suggested a once-innocent child.

Now I could see that she was even younger than I first thought, no older than twenty or twenty-one.

Valonia's long hair had been tucked under the fox-fur collar. With one hand behind her neck, she pulled it free. She shook her head, and a wealth of spun gold cascaded around her face.

"Are you ready for the world to change, Harry?"

"I guess I better be."

"It's all so old and tired."

"Not all of it," I said, openly admiring her.

She liked to be admired.

"They're going to love him so much," she said.

"Who?"

"The people."

"Oh, yeah. Them."

"They'll love the way he'll take charge. Bring order. His compassion and his strength."

"And his magnificent dental work."

She laughed, but then chastised me. "The senator's a great man, Harry. You wouldn't be here if you didn't think so."

Cautious about being seduced to respond outside the character that I had created—or, rather, borrowed from a Graham Greene novel—I said, “For me, it’s mostly about the money.”

Gazing into the fog, Valonia blew out a *poof* of breath through puckered lips. “The old, tired world—just gone.”

“Do that again,” I requested.

Staring at me, she puckered and blew.

I said, “Maybe, after all, it’s not entirely about the money.”

Her blue eyes dazzled. “The perpetual arguing, the tiresome debate that never settles anything. No one will miss that.”

“No one,” I agreed, but was overcome by sorrow that she could be so young yet hate so much.

“He’ll shut them up, Harry.”

“It’s time somebody did.”

“And in the end, they’ll like it.”

She inhaled as if trying to clear nasal congestion.

“The endless quarreling,” she said, “when we know the issues were really settled long ago.”

“Ages ago,” I agreed.

She tried to clear her nose again. “The people are going to be so grateful for the New Civility.”

I could hear the uppercase *N* and *C* in the way that she said it.

“Do you believe, Harry?”

“Deeply. Plus there’s the money.”

“It’s so wonderful to believe.”

“You come so alive when you say the word.”

“Believe,” she said with childlike yearning. “*Believe.*”

She inhaled noisily, and again.

“Damn these allergies,” she complained, and reached into a coat pocket for a handkerchief.

From under my sweatshirt, from the small of my back, I drew the gun that held two more rounds.

Her compact pistol, a lady’s gun but deadly, hung up on the lining of her coat pocket as she tried to draw it.

“Valonia, don’t.”

The snagged lining tore.

“Please,” I said.

The gun came free, and in her passion to defend the faith, she fired wildly.

In every direction from the bullet hole, the laminated window beside my head instantly webbed to the limits of its frame.

I shot her once, not just to wound, because it never could have been that way.

Golden hair swirled, shimmered, as she spasmed from the impact. She dropped the little gun, and dropped herself, collapsing toward a needed rest, faceup on the stained and soiled deck, an orchid in the mud.

Snaring her pistol, I knelt beside her.

Her eyes were open, but not yet vacant. She stared at something, perhaps a memory, and then at me.

She said, “I’ll never get to see...”

I took one of her hands in both of mine, and I was not assaulted by the vision of a red tide. That future had been thwarted.

“I’ll never get to see...the new world,” she finished.

“No,” I said. “I spared you that.”

Her limp hand tightened on mine.

She closed her eyes. And at once opened them in alarm.

“Don’t let go,” she pleaded, her voice younger now, without sophistication or artifice.

I promised her, “I won’t.”

The strength in her grip increased, became fierce, and then she had no strength at all.

Although she was gone, I still held her hand and prayed silently that she would not add to her suffering by lingering here in spirit.

I wondered who had turned her free mind from the light into the dark, where and how and when. I wanted to find him, her, every one of them—and kill them all.

In the closet where I had discovered a satchel in which to stow the bomb triggers, on a shelf above the hanging rain gear, I had seen what I needed now. I went down to the foredeck, selected two wool blankets, and returned to the bridge with them.

After shaking open one of the blankets, I refolded it lengthwise to make a soft and simple catafalque on which to place her.

I lifted her in the cradle of my arms and moved her onto the woolen cushion. She proved to be lighter than I expected. She was petite but had projected herself larger in life.

Before her eyes locked open, I closed her lids with my thumbs and held them for a moment. I placed her right hand atop her left, on her breast.

I shook out the second blanket, folded it much like the first, and covered Valonia Fontenelle, who after all would never be famous. Or infamous.

Questing fog crept across the threshold, seduced by the warmth of the bridge. I stepped outside and closed the door.

I threw Birdie Hopkins's handgun into the sea.

At the railing on the open portion of the bridge deck, I stood for a while, staring down at what the fog allowed me to see of the rolling ocean.

Within half an hour, I had killed three men and a woman—but I had not murdered anyone. I combed the fine hairs of philosophy, assuring myself that I had found the part between moral and immoral.

With no one at the helm, the action of tides and currents had begun to turn the tugboat in the lazy vortex that nature preferred.

On the blue lake of abiding hope, the sun had been warm and every soft breeze a caress, and the future had waited to be dreamed.

Below me now, the ocean was not blue, and I could not see any hope in it, but the ocean did abide.

CHAPTER 40

ON MALO SUERTE LAKE, NEAR PICO MUNDO, I had on occasion, for pay, driven sportfishing boats of a size to host parties, but I had never been behind the helm of a vessel as large as the tugboat. I had not driven anything on the open ocean, either.

The control console was similar to those on sportfishers. Port-engine clutch and starboard-engine clutch to the left, wheel in the center, port throttle and starboard throttle to the right. Near the throttles, a switch marked ENGINE STOP. The gauge board: gear-oil pressure, engine-oil pressure, water temperature, voltmeter, tachometers, bilge and fuel alarms.

Because the tug had a state-of-the-art GPS navigation system with a large sea-map monitor, I wouldn't have much need to consult the compass. On the screen now, I could see the boat's position at the center, the relevant portion of the California coast on the right, because the vessel currently faced north.

For a moment, I studied the radar display as the heading flash picked out pips. Revealed were the same number as before, none of them closer, and one—*Junie's Moonbeam*—much farther away.

Either Utgard had turned off the depth-finder or, because of his familiarity with the area, had never activated it. During the short cruise I would be taking, I wouldn't need sonar until near the end, but I switched it on.

I tried not to think about the dead woman on the deck nearby and the three other corpses aboard. I focused on the task of getting the

nukes to a place from which they could not easily be transshipped before trustworthy authorities could gain possession of them.

The tugboat faced north. The abandoned boatyard south of Rooster Point, where trucks waited to transport the bombs to distant cities, also lay to the north.

As I began to bring the tug around to the south, a phone rang with the most familiar notes of “Ode to Joy.” It had been left atop the gauge board, directly in front of me.

Most likely, this was Utgard’s phone. By now, he should have confirmed to someone onshore that the nuclear weapons had been received from *Junie’s Moonbeam* and that he was proceeding to the rendezvous at the boatyard.

I doubted that Mr. Sinatra’s paranormal rampage had disabled Hoss Shackett any more than it had Utgard. This incoming call was surely from the chief.

By the time I brought the boat around due south, the call had gone to voice mail, and after a pause, the caller rang again. I let it go to voice mail a second time.

The conspirators onshore now knew something had gone wrong.

Because I had changed the boat’s course 180 degrees, the GPS sea map currently showed the coastline on the left side of the screen. A legend identified the harbor as MAGIC BEACH; and under the words were numbers that meant nothing to me.

Because I had found employees of the harbor department to be arrogant, rude, and homicidal, I declined to give them any more of my business. I would not be returning to the harbor.

Serenaded by the soft ping of radar and by the louder pong of sonar, I throttled up and drove the tugboat south, as if I knew what I was doing, protected by electronics from being misled by singing sea nymphs perched on hull-shredding rocks.

No doubt I remained vulnerable to kraken and other sea serpents of such mammoth scale that they could capsize ships and eat people as casually as we take sardines from the can. I intended to remain aboard for fifteen minutes at the very most, however, so it was not likely that the tug would be seized in the tentacles of a Kong-size octopus and dragged down twenty thousand leagues.

Although the boat had a radio room, the bridge also featured a VHF/FM radiotelephone with a scanner. I had hardly headed south when I received a call on Channel 22, from the Coast Guard cutter with which Joey had been chatting earlier.

The proper procedure probably was to repeat the call sign that the radioman aboard the cutter had given me, then identify myself by the call sign of the tug. Instead, I ignored the call.

For the sake of the nation, I was pleased to discover that Coast Guard officers were diligent and persistent. Apparently, by satellite tracking, they had monitored the rendezvous between the tugboat and *Junie's Moonbeam*.

They were curious as to why we had delayed at the transfer coordinates after the yacht had departed. And they wanted to know why we were conveying the ill passenger south instead of immediately east to the harbor and the hospital.

After spending so much of their lives at sea, they recognized something fishy when they saw it.

Earlier, holding Joey at gunpoint, when I had hoped that help might be closer than fifty nautical miles, I had wanted to talk to the Coast Guard, but now circumstances had changed. I was not going to prattle about hijacked thermonuclear weapons over VHF/FM, on a frequency to which anyone might be listening, including Chief Hoss Shackett and his cloned midget, mini-Hoss, if such a one existed.

After increasingly testy messages insisting upon a response, they gave up. I assumed that now, with engines at full speed, the cutter had adopted a new course to intercept the tug, which was all right with me, as I would have debarked long before they arrived.

“Ode to Joy” struck up again as another call arrived on the regular phone.

I was a popular guy. Of course, having been a good fry cook for some years, I had grown accustomed to having a coterie of dedicated fans, usually with mustard stains on their shirts.

Riding with Birdie Hopkins as she had piloted her Cadillac in zero visibility had been unnerving. In spite of the radar and the GPS navigation, which all but guaranteed that the tugboat would not

plow into anything, I found motoring fog-blind across the sea to be far more disturbing, second by second, than my entire time in the car with Fred's widow.

Perhaps the watery abyss below had something to do with my nervousness. Or the aforementioned thermonuclear weapons.

Motoring almost directly across the shorebound waves instead of head-on against them, the boat did not pitch a great deal. But it did yaw more than I would have liked, even on this calm sea.

On the GPS sea map, along the shoreline, both natural and man-made landmarks were identified, including the Magic Beach pier, where all this had begun when I had gone for a walk to have a word with the mysterious young woman who had appeared in my dream.

Five-tenths of a mile south of the pier, the mouth of Hecate's Canyon, a narrow defile, opened to the sea.

Because a running stream had carved the canyon over millennia, one of two conditions was likely to exist where sea and canyon met, the first involving sediment. If the terminus of the stream remained above sea level, the water would feather out as it exited the canyon, depositing silt the way that the Mississippi formed the delta as it approached the Gulf of Mexico.

If instead the canyon had been carved so deep that the western end of it was below sea level, the silt deposited by the stream had long ago been washed into the Pacific and carried away to far places. In that case, because tides also carve the land they meet, the ocean might have pressed into the canyon mouth, forming a cove with a deep-water approach.

Considering the geological age of the California coast and the steepness with which this length of it descended to the ocean, I was counting on condition number two. As I leaned close to the sea-map monitor to read the sounding lines, I noticed that this task had been made easier by a color key on a data bar at the bottom of the screen.

Land was depicted in gold. White signified deep water, which lay under my current position. Blue identified shallow water, and green warned of land exposed at low tide but submerged at high.

An eastward-narrowing but still sufficiently wide channel, surely deep enough to take the draft of the tugboat, bisected the beach. It carried forward into a cove that was recessed in the mouth of the canyon.

Bingo.

Due west of Hecate's Canyon, I changed course for the coast.

No longer content to report on what now lay ahead, the radar seemed to express extreme dissatisfaction with the prospects of a lengthy journey on this course. I switched it off.

By the time I had motored less than half a mile east, the communications officer aboard the distant Coast Guard cutter came back to me by VHF/FM. He was full of questions again.

I felt that action would answer him better than mere words—and would be more certain to keep the cutter coming at the highest speed.

Through the bridge windows, I could see not a single coastal light, only palisades of fog that parted to reveal more of the same, though soon I would encounter something more solid than mist.

I throttled both engines forward and held the wheel steady. The sea map showed the tugboat driving precisely down the center of the Hecate's Canyon channel, though still a mile offshore.

Not six weeks ago, at St. Bartholomew's Abbey in the High Sierra, I had seen the first snow of my life, and within days, I had endured enough of the stuff to last a lifetime.

Magic Beach had been my first experience of a coastal town. At first it had seemed balmy and a welcome change from the blizzard that had buried the abbey.

Perhaps I would feel differently in time, but at that moment, as I approached the coast aboard the tug, through fog on treacherous seas, I felt homesick for the dry Mojave and Pico Mundo, and sick to death of water in all its forms, except as it might be necessary for bathing and flushing the john.

On Channel 22, the communications officer aboard the cutter, observing me by satellite, had stopped repeating the same questions and had begun to issue warnings in an urgent voice.

I was tense enough without having to listen to his shrill predictions of disaster. I switched off the radiotelephone.

The depth-finder began to pong more frequently.

“Ode to Joy” played again. Based on my experience with Utgard Rolf, something by Wagner or anything by any gangster-rap group would have been a better fit with his personality.

What had Beethoven ever done to Utgard that such lovely music should be used as a crime-phone ring?

On the screen: the white of a deep-water channel narrowing and funneling toward a narrow crescent of blue ahead, and beyond the blue a crescent of green, and beyond the green a great stately gold swath of land as solid as anyone could want it, the magnificent western ramparts of America the beautiful.

Motoring right down the center of the channel.

No need to check the fuel gauge. Only a few ounces were required to complete the trip.

The voltmeter. To hell with the voltmeter. I had no idea what a voltmeter did. Probably no more than one in a million people knew what a voltmeter did. Yet there it was, occupying a prime lower-left corner of the gauge board, so proud of itself, mocking everyone who was not a lifelong seaman with high voltmeter awareness.

Gear-oil pressure gauge, engine-oil pressure gauge, water temperature gauge, tachometers: They were of no interest to me now, suppliers of useless data, silly instruments of no import.

What respect I still had for marine technology was reserved for the depth-finder, the sonar soundings, ponging faster and louder, faster.

My plan, as patchwork as it might be, had been predicated on the belief that nuclear bombs were pretty much as hard to detonate as were sticks of dynamite.

You can throw a fat stick of dynamite against a wall, whack it with a hammer, stab it with a knife—and, at least as I understand the subject, it will not explode. A lit fuse will do the trick, as perhaps will a jolt of electric current from a plunger box, but if you want to drive across twenty thousand sticks of dynamite in a

Peterbilt, you can do so, if I have my facts straight, without risk of being blown to bits.

Pure nitroglycerin is another matter.

I had separated the nukes from their triggers or from objects that I sincerely believed to be their triggers. At the time these events occurred, I was not a nuclear physicist—nor am I one now, as I write this—but I felt as certain as a nonphysicist could be that all four thermonuclear devices would ride out a hard jolt without vaporizing me.

The fog did not relent: nothing but fog, fog, fog.

I took a wide stance, leaning toward the console, feet pressed hard against the deck, and gripped the wheel tightly with my left hand.

The pong of the sonar counted a cadence grossly out of sync with the rhythm of “Ode to Joy,” and relying sheerly on intuition, I chose what I hoped might be the last best moment to punch the ENGINE STOP button.

I gripped the wheel now with both hands, holding course but mostly just holding tight.

A boat has no brakes. The only way to halt forward motion is to reverse engines. Switching off the engines, as I had done, at once kills further forward thrust but has no effect on current momentum.

We traveled the final meters of the Hecate’s Canyon channel with significant momentum. Water, of course, offers momentum-diminishing resistance, but less than you might think when the boat has a modest beam, a V-bow, and a round-bottom hull.

Only subsequent to these events did I learn about these aspects of the seagoing tug’s design, and come to appreciate fully how much it still has to give even after you kill its engines.

Sand offers greater resistance than water, as you might imagine, and mud outperforms sand in this regard. I cannot claim to have been able to discern when the tugboat finished ramming through sand and began beaching itself more firmly in mud. All I remember is that one second the channel was still deep enough to accommodate the boat’s draft, and the next second it was not deep enough.

The bullet-punctured bridge window shattered completely out of its frame, and every unsecured item aboard the boat flew as objects do in any building rocked by an earthquake. Nothing clobbered me, which spoke well to Utgard's attention to maritime safety.

My legs went out from under me, but I held fast to the wheel.

Shrieking, twanging, cracking, popping, hissing, the tugboat climbed out of the waters of the cove—bow rising, rising—like a prehistoric amphibian deciding that the hour had come to declare itself sufficiently evolved for life on land.

When the craft came to a stop, I got my feet under myself, but for a long moment my cramped hands would not let go of the wheel.

CHAPTER 41

ALTHOUGH I HAD STOPPED THE ENGINES BEFORE impact, I assumed a fire might still break out, even though diesel fuel does not burn as readily as gasoline.

The question about whether thermonuclear weapons might detonate from a hard knock had happily been answered in the negative. Fire, if it erupted, was not likely to faze the cast-steel jackets in which the shaped plutonium appeared to have been encased; therefore, I was not concerned about the release of radioactive material.

Finally able to let go of the helm, I retrieved the satchel containing the bomb triggers.

Earlier, when so much had remained to be done to convey the nukes to a place from which they could not easily be spirited away, I had been too frantic to notice how heavy the bag was. Handling the first of the triggers, I had estimated its weight at four or five pounds. That extrapolated to a maximum combined weight of twenty pounds, but the satchel was at least half again as heavy as that.

James Bond, especially as played by Daniel Craig, would have snatched up the satchel as if it contained politicians' promises. Smiling insouciantly, he would have dashed off with the triggers at a pace qualifying him as a marathon runner in the Olympics.

Bond, of course, has the advantage of being fortified with a diet largely consisting of martinis. I drink nothing stronger than red

wine, and not much of that.

Muttering something derogatory about bomb designers' tendency to make everything bigger and heavier than it probably had to be, about their blithe disregard for the need to conserve precious resources, I carried the leather bag off the bridge. I closed the door behind me and held fast to it for a moment, getting my bearings.

The tugboat listed to port, and the deck sloped down toward the stern because the bow had climbed onto the beach. Although the wet deck had not been a serious challenge when we had been at sea, this degree of incline promised to provide me with entertainment.

Slipping, as they say, like a pig on ice, I crossed the canted deck to the railing and looked down. Wondering why a pig would ever *be* on ice, I saw dark ground under the eddying fog.

I hefted the satchel over the railing and let it drop. All the triggers were wrapped in double-walled felt bags, as if they had been purchased in an upscale store like Tiffany; consequently, they did not clank rudely upon impact.

Because the boat listed in this direction, I had to climb out onto the railing as well as scramble over it. When I landed beside the satchel, on solid ground, I promised myself that my seagoing days were over.

In the past, I had lied to myself about such things. For the moment, however, I was willing to disregard those previous false promises, perfidious as they might have been, and to take joy in my commitment to a landlubber's life.

I considered heading directly inland, through Hecate's Canyon, where coyotes prowled and where the buried bodies of at least two murdered girls—victims of the art teacher, Arliss Clerebold—had never been found.

Nope.

Instead, I picked up the satchel and, leaning to the right as though I remained on a listing deck, I stepped within sight of the breaking surf and followed it north, which was to my right as I faced the Pacific. In this white wilderness, the water line was the only reliable guide available to me.

According to the GPS sea map on the tugboat bridge, the cove had a crescent beach that curved between the steep slopes that formed the terminus of the canyon. At the northwest end of the cove, the beach continued north along the coast all the way past town to the harbor.

That turn, from cove to coastal shore, could be underwater at high tide. Fortunately, this was not high tide, and at a brisk walk I reached the main beach in two or three minutes.

A bluff diminished northward for the next quarter of a mile or more. I followed it until it petered out, and then headed inland until I came to Magic Beach's quaint concrete boardwalk, on which I continued north.

I was tired. The events of the night justified my weariness. I felt that it would be within my rights to lie down for a nice sleep on the boardwalk, and to hell with the in-line skaters whose early-morning speedfest would be presented with one more obstacle in addition to the usual old men with canes and little old ladies with walkers.

Weariness alone did not explain my increasing difficulty with the leather satchel. Weary or not, the farther you carry any heavy burden, the heavier it seems, but neither did that truth solve the puzzle of the rapidly escalating weight. I had been lugging the bag for less than ten minutes, and already it felt twice as heavy as when I had dropped it over the tugboat railing.

With caution, I approached Hutch Hutchison's house from the alleyway. Although I did not have to worry that Utgard Rolf might be waiting inside for me, and although I figured Hoss Shackett must be busy elsewhere, tearing his hair out and contemplating an extreme identity change that would include gender alteration, the pair of redheaded gunmen might have time on their hands and the patience to wait here like trap-door spiders.

After letting myself through the gate beside the garage, I had to carry the satchel with both hands. By then it felt as though it contained the grand piano that Laurel and Hardy had never been able to get up those narrow stairs.

I put it down on the brick patio, next to the wrought-iron chair on which earlier I had draped my sand-caked jeans and socks. I had to

roll my shoulders and stretch my arms to relieve the strain that had knotted my muscles.

I stepped back from the house, to a corner of the garage, where I flipped open the cell phone given to me by Birdie Hopkins. I called the Cottage of the Happy Monster. Annamaria answered on the third ring.

“It’s me,” I said. “Where’s Blossom?”

“Making popcorn. She’s the dearest person.”

“I knew you’d like her.”

“She will be with me always,” Annamaria said, which seemed to me an odd way to say that she would never forget Blossom Rosedale.

“I’ll be coming for you soon,” I said. “Within the hour. We’ll have to leave town, if that’s all right with you.”

“What will be will be.”

“Here we go again.”

“You’re my protector, and I’m your charge. We do as you think best.”

I did not know why I felt now a greater weight upon me than when in my sole possession, aboard the death boat, had been four nuclear bombs and their triggers.

When I found myself with no reply, she said, “You’re always free to retract your pledge, Odd Thomas.”

In memory, I saw her in the light of the oil lamp: *Will you die for me?*

I had said yes, and had taken the offered bell.

“No,” I said. “I’m with you. Wherever this is leading. Until the end of it. We’re leaving town. I’ll be there within the hour.”

I closed the phone and slipped it in a pocket of my jeans.

Although Ozzie Boone’s tutelage and the writing of these four manuscripts have given me some facility with language, I don’t have the words to describe the strange feeling that overcame me then.

Of all the things I am, a killer is one of them. Not a murderer, but still a killer. And a fool. The only child of a mad mother and a narcissistic father. A failed hero. A confused boy. A troubled man. A

guy who makes his life up as he goes along. A seeker who cannot find his way.

No one should entrust someone like me with a treasure. Whether Annamaria herself was the treasure, or her child, or neither of them, but instead some mysterious thing yet to be revealed, I knew that she believed she had a treasure that required protection. Her judgment in the matter had a conviction that convinced me.

In spite of an acute awareness of my inadequacies, I intuited that, for all my faults, this was my duty and my honor. What I felt then, by Hutch's garage, that I cannot describe is a nameless emotion below humility, a deference immeasurably greater than what the meek feel in the shadow of the mighty, what a sparrow might feel if Nature charged him with carrying on his small wings all the living things of a dying Earth to a new world.

And I did not know why I felt all this, because I did not know to what I had committed. Or perhaps I knew in my heart, but kept the knowledge from myself, preferring to proceed in ignorance, for fear the truth would paralyze me, petrify me as solidly as eons of time can petrify living wood into hardest stone.

CHAPTER 42

IN CASE THE REDHEADED GUNMEN HAD COME visiting Hutch, had not been convinced by his performance, and had settled down to wait for me, I examined the compact pistol. The ten-round magazine held nine. I switched off the safety.

Most likely because I had recently spent too much time at sea, I muttered, “Okay, fish or cut bait.”

The Ziploc pill bag in the terra-cotta bowl of cyclamens. The key in the bag.

Ease open the door. Quiet. The fading cinnamon aroma of homemade cookies. The golden glow of the string lights hidden in the recessed toe kick of the cabinets.

All as it should be. Never a good sign.

This time wearing pants, I crossed the cozy kitchen and warily entered the downstairs hall.

When I peered cautiously through the open parlor door, I saw Hutch in the armchair where I had left him. The chenille throw lay across his lap and draped his knees; but he had put the book aside. He snored softly.

I engaged the safety on the little pistol, and pocketed the weapon.

Hutch must have had dinner while I’d been gone, and had returned to the parlor to watch television. On the TV played an old movie in which he had starred. He had muted the sound.

I stood watching the silent screen.

His co-star in this one had been the wondrous Deborah Kerr, as beautiful as she had been in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, as haunting as in *An Affair to Remember*, as elegant as in *Bonjour Tristesse*, as fresh-faced and innocent as in *Black Narcissus*.

Hutch had not been storklike in those days. With his height and his mane of hair, he had been a lion on the screen. Time had not yet carved his noble profile into a caricature, brow and beak and blunted chin.

Whatever he was currently saying to Deborah Kerr and she to him, the conversation was intense. He held her tenderly by her shoulders, and she gazed up at him, and the moment was building to a kiss as surely as lightning leads to thunder.

“She was magnificent,” Hutch said, having awakened as I stood entranced by the images on the TV.

“Were you in love with her, sir?”

“Oh, yes. Very much so. From a distance. She was untouchable, however. A true lady. There are none like her now.”

And here came the kiss. A few more words. And a second kiss. Dissolve to a European battlefield.

Hutch sighed. “Half a century goes by in what seems like a year. Don’t waste an hour in boredom, son, or wishing for tomorrow.”

“I do my best to keep myself occupied,” I assured him.

Sitting up straighter in the chair, he said, “I’m sorry to say no one has come looking for you.”

“I’m delighted to hear it.”

“I would have given a stirring performance, one for the ages. Acting is a marvelous profession, son. If you can spend enough time playing other people, you don’t have to think too much about your own character and motivations.”

“To save my skin, I had to be someone else tonight. I called myself Harry Lime.”

“That takeschutzpah. You’re no Orson Welles, young man.”

“I wouldn’t disagree, sir.”

“I almost landed the lead in *The Third Man*. But I can’t begrudge Joseph Cotten getting it. He was superb.”

I sat on the footstool. “Mr. Hutchison—”

“Call me Hutch. Everyone does.”

“Yes, sir. Well, as you know, I didn’t arrive on this job with many clothes—”

Leaning forward in his armchair, eyes alight, he interrupted: “We’ll go to a thrift shop tomorrow! I’ve been afire with the idea since we talked about it earlier.”

“Well, gee, what I was about to say is...I’m going upstairs to change into a clean sweatshirt. And I’m in such a hurry, I was kind of hoping it wouldn’t be too much of an inconvenience if I asked you to dispose of my clothing.”

He understood but didn’t want to understand. “What a peculiar request.”

“I have to leave tonight, sir.”

“But why?” He held up one hand that, in the day, held Deborah Kerr. “Yes, I see. Big guy with a chin beard, then a redheaded guy who does or does not have bad teeth. So am I to assume that your differences with them could not be resolved?”

“Not entirely, sir.”

“Now you’re going on the lam.”

“Exactly.”

“Once, I was on the lam myself.”

I said, “With Henry Fonda in relentless pursuit.”

“Relentless in his relaxed way. I think it would have been better if Henry shot me down.”

“But you were innocent.”

“Yes, but sometimes the innocent die, and audiences occasionally like a tragedy.” He frowned. “Son, you came here with one suitcase, and you’re leaving with just the clothes on your back.”

“I prefer to travel light.”

“Just be certain to wear pants.”

“I intend to, sir.”

“Call me Hutch. Everyone does. These thrift-shop clothes of yours...do they come with an obligation?”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“When one buys clothing in a thrift shop and is done with it, is one contractually obligated to pass the clothing on to someone

poorer than oneself?”

“Oh, no, sir. You can just throw them in the trash.”

“That’s easy, then. I thought there might be some protocol that I would want to honor, if you had committed to it.” He pulled aside the chenille throw on his lap and prepared to get up from the chair.

I said, “One more thing, and I regret having to ask.”

He looked crestfallen. “You want to take the rest of the cookies you made today.”

“No, no. Those are yours.”

“Oh, good. Splendid. Lovely.”

“Sir, I was wondering if I could borrow one of the cars.”

“Of course. You’re a superb driver.”

“I can’t risk trying to leave town by bus or train.”

“They’ll be watching public transport.”

“Precisely. If I could drive your car to Santa Barbara, I could leave it with your nephew there, and maybe he could arrange to get it back to you.”

His brow creased with worry. “But what will you do then?”

“Make it up as I go along. It works for me.”

“Sounds grim.”

“No, sir. It’s adventurous but not grim.” I got up from the footstool. “I’d better change sweatshirts and get moving.”

Each of his long legs seemed to have two knee joints as he unfolded them and got to his feet. “I shall meet you in the kitchen with the car keys.”

“Oh,” I said, “and a flashlight? I’ll need a flashlight. That’s it. I won’t keep asking for stuff.”

“One needs a good flashlight on the lam. No problem.”

Upstairs in my room, I realized that I would also be leaving a collection of Sinatra biographies. I suspected that I would not need them anymore.

In the bathroom, I stripped to the waist, washed my upper body, face, and hands, careful not to disturb the taped wound on my side. I put on a fresh T-shirt and a sweatshirt that did not have a word on either the chest or the back.

When I went down to the kitchen, a flashlight and the keys to the Mercedes were on the kitchen island.

“Sir, I can’t take the Mercedes.”

“It is much better cover than the Explorer. They might expect a young man such as yourself, in sneakers and a sweatshirt, on the lam, to split town in an Explorer, but never in a Mercedes.”

“I’d rather have the Explorer.”

“I refuse to give you the keys to the Explorer. The Mercedes is better cover. And *I* am the director for once.”

“But—”

Hutch pointed to a plastic-wrapped package also on the kitchen island. The label said PORK RIND, and the plastic was still crusted with frost from the freezer.

“I want you to have that,” he said.

“Gee, sir, I do love pork rind, but I’m not going to have any cooking facilities for a while.”

“*Pork rind* is merely my code, so I’ll know what’s in the package. If it said *beef tongue*, then it would contain entirely twenties. If it said *sweetbreads*, it would contain a mix of half twenties and half hundreds.”

“Money? Oh, no. No, no, no. I can’t accept that.”

“I have bank accounts, of course, but I don’t entirely trust banks, you see. When I was nine years old, a lot of banks failed.”

“I have money,” I assured him. “I’ve saved some of my pay.”

“That’s not enough to go on the lam. You need to be flush when you go on the lam, as I learned the hard way.”

“But that’s too much, way too much.”

“How would you know? Maybe *pork rind* is my code for a brick of one-dollar bills.”

“What *is* it your code for, sir?”

“None of your damn business.”

He produced a pink hostess-gift bag decorated with yellow birds flying with curls of blue ribbon in their beaks. He put the package of so-called pork rind in the bag and held it out to me by the two braided gold-cord handles.

I waved it away. “Really. Really, I can’t.”

His face darkened with disapproval, tightened with authority, thrust forward with the expectation of obedience. His voice was that of the heroic captain demanding of his men more than they think they are capable of giving. He raised his free hand in a bony fist for emphasis.

“Soldier, you are going to take this, and you are going to do the right thing with it, and I will brook no debate, accept no excuse. Is that perfectly clear?”

Annamaria said that people gave her money. I doubted that any of them had forced it upon her with an implied threat of violence.

“This is very generous, sir.”

He broke character and grinned. “Take, take. Don’t be silly. It’s Nibbles’s money, anyway.”

“Nibbles the swashbuckling rabbit.”

“He just keeps earning royalties that I don’t know what to do with.”

Accepting the hostess-gift bag, I said, “If I ever have kids, sir, each of them will have his own full set of Nibbles’s adventures.”

As I put the flashlight in the bag with the frozen money and picked up the keys to the Mercedes, Hutch said, “Through dinner and everything this evening, how many times do you think I sanitized my hands with Purell?”

“Well, you had the chicken enchiladas, and though you like the taste of chicken, it makes you nervous because of all the salmonella and *E. coli* stories in the press. So I’d say...twenty times?”

“Guess again.”

“Thirty?”

With an unmistakable note of pride, he said, “Five.”

“Only five?”

“Five,” he repeated.

“That’s really something, sir.”

“Isn’t it? Having touched money, even wrapped in plastic and frozen, I’m half desperate to Purell my hands right now, but I’m not going to.”

“You’re not going cold turkey, are you?”

“No, no. I’ll wean myself from it as best I can. I had a brother who was a heroin addict and went cold turkey. It was ghastly.”

“Yes, sir. The young Anthony Perkins.”

“The experience so shattered him that later he wore his mother’s clothes and stabbed people. I shall minimize my use of Purell but not risk such a fate as his.”

He smiled and so did I.

“Take care of yourself, son.”

“I will, sir. You, too.”

I started toward the door.

“Odd?”

I turned.

He said, “We had some fun this past month, didn’t we?”

“Yes, sir. We sure did.”

“Good. Very good. That’s how I feel. I hoped you did.”

“The world is often dark these days, sir. But not in here, in this house. It was a pleasure to work for you. To know you.”

As I opened the door, he said, “Son?”

Again I looked back.

He said, “Maybe...a hug?”

I put down the hostess-gift bag and returned to him. His height and the strong presence that he projected in life, as he had on the screen, disguised his frailty.

When he could, he said, “You know that son I lost in the war?”

“You mean Jamie, the son you never had.”

“That’s the one. Well, if I had married someone named Corrina and if we’d had a son named Jamie and if I had lost him in the war, I now kind of know how that would have felt.”

He had surprised me in many ways. Now I surprised myself by being unable to reply.

At the door again, after picking up the bag of money, I was able to say, “I’ll do my best to come back one day, sir.”

“Everyone calls me Hutch.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do my best to come back, and when I do, we’ll go to a thrift shop.”

He bit his lip and nodded. “Well. All right, then. I’m going to have a cookie now.”

“Have one for me.”

“Splendid. Yes. I will indeed. I’ll have two.”

I stepped outside and closed the door.

Not immediately able to proceed, I stood there, inexpressibly grateful that my life, for all its terrors, is so filled with moments of grace.

CHAPTER 43

THE SATCHEL CONTAINING THE FOUR BOMB TRIGGERS had grown so heavy that I needed all my strength and determination to carry it into the garage and stow it in the trunk of the Mercedes.

I zipped open the bag and, in the trunk light, found that it contained nothing more than I had put into it aboard the tugboat.

Relying on my psychic magnetism both to guide me through the fog without a major collision and to lead me to a pay phone, I drove away from Hutch's place.

In these streets that seemed as mystic as they were misted, Hoss Shackett perhaps traveled in desperation and rage, either hoping to resuscitate the plan to incinerate four cities or preparing to flee justice, or seeking the monkey in the mechanism, the cause of his current misfortune.

The monkey, who had a highly active imagination, could not help worrying about the chief, because in his monkey heart he knew, just *knew*, that any encounter would not be with Hoss Shackett the Nice but with the Hoss Shackett who ate little kittens and picked his teeth with their bones.

The downside of psychic magnetism is that it occasionally leads me to a person whom I wish to avoid. This is because every effort that I make to block him from my thoughts is defeated by my constant worry that I will come face to face with him. And even if I succeed in pushing him from my conscious mind, the treacherous subconscious continues to fret about him. Then the object of my

dread is either drawn to me—reverse psychic magnetism—or I to him, and often at just the wrong moment.

Therefore, to the exclusion of all else, I concentrated on finding a pay phone as I piloted the Mercedes. Pay phone, pay phone, pay phone.

Since cell phones have become ubiquitous, public pay phones have become more difficult to find. Someday the telephone will be a small voice-activated chip embedded just behind the jawbone and under the ear, and then cell phones will be as outmoded as the coin-operated variety that they have gradually but steadily replaced.

Those commentators who explain our world to us and who tell us how we should feel about it will call the embedded phone “progress.” And when someone from the government wishes to speak with you, they will always know where to reach you and, because of your implant’s transponder signature, where to find you.

This will go a long way toward encouraging the New Civility and toward discouraging the endless quarreling and tiresome debate that characterize our current society, which to so many impatient citizens seems old and tired. All that has been will be blown away, and you may be frightened sometimes by all the changes, but those who have the perspective and the ability to shape societal consensus are as sure as they have ever been about anything that, in the end, you will like your new world and feel that it is a paradise on earth, so just shut up already.

In the blinded night, wondering if eventually my fate would be much like Samson’s, whose eyes had been put out and who had been imprisoned in Gaza, I arrived by psychic magnetism and Mercedes in the parking lot of a convenience store, outside of which stood a pay phone.

Because I did not want these calls to be traced back to Birdie Hopkins’s cell, which would be big trouble for her, I went into the store, bought a bottle of aspirin and a Pepsi, and got change for the public phone.

After taking two aspirin, I tasked the information operator with finding me the numbers of the nearest FBI and Homeland Security field offices.

I called the FBI in Santa Cruz and told them about the nuclear weapons aboard the seagoing tugboat beached at the mouth of Hecate's Canyon. I suggested that they immediately contact the Coast Guard to confirm that such a vessel had indeed run aground, and I warned them that Chief Hoss Shackett was among the people who had conspired to import those bombs.

The agent with whom I spoke was initially patient in the way that he would have been when listening to an earnest citizen discuss the necessity of all Earthlings wearing aluminum-foil skullcaps to prevent extraterrestrials from reading our thoughts.

As the telling details of my story accumulated, however, he became more involved. Then riveted. When the time arrived for me to hang up, he brought to bear all the tricks of psychology that a good agent knows, intent on keeping me on the line, teasing from me some detail that would lead to my identification, and convincing me that the bureau was prepared to reward me with a monument in Washington, my face on a postage stamp, and seventy-two virgins provided *this side* of Paradise.

I hung up and, in the fashion that I had divined my way to a pay phone, I proceeded to the church served by Reverend Charles Moran, who would never know that I had prevented him from killing his wife and committing suicide this very night.

The rectory was separated from the church by a courtyard in which gnarled and spiky abstract sculptures, apparently representing eternal truths, scared the crap out of me more than once as they loomed abruptly out of the fog.

I went around to the back of the church, to the corner occupied by the sacristy. The door was locked.

Assuming that the good reverend and his wife were enjoying the deep sleep of the sinless devout, I used the butt of Valonia's pistol to break one pane in a sacristy window. I reached through, found the latch, and slipped inside.

I switched on my flashlight and oriented myself. Then I went through an open door into the sanctuary.

Turning on the church lights would unnecessarily risk drawing unwanted attention, which in this instance was any attention of any

kind from anyone.

Besides, in this small way, I was reducing my carbon footprint. Although, having prevented the detonation of four nuclear weapons, I suppose that I had earned enough carbon credits to live the rest of my life high on the hog if I wished.

Above the altar, the abstract sculpture of Big Bird or the Lord, or whatever, did not look down at me accusingly, because it had no eyes.

I descended the altar platform, went through the chancel gate, and proceeded to the third pew, where I had left my ID and that belonging to Sam Whittle.

Although I had no use for Flashlight Guy's wallet, my own would come in handy in the event that I was stopped by the highway patrol while behind the wheel of Hutch's Mercedes and needed to produce a driver's license. I found mine, shoved it in my hip pocket, and left Whittle's wallet where it was.

As I returned to the center aisle, the lights came on.

In the sanctuary, just this side of the sacristy door, stood Chief Hoss Shackett.

CHAPTER 44

CHIEF HOSS SHACKETT DID NOT LOOK WELL. IN the interrogation-room disturbance, he had suffered an abrasion on his forehead, one black eye, and a contusion that had darkened the left side of his face. His nose had once been as straight and proud as every sadistic fascist facilitator of terrorism would like his nose to be; now it resembled a mutant pink zucchini. His stiff brush-cut hair appeared to have wilted.

Someone, I assumed, must have found my wallet in the hymnal holder and figured that I would return for it.

Dispelling that notion, the chief said, "Lime. Harry Lime." He did not seem to have discovered that my name was Odd Thomas.

Tucking the flashlight under my belt, I said, "Good evening, Chief. You're looking well."

"What are you doing here?" he asked, except that before the question mark he inserted an epithet that was disgusting but not inventive.

"I was hoping," I said, "that you had another Almond Joy. I've regretted not accepting your offer of half the one you ate."

He took two steps away from the sacristy door, limping to favor his left leg, but then he halted, as if he didn't want to get too close to me. We were about forty feet apart.

"What's happened to the tugboat?" he asked.

"Is this a riddle, sir?"

"What have you done with them?"

“The? Them? Is it one or two tugboats?”

“This time, smartass, I am not going to play amnesia with you.”

“Do you have amnesia, sir?”

His right arm had been hanging slack at his side, and I had assumed that it had been injured in his disastrous encounter with Mr. Sinatra.

Now he raised the arm, revealing a fearsome gun in his hand. The firearm appeared to be so large that the weight of it might fracture his wrist, and it wobbled slightly in his grip. A silencer had been screwed to the end of the barrel.

I drew the small pistol that I had confiscated on the bridge of the tugboat. At that distance, I would have to have been a crack shot to hit him with such an intimate weapon.

“I need those nukes,” the chief said. “I need them, I need them right now.”

“I don’t want to be an enabler, sir. I’d rather get you into a twelve-step program to help you break this addiction.”

“Don’t push me, kid. I have nothing to lose.”

“Oh, Chief, don’t undersell yourself. You’ve still got a lot to lose. Your arrogance, your self-importance, your greed, that insane gleam of historic destiny in your eye—”

When he fired a round, the only sound issuing from his pistol was a whispery *wathup*, rather like Elmer Fudd in one of those old Looney Tunes, lisping *What’s up?*

Although I believed that he intended to wound or kill me, the round went well wide of its target, cracking into one of the pews six feet to my left. Perhaps the injuries to his face had blurred his vision.

If Hutch had thought it took chutzpah for me to try playing Harry Lime, he should have seen me attempting to convince the chief that I was Superman: “Put the gun down, Shackett. I don’t want to have to damage the church with my telekinetic power, but if you give me no other choice, I’ll take you out like I did earlier tonight.”

He was so impressed that he carefully aimed at me and squeezed off another shot.

I did not juke, in part because Superman would never do so; therefore, a feint would disprove my claim to telekinesis. Besides, the chief's aim was so bad that I feared I might lean into the slug instead of away from it.

Another pew spat up a shower of splinters.

"I'm giving you one last chance to put down the gun," I declared with the confidence of an invincible man in blue tights and red cape.

"I don't know what happened in that room," Hoss Shackett said, squinting at me as he tried to line up his third shot. "But if you had the power to do all that crazy stuff, you would have had the power to get yourself out of the leg iron. You didn't, you had to wait for me to unlock it."

An invincible man might have issued a gentle pitying laugh at such shallow reasoning, but I could not pull that off without a year or two of acting classes. Instead, I said, "Any child could see the flaw in your logic."

His third round slammed into a center-aisle column behind me and six inches to my right.

As he aimed again, the chief said, "Any child, you think? So bring him to me, and I'll kill the little bastard after I'm done with you."

When he squeezed the trigger, no *wathup* ensued. He tried again and then lowered the weapon. He reached to his gun belt to get more ammunition.

I sprinted to the chancel railing, leaped across it, and ran onto the altar platform. From a distance of twelve or fifteen feet, I emptied the magazine of my girly gun into his abdomen and chest.

The pistol proved to be nicely balanced, with little recoil, and I prevented the muzzle from pulling up on the target. Maybe three or four shots missed, wide to one side or the other, but five or six tore into his torso; I saw them hit.

The impact of the slugs staggered Hoss Shackett back against the wall, and his body spasmed with each strike. Yet he did not go down.

He grunted in pain, but I was counting on a scream and a dying gurgle.

Exhibiting a riveting theatricality with which I would not have credited him, the chief ripped open the front of his uniform shirt to reveal the flattened slugs, like puddles of lead, adhering to his bulletproof Kevlar vest.

The six rounds had winded but not wounded him.

This was so unfair.

If I had known that he was wearing Kevlar, I would have aimed for his head. I had gone for his torso because it was a much bigger target. A head is an easy thing to miss, especially at a distance of fifteen feet, when the shooter is a person with an intense dislike of guns, in a situation of extreme stress, firing a Tinkertoy pistol designed for use in close quarters.

The chief had found another loaded magazine. He ejected the depleted one from his weapon.

I dropped my pathetic gun, retreated at a run, leaped across the chancel railing, pleased that I didn't catch a foot on it and plant my face in the floor. I sprinted along the aisle toward the narthex.

For an instant, I considered throwing hymnals at him, but as I had an ear for sacred music—especially Gregorian chants and gospel songs—and a respect for books, I restrained myself.

The front door, through which the golden retriever and I had come a few hours ago, had been locked for the night. Only a key would open it.

Two other doors led out of the narthex, but considering the church as I remembered it from outside, the exit to my left could have taken me only to the bell tower, which would have been a vertical dead end.

As I glanced back into the nave, Chief Hoss Shackett opened the gate in the chancel railing and limped out of the sanctuary, into the center aisle. He looked like Captain Ahab in a mad frenzy of white-whale obsession.

I took the only exit available to me, switched on lights, and discovered that I was in an enclosed flagstone walkway linking the church to an annex of some kind.

Taped to the walls were charming drawings executed by children of various ages, all featuring a smiling bearded man in white robes,

who I assumed, because of his halo, must be Jesus. The Son of God, inadequately but earnestly rendered, was engaged in all manner of tasks that I did not recall being recounted in Scripture.

Jesus with hands upraised, transforming a rain of bombs into flowers. Jesus smiling but shaking his finger at a pregnant woman about to drink a bottle of beer. Jesus saving a stranded polar bear from an ice floe. Jesus turning a flamethrower on stacks of crates labeled CIGARETTES.

At the end of the walkway, beside a drawing of Jesus apparently using his miraculous powers to turn an obese boy's prized collection of cakes and pies into packages of tofu, another door opened onto a corridor that served classrooms used for Sunday school and other activities.

When I came to an intersecting hall, I saw what seemed to be an exterior door at the farther end, and I made for it with all the haste of Jesus chasing from the temple those people who worked for companies that manufactured clothing made from polyester and other unnatural fabrics.

Although the exit was locked, it featured a thumb-turn for the deadbolt. Through the French window in the top of the door, the cold curdled fog was brightened by an exterior stoop light that had come on with the hallway fluorescents, and it appeared welcoming compared to the Hoss-stalked realm behind me. As I was about to disengage the lock, however, a coyote stood on its hind legs, put its forepaws on the door, and peered at me through one of the four panes of glass.

CHAPTER 45

WHEN I LEANED CLOSE TO THE WINDOW IN THE door to see whether I would have to deal with a lone wolf, so to speak, or with a group, the coyote bared its stained and ragged teeth. The beast licked the glass as if I were a tasty treat displayed in a vending machine, for which it lacked sufficient coins to make a purchase.

Low to the ground, swarming in the fog, were radiant yellow eyes and, bearing the eyes, more coyotes than I had the time or the heart to count. A second individual stood up boldly at the door, and the multitudes behind these two leaders roiled among one another with increasing agitation, though they remained eerily silent.

Annamaria had told me earlier, on the greensward along Hecate's Canyon, that the coyotes menacing us had not been only what they had appeared to be. She had admonished them that we were not theirs to take, that they must leave—and they had gone.

Although she had told me that I had nothing to fear from them, that I needed only to be bold, I did not feel capable of a boldness to equal that of these coyotes, which had the effrontery to threaten a man taking refuge in a Sunday school.

Besides, Annamaria understood something about them that I did not. Her knowledge made her bold. My lack of knowledge might get me killed.

Hastily retreating from the exit, I slipped into a classroom and closed the windowed door. Light entered from the hallway, and I stood to one side, in shadows.

I listened for Hoss Shackett but heard nothing.

Although usually coyotes explore only the portion of encroaching civilization that borders canyons and open wildland, occasionally one will venture far out of its territory and into the heart of a town. A Columbus of his species.

I had never before seen more than one or, at most, a pair this far from their natural habitat. The horde waiting in the fog seemed to be without precedent.

More peculiar than their distance from open hills and rough canyons was in fact the number of them. Although a family of six had threatened us earlier in the night, coyotes do not travel in traditional packs.

They hunt alone until they mate, whereafter they hunt in pairs. In the cycle of their lives, there will be a period when they hunt as families, the parents with their offspring, until the young decide to venture out on their own.

A female will bear three to twelve pups in a litter. Some will be stillborn, and some might die in their first days. A large family numbers eight or ten.

Although the fog could be deceiving and although my imagination is notorious, I was convinced that at least twenty of the beasts had swarmed beyond the door, and perhaps many more.

If they were not, as Annamaria had said, only what they seemed, then what *else* were they?

Whatever they might be, I supposed that Mama Shackett's boy was deadlier than all the coyotes in the night from the Pacific to the Mississippi. I became increasingly unnerved by the stealth with which he sought me.

Hooding my flashlight, I explored my surroundings, hoping to find something that might serve as a weapon, although I recognized that a Sunday-school room would not offer the choices of an armory or, for that matter, of Birdie Hopkins's purse. The chief most likely would not be so slow-moving that I could buffet him into submission with a pair of blackboard erasers.

In my explorations, I came upon another interior windowed door, this one with a vinyl blind drawn over the panes. I discovered that it

opened into the next classroom, perhaps so that one instructor could easily monitor two classes.

I left the door standing open behind me, both to avoid making a noise and to leave a clear route for a swift retreat.

Each room featured a narrow supply closet in which I could have taken refuge. And each teacher's desk offered a knee space big enough to conceal a man.

If Hoss Shackett conducted a thorough search, which I expected that he would, perhaps after calling in a deputy or two for backup, he would inevitably find me in any closet or knee space. The only question then would be whether the chief would beat me brutally with a nightstick and then shoot me to death—or shoot me to death and then beat me.

Because the second classroom connected to the third by way of an interior door, suggesting that all of these rooms were similarly joined, I might be able to circle through the annex to the entry corridor, getting behind Shackett and away.

Something creaked. I switched off the flashlight, and froze.

The sound had not come from nearby. I couldn't discern whether it had arisen from the hallway or from one of the rooms through which I had recently passed.

I could have gone to the windows to determine if they were fixed or operable. But I *knew* that I would find the same admiring throng of chop-licking coyotes urging me with entreating eyes to join them for a run on the wild side, which was how they lured domesticated dogs to their doom.

I stood frozen a moment longer, then thawed, and switched on the flashlight. Filtering the beam through my fingers, I went to the door between this classroom and yet one more.

With my hand on the doorknob, I hesitated.

Either intuition or an overstimulated adrenal medulla, pumping inordinate amounts of stress hormones into my system, led me to the sudden perception that Hoss Shackett was in the next room. And not merely in the next room but standing inches away on the other side of this door. And not merely standing on the other side of this

door, but standing with his hand on the knob over there, as mine was on the knob over here.

Both sides of the window in the door featured privacy blinds. If I peeled back this blind to peek, I would only see the back of the other blind—unless the chief peeled his back to peek at the same time that I did, in which case we would be eye to eye.

My heart raced. My mouth went so dry that I knew my tongue would rattle against my teeth if I dared move it. I was afraid to turn the knob because, as the chief felt it rotate under his hand, he would *know* where I was, while I would still not be entirely convinced about his location.

At some point, when paralyzed by fear, you have to decide if it is better to move at any cost or to remain motionless until you fall dead from a burst bladder or go raving mad with terror. Thus far, in such moments, I have always decided to move, and again I made that choice.

I turned the knob, thrust open the door, and entered the next classroom. Hoss Shackett was not waiting there for me.

Although annoyed with myself, I was not embarrassed. Even for someone like me, gifted with paranormal perception, it is often difficult to tell the difference between reliable intuition and the effects of an overstimulated adrenal medulla. You must shrug and take comfort that it was merely the medulla malfunctioning, for if it had been the entire adrenal gland, you would suddenly grow hair on your palms and begin lactating.

A few steps into the new room, a disturbing sound caused me to halt and cock my head to listen. An arrhythmic clicking-ticking rose from other classrooms or from the long hallway to the back entrance, at first utterly alien, then familiar, then abruptly recognized: the click of sharp claws on vinyl flooring as eager coyotes scrambled and slipped and sniffed in search of something odd to eat.

Shackett must have opened the back door and accidentally let them inside. But if he had done so, why hadn't he cried out in alarm when they surged around him or why hadn't he fired a shot to spook them into retreat?

If I had navigated correctly through the joined rooms, the door ahead of me should open onto the short hall of the T, the entrance corridor. Indeed, it did.

Although it was not a noble thought, I hoped that the coyotes had torn the chief of police to pieces when they had come through the back door. Not having heard the beasts snarling and not having heard the chief screaming, I assumed my fond hope would not be fulfilled.

As soon as I entered the short hall, I turned left and rushed to the enclosed flagstone walkway between the annex and the church. I slammed the door behind me and kept moving, but when I glanced back, I saw that the latch had not caught, that the door had rebounded, and that it still stood open.

I was in the Hall of What Would Jesus Do, where I ran past a child's drawing that I had not noticed during my previous passage: Jesus in a helicopter, rescuing livestock from a veal farm.

When I reached the entrance to the narthex, I looked back and saw coyotes leaping through the annex door into the enclosed walkway, tails lashing with the delight of natural-born gourmands when they saw me.

I took time to close the narthex door between me and the pack, and to make certain that the latch engaged.

The front entrance to the church remained locked. I returned along the main aisle of the nave, hurrying toward the chancel railing over which I had fled such a short while ago.

Because the coyotes couldn't have gotten into the Sunday-school annex on their own and because the chief hadn't cried out in terror or in the agony of a bitten man, I considered the possibility that he had let them inside to assist in the search for me.

That made no sense. Even coyotes that were something more than only what they appeared to be were nonetheless coyotes, and evil police chiefs were still human beings. Predatory wild animals and people did not form multispecies gangs for their mutual enrichment, not even in California.

I must be overlooking something. This wouldn't be the first time.

As I threw open the chancel railing and entered the sanctuary, even in my haste I was smug enough to congratulate myself on my quick thinking and fast action. When, in a moment, I departed the church by the sacristy door, the slavering coyotes would be roaming through the annex, confused and distracted, and I would have a clear track to the Mercedes parked in the street.

In the sacristy, I crunched across the glass from the window that I had broken to gain entrance. Evidently, Hoss Shackett had been nearby at the time, had heard the noise, and had followed me into the church through the same window.

Why he had been in the immediate neighborhood, I did not know and did not need to know. Curiosity + cats = road kill. All that mattered was getting to the Mercedes and splitting before the chief saw what vehicle I was driving.

I unlocked the sacristy door and went out into the fog, through which I could see many lights at the previously dark rectory, on the farther side of the courtyard that was populated by bloodcurdling devotional statuary.

Perhaps Reverend Charles Moran had been awakened by a poor parishioner who had no more dried peat moss or briquettes of dung to burn in her potbellied stove, nor any more porridge to feed the six orphaned nieces with whom she shared her one-room shanty out by the pauper's graveyard, and now he was preparing to rush off to bring her a selection of Lean Cuisine entrées and a case of Perrier.

Whatever he was up to, I assured myself that it was none of my business, but then as I headed toward the street, I had a change of heart at the sight of yellow-eyed legions of coyotes appearing out of the fog as they rounded the corner of the bell tower. As I could not return to the church and as the minister's residence offered the nearest haven, I decided to ask if Reverend Moran needed a companion on his mission of mercy.

Maybe the coyotes, too, were badly frightened by the unorthodox sculpture and put off their stride, or maybe I found resources that I had never before tapped. Instead of trying to keep up with me, those cousins of wolves decided to outflank me, angling toward the front

of the rectory with the intention of being there with bibs on when I arrived.

Still a member of the smartest if also most ignorant species on the planet, I changed course for the back of the house, which I hoped to reach before they realized what I had done.

They continued to lope through the night in silence, which was not characteristic of their kind. Usually, in the hunt, they issued ululant howls, eerie songs of death, that chilled the blood.

Springing up the back-porch steps, I sensed that the silent predators had gotten wise to my trick and were in fierce competition to be the first to rip out the seat of my jeans.

Certain that I had no time to knock and present myself properly, I tried the door and blew out a gust of breath when it proved to be unlocked.

CHAPTER 46

INSIDE THE RECTORY, AS I ENGAGED THE LOCK, I hoped the coyotes didn't have a key. I noted with relief, there was no pet door.

Tidy, cheerful, the kitchen contained nothing that identified it as that of a clergyman.

On the refrigerator were a collection of decorative magnets that featured uplifting though not spiritual messages. One declared EVERY DAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF YOUR LIFE, which seemed to me to be an excuse to remain infantile.

I did not know what to do next.

Nothing unusual about that.

Hoss Shackett might have been on his way to see Reverend Moran when he heard me break the sacristy window. He could show up here at any time.

Currently more deranged than usual, alarmed, desperate, the chief might even have decided that, after all, he had to kill the minister, who had witnessed my arrest.

Considering all that had happened since I had been taken into custody and how totally the chief's plans had fallen apart, killing Reverend Moran no longer made any sense, if it ever had. But that was the way of a sociopath like the chief: He could pass for normal year after year—until suddenly he no longer could.

Intending to locate the minister and warn him, I left the kitchen—and heard people talking. I prowled swiftly room by room until I

arrived at the half-open door of a study, off the entrance foyer, where I stopped when I recognized Charles Moran's voice.

"The Lord is with us, Melanie."

A woman laughed tenderly. She had the kind of musical voice that on certain words trembled toward bird song. "Charlie, dear, the Lord is at all times with us. Here."

"I don't know that I should."

"Jesus himself imbibed, Charlie."

They clinked glasses, and after a hesitation, I pushed open the door and entered the study.

Reverend Moran stood beside the desk, wearing chinos, a tan turtleneck, and a sports jacket. He looked up from his drink, his eyes widening. "Todd."

"I'm not here to harm you," I assured him.

The woman with him was attractive but with a hairstyle twenty years behind the times.

"Mrs. Moran?" I asked, and she nodded, and I said, "Don't be afraid."

To my surprise, Reverend Moran drew a pistol from under his jacket, and to my greater surprise, he shot his wife dead.

He turned the pistol on me. In answer to my astonishment, he said, "She poured the first drink. She'd have suggested I pour a second."

I noticed the brand name on the bottle: Lord Calvert.

The Lord is with us, Melanie.

Charlie, dear, the Lord is at all times with us.

"And when my hands were busy fixing the drink, she would have pulled the pistol under *her* jacket and shot me."

"But. She. You. Your wife."

"Of eighteen years. That's why I could read her so well."

"Dead. Look. Dead. Why?"

"The way this blew up, there's not going to be enough money for both of us."

"But. You. Church. Jesus."

"I'll miss the church. My flock."

"The bombs? You? Part of that?"

Chief Hoss Shackett announced himself and cured my incoherence by slamming the flat of his hand so hard against the back of my head that I stumbled forward and fell too close to the dead woman.

As I rolled onto my back and looked up, the chief loomed behind his mutant-pink-zucchini nose. “You knew he was part of it, shithead. That’s why you came here in the first place, nosing around.”

Earlier in the night, I had arrived at the church with the dog, out of that unusually dense fog that had been more than a fog, that had seemed to me like a premonition of absolute destruction.

On consideration, it made sense that if my blind wandering with the golden retriever had been a kind of waking premonition, then I might have found my way to a place that was associated with the truth behind that hideous vision.

Shackett pointed his gun at me. “Don’t get cute.”

Looking up at him, my ears ringing, I said, “I don’t feel cute.”

Reverend Moran said, “Kill him.”

“No flying furniture,” Shackett warned me.

“None. No, sir.”

“Starts moving, I blow your face off.”

“Face. Off. I hear you.”

“Kill him,” the minister repeated.

“You sucker-punched me before,” Shackett said.

“I felt bad about that, sir.”

“Shut up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You see my gun, shithead?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where is my gun?”

“In my face, sir.”

“Where it *stays*.”

“I understand.”

“How long to squeeze a trigger?”

“Fraction of a second, sir.”

“See that chair?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If that chair moves?”

“Face. Off.”

“See that desk set?”

“I see it, sir.”

“If that desk set moves?”

“Good-bye face.”

“Kill the bastard,” Reverend Moran urged.

The minister was still holding his pistol.

His hand was twitching.

He wanted to waste me himself.

“Get up,” Shackett ordered me. “You’re gonna talk.”

As I obeyed, Reverend Moran objected. “No talk.”

“Control yourself,” Shackett admonished the minister.

“Just kill him, and let’s go.”

“I want answers.”

“He won’t give you any.”

“I might,” I assured them. “I will. I’d like to.”

Shackett said, “Coast Guard’s reporting the tug is beached.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“I’m not talking to you, shithead.”

“My mistake.”

Reverend Moran said, “Beached where?”

“The cove at Hecate’s Canyon.”

Reverend Moran said, “Could we—”

“No. Coast Guard’s all over it.”

“Kill him,” Reverend Moran said more ferociously.

“When it’s time.”

Reverend Moran said, “It’s time now.”

“It’s not time,” Shackett said.

“It’s not,” I agreed.

“Hoss, it’s over,” the minister said.

His gun hand shook like a Pentecostal receiving the spirit.

“I know it’s over,” Shackett said.

“Do you *really* know it’s over?”

“Oh, I really know,” Shackett said.

“We gotta fly,” the minister said.

Shackett said, "We have a little time."

"I want to be gone," Reverend Moran insisted.

"You can't wait five minutes?"

"I want to be gone now."

"You want to be gone now?"

"Right now, Hoss. Gone. Now."

Hoss Shackett shot Reverend Moran in the head, said, "Now you're gone," and had his gun back in my face before I could blink.

"This is bad," I said.

"You think this is bad, Harry?"

"Oh, I know it's bad. Very bad."

"It can get worse."

"Yes. I've seen how it can."

The Reverend and Mrs. Moran were not bleeding. This did not mean they were not human.

They had not had time to bleed. They had died instantly. Neat corpses.

"I want what you've got," Shackett said.

"What have I got?" I asked.

"The juice."

"What juice?"

"The stuff makes you psychic."

"There's no stuff."

"What did you call the power? The furniture power?"

"Telekinesis."

"I want that. I want the juice."

"I told you—one shot, it's for life."

"That was bullshit."

If only he knew.

No bull was involved.

I can produce it without a bull.

"One shot," I insisted. "Then they have you."

"You say the government screwed you?"

"I hate them. They screwed me good."

"Where is my gun?"

"It's in my face, sir. May I ask a question?"

“Hell, no.”

I nodded and bit my lip.

He glared at me. “What?”

“Why didn’t the coyotes tear you to pieces?”

“What coyotes?”

“When you let them into the Sunday school.”

“Don’t try to make me think you’re crazy on drugs, Harry.”

“I wouldn’t, sir.”

“That would be as pathetic as the amnesia crap.”

“Yes, sir.”

“My point is, if the government screwed you, then you would have sold out for twenty-five million.”

“They would have killed my family.”

“You’re not married.”

“No. It’s my brother.”

“Who cares about a brother?”

“We’re twins. We’re so close.”

“I don’t buy it, Harry.”

“He’s paraplegic, see.”

“So what?”

“And he has a learning disability.”

“A what?”

“And he lost an eye in the war.”

“What’re you pulling here?”

“Iraq. My other brother, Jamie, he died there.”

“Did that chair just move?”

“No, sir.”

“I thought I saw it move.”

“No, sir.”

“If it moves—”

“Good-bye face. Yes, sir.”

“You’ve got a one-eyed paraplegic brother.”

“Yes, sir. With a learning disability.”

“Does he have a harelip, too?”

“No, sir.”

“The first thing you said was true.”

Astonished, I said, "It was?"

"You know it was."

"And what first thing was that, sir?"

"That the drug facilitated psychic powers for twelve hours."

"Twelve to eighteen. Yes, I remember saying that."

"I thought you would."

"That's why you're the chief of police."

"Don't try sucking up to me, Harry."

"No, sir. That wouldn't work with you."

"I'd love to blow your face off."

"I can feel your passion, sir."

"You take a pill a day," he said.

"Yes, sir, a multivitamin."

"The psychic pill. The tele-what pill."

"Telekinesis, sir."

"You take one a day."

"I guess I have to admit it, sir."

"Did that inkwell just move?"

"No, sir."

"Where is my gun?"

"It's in my face, sir."

"If that inkwell moves."

"Good-bye face. Yes, sir."

We had developed an intricate litany.

You would have thought we were in a *Catholic* rectory.

"So you have to admit it, do you?"

"Yes, sir. I have to admit it."

"So you have a supply of the pills."

"Yes, sir. I have quite a supply."

"I want those pills."

"I should warn you, sir."

"Warn me what?"

"Telekinesis isn't what it's cracked up to be."

"Look at my face, Harry."

"I feel bad about that, sir."

"Shut up, shithead."

“Yes, sir.”

“I think it’s *everything* it’s cracked up to be.”

One of the redheaded gunmen appeared in the doorway behind Hoss Shackett.

“Oh, Lordy,” I said.

Shackett grinned. Some of his teeth were broken.

Way to go, Mr. Sinatra.

I wished Mr. Sinatra would deal with the redhead.

But he had probably moved on to Paradise. Just my luck.

“You’re in a corner now, aren’t you, Harry?”

“I can’t catch a break.”

The new arrival was the redhead with the methamphetamine teeth.

“Don’t try that trick with me, Harry.”

“What trick, sir?”

“Pretending someone’s behind me.”

“Someone is behind you, sir.”

“So I’ll turn and look, and you’ll go for me.”

“No, sir. He’s a friend of yours, and no friend of mine.”

“Where’s my gun, Harry?”

“It’s in my face, sir.”

“Give me your pills.”

“I don’t have them with me, sir.”

“Where are they?”

“In my pillbox.”

“Where’s your pillbox?”

“Chicago.”

“I’m gonna blow your face off, Harry.”

“Not without those pills, sir.”

“I’ll torture it out of you. Don’t think I won’t.”

“I haven’t mistaken you for a nun, sir.”

“Stop scamming me with the over-the-shoulder look.”

“No reason to scam you, sir. He’s really your buddy.”

The redhead disproved my contention by shooting Hoss Shackett in the head.

I let out an expletive that seemed to have come from the people I had been associating with, not from me, and I staggered back from the dead and toppling chief. Staggering, I fell; and falling, I fell upon the minister's dead wife.

I heard myself spewing exclamations of disgust and horror as I tried to get off the dead woman, but it seemed as though she grabbed at me, clutched me, and by the time I crawled away from her on my hands and knees, I was gibbering like someone who had barely escaped the House of Usher or any other place of Poe's creation.

"Get up," said the redhead.

"I'm trying."

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"What's *wrong* with me?"

"Are you spastic?"

"Are you *blind*?"

"Don't speak harshly to me," he said.

"Do you see all these *dead* people?"

"Do they bother you—dead people?"

"You have no idea," I said.

"They are just people, except dead."

"What—then I'm just a corpse, except alive?"

His smile was ghastly. "Yes, precisely."

I had invented a neat organizational chart for these people. The redheads were bottom-feeders. Utgard was middle management. Shackett was at or near the top. If I ever hosted a dinner party, I assumed I knew exactly how they should be seated.

Instead, this redhead's attitude suggested that he not only had the temerity to whack the chief but also the authority. His rotten teeth seemed not to be proof of low status, after all, but perhaps a fashion choice.

"Do you have to point that gun at my head?"

"Would you prefer I point it at your chest?"

"Yes. In fact, yes."

"You'll be just as dead either way."

"But I'll be a prettier dead this way."

“It’s loaded with door-busters.”

“If you’re going to kill me, just do it.”

“I didn’t say I was going to kill you.”

“You’re not going to kill me?”

“Most likely, yes. But one never knows.”

“What do you want from me?” I demanded.

“First, I want to talk to you.”

“This never works out well.”

“Have a seat.”

“What—*here*?”

“On the sofa.”

“I can’t talk with dead people.”

“They will not interrupt.”

“I’m serious about this. I’m freaked out.”

“Don’t speak harshly to me,” he said.

“Well, you just don’t listen.”

“That is unfair. I listen. I’m a good listener.”

“You haven’t been listening to *me*.”

“You sound just like my wife.”

This was interesting.

“You have a wife?”

“I adore her.”

“What’s her name?”

“Do not laugh when I tell you.”

“I am in no mood to laugh, sir.”

He watched me closely for signs of amusement.

The gun had a large bore. It probably would bust doors.

“Her name is Freddie.”

“Why, that’s delightful.”

“Delightful like funny?”

“No, delightful like charming.”

“She is not a masculine woman.”

“The name implies no such thing,” I assured him.

“She is entirely feminine.”

“Freddie is a nickname for Frederica.”

He stared at me, processing what I had said.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“Absolutely. Frederica, Freddie.”

“Frederica is a nice feminine name.”

“Exactly my point,” I said.

“But her parents only named her Freddie.”

I shrugged. “Parents. What’re you gonna do?”

He stared at me for a long moment.

I tried not to study his teeth.

Finally he said, “Perhaps we can talk in the kitchen.”

“Have you left any dead people in the kitchen?”

“I could find no one there to kill.”

“Then the kitchen will be fine,” I said.

CHAPTER 47

THE REDHEAD AND I SAT ACROSS FROM EACH other at the kitchen table. He still pointed the gun at me, but less aggressively.

He indicated the decorative magnets on the refrigerator door. “What does that one mean—‘I complained I had no shoes, till I met a man with no feet.’ ”

“You’ve got me. I’m sure Reverend Moran had all the shoes he wanted.”

“Why would a man have no feet?”

“I guess someone cut them off.”

“That will happen,” he said. “Moran always annoyed me, I never saw him in this.”

“How *did* he fit?” I asked. “Minister. Church. Jesus. Nuclear terrorism. I don’t get it.”

“He was I-I-G-O,” said the redhead.

“He was igo?”

“International Interdenominational Goodwill Organization. He founded it.”

“Now I know less than I did.”

“He went all over the world furthering peace.”

“And look what a paradise he made for us.”

“You know, I think you’re a funny kid.”

“So I’ve been told. Usually with a gun pointed at me.”

“He negotiated with countries that persecuted Christians.”

“He wanted to see them persecuted more?”

“Moran had to negotiate with the persecutors, of course.”

“I’ll bet *they* have tough lawyers.”

“In the process, he made a great many valuable contacts.”

“You mean dictators, thugs, and mad mullahs.”

“Precisely. Special friendships. Somewhere along the way, he realized that he was engaged in a lost cause.”

“Promoting good will.”

“Yes. He became weary, disillusioned, depressed. Half a million to a million Christians are killed each year in these countries. He was saving five at a time. He was a man who had to have a cause, and a successful cause that made him proud, so he found a new one.”

“Let me guess—himself.”

“IIGO had an impeccable reputation as a charity. That made it a perfect conduit for laundering funds for rogue governments...then for terrorists. One thing led to another.”

“Which led to him shot in the head.”

“Did you kill him?” he asked.

“No, no. Shackett did it.”

“Did you kill Mrs. Moran?”

“No, no. Reverend Moran killed her.”

“Then you have killed no one here?”

“No one,” I confirmed.

“But aboard the tugboat,” he said.

“I crawled so he could walk. He walked so you could fly.”

He frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I have no idea. I just read it off the refrigerator.”

He licked his black and crumbling teeth, wincing as he did so.

“Harry—is your name in fact Harry?”

“Well, it’s not Todd.”

“Do you know why I haven’t killed you yet, Harry?”

“I’ve given you no reason to?” I said hopefully.

“For one thing, my brother and I have a responsibility here.”

“The resemblance is remarkable. Are you identical twins?”

“In this current operation, we represent the nation that produced the bombs.”

“You will absolutely be able to sell film rights.”

“To save our own skins, we will have to give them a *perfect* story believable in every detail.”

“Oh. Every detail. Well. Talk about a tall order.”

“If you cooperate fully with those details, I don’t have to kill you. But there’s another thing.”

“There’s always another thing.”

He favored me with a sly, calculating look. You might think that was the only look he had, but in fact I had seen one other.

“I was listening outside the study door long before you saw me,” he said.

“Your employers get their money’s worth.”

“I heard something that intrigued me. The pills, Harry.”

“Oh, my.”

“I am always looking for a new experience.”

“Not me. I’ve had too many just tonight.”

I half expected a coyote with a gun to appear behind the redhead and shoot him dead. *Then* we’d see how long I could keep myself alive with conversation.

“My brother won’t touch drugs,” he said.

“There’s got to be one in every family.”

“For a while I had a minor problem with methamphetamine.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“But I’m cured now.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“I do some heroin, but I don’t overdo it.”

“That’s the key. Moderation.”

He leaned toward me over the dinette table. I waited for his breath to peel up the Formica.

He whispered, “Is it true? Pills that, as Shackett said, facilitate psychic powers?”

“It’s a secret government project.”

“Isn’t America amazing?”

“I’ve got a bottle in my car. They’re disguised as aspirin.”

“You know another reason I haven’t killed you yet, Harry?”

“I am clueless.”

“I never caught you once looking at my teeth.”

“Your teeth? What about your teeth?”

He grinned broadly at me.

“So what?” I said. “Some people don’t even have teeth.”

“You’re a very considerate guy, you know that?”

I shrugged.

“No, Harry, you are. People can be cruel.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve had my own experiences.”

“You? You’re a pretty good-lookin’ guy.”

“Well, I compete okay,” I said. “But I don’t mean me. I have a brother, too. Maybe you heard me telling Shackett about him.”

“No, I must’ve come in after that.”

“My brother, he’s paraplegic.”

“Oh, man, that’s a tough one.”

“And blind in one eye.”

“See, that’s where you learned compassion.”

“It’s learning the hard way.”

“Know what I’m gonna do? I’m gonna have all my teeth pulled, replace ’em with implants.”

“Ouch.”

“It’s for Freddie.”

“Love makes the world go ’round. But still...ouch.”

“Oh, they put you in twilight sleep. It’s painless.”

I said, “For your sake, I hope that’s true.”

“If the doctor’s lyin’, I’ll kill him after.”

He laughed, and I laughed, and with Mrs. Moran’s pistol, I shot him under the table.

Reflexively, the redhead squeezed off a round that whistled past my head, and I brought Mrs. Moran’s gun above the table and shot him twice.

He almost rocked his chair over backward, but then he dropped forward on the table, as dead as Lincoln but not as great a man, and his gun fell out of his hand.

For a while I sat there shaking. I could not get up. I was so cold that my breath should have been pluming from me in a frost.

When the redhead had shot the chief, I had stumbled backward and had managed to fall facedown atop the minister’s dead wife.

Reverend Moran had been correct: His wife had been carrying a pistol in a holster under her blazer.

Finally I got up from the kitchen table. I went to the sink and put the pistol on the cutting board.

I turned on the hot water and splashed my face. I couldn't get warm. I was freezing.

After a while, I realized that I was washing my hands. Evidently, I had washed them several times. The water was so hot that my hands were bright red.

CHAPTER 48

ALTHOUGH I DID NOT WANT TO TOUCH MELANIE Moran's pistol again, I could hear Fate shouting at me to learn, for heaven's sake, from experience. The current lesson, which I had absorbed well, was never to visit a clergyman's house without a firearm.

In the living room, which presently contained no dead bodies, I used Reverend Moran's telephone to call the Homeland Security field-office number in Santa Cruz that the operator had provided to me earlier at the convenience-store pay phone.

My call was handed off to a bored junior agent who stopped yawning when I told him that I was the guy who had beached the tugboat carrying four thermonuclear weapons in the cove at Hecate's Canyon. They had recently heard about that, and they had agents on the way from Los Angeles; and he hoped that I had no intention of talking to the news media.

I assured him I would not, that in fact I didn't even want to talk to him, that all I had done lately was talk, talk, talk, and I was talked out. I told him the triggers for four bombs would be in a leather satchel in the Salvation Army used-clothing collection bin at the corner of Memorial Park Avenue and Highcliff Drive.

To spare Homeland Security confusion, I noted that no Memorial Park existed anywhere along Memorial Park Avenue or at either end, and I cautioned him not to expect to find Highcliff Drive along any of the town's bluffs.

“I told the FBI about the tugboat, and I’m telling you about the triggers,” I said, “because I don’t fully trust all this with one agency. And *you* should not trust everyone in the Magic Beach Police Department.”

After I hung up, I went to the front door and looked through one of the flanking sidelights at the porch. I saw no coyotes, so I left the house.

Behind me, the phone began to ring. I knew it would be the young agent from Homeland Security or a telemarketing firm. I had nothing to say to either.

By the time I reached the porch steps, the pack materialized before me, as though the fog were not a weather condition but instead a doorway through which they could step in an instant off the dry inland hills fifty miles distant into this coastal night. Legions of radiant yellow eyes receded into the murk.

Trying to recall the effective words that Annamaria had used on the greenbelt along Hecate’s Canyon, I said, “You do not belong here.”

As I descended the steps, the coyotes failed to retreat.

“The rest of the world is yours...but not this place at this moment.”

As I descended the final step and arrived on the walkway, the coyotes swarmed around me, some growling low in their throats, others mewling with an eager hunger.

They smelled of musk and meadows, and their breath of blood.

Moving forward, I said, “I am not yours. You will leave now.”

They seemed to think that I was mistaken, that I was indeed theirs, that they had seen the menu with my name on it, and their bodies pressed against my legs.

Annamaria had quoted Shakespeare: *Virtue is bold, and goodness never fearful.*

“I know,” I told the coyotes, “that you are not only what you appear to be, and I am not afraid of anything you are.”

That was a lie, but it was not a fraction as outrageous as the multitudinous lies that I had told to Chief Hoss Shackett and his associates.

One of the beasts nipped the left leg of my jeans and tugged.

“You will leave now,” I said firmly but serenely, without a tremor in my voice, as Annamaria had said it.

Another coyote snatched at the right leg of my jeans. A third one nipped at my left shoe.

They were growing more aggressive.

Out of the mist, through their thickly furred and plume-tailed ranks, came one stronger than the others, with a proud chest ruff and a larger head than any in the pack.

Coyotes communicate—especially in the hunt—by the pricking of their flexible and expressive ears, by the positions of their tails, and with other body language.

As this leader approached me through the swarm that parted to give him passage, his every expression of ears and tail was at once mimicked by the others, as if he were marshaling them for attack.

I faltered to a halt.

Although I had the words that Annamaria used, I did not have Annamaria, and it was beginning to look as if that was the difference between coyotes skulking away in defeat and coyotes ripping my throat out.

Much earlier in the evening, in the Brick District, a still small voice deep inside me had said *Hide* when a harbor-department truck had turned the corner. Now through my mind rang two words: *the bell*.

I did not have Annamaria with me, but I had something that had belonged to Annamaria, and I fished it from under my sweatshirt.

Surely the silver bell, no larger than a thimble, would be too small, too alien to a coyote’s experience, too lacking in shine in this foggy dark to attract their notice.

Yet when I let it lie upon the blue field of my sweatshirt, the eyes of the leader went to it, and as well the eyes of the others.

“The rest of the world is yours,” I repeated, “but not this place at this moment.”

The leader did not relent, but some of the smaller individuals began to shy away from me.

Emboldened, I addressed the master of the others, making eye contact with him and with him alone. “You will leave now.”

He did not look away from me, but he stopped advancing.

“You will leave now,” I repeated, and I moved forward once more, bold and not fearful, as Shakespeare advised, though I couldn’t lay claim to goodness and virtue to the extent that I would have liked.

“Now,” I insisted, and with one hand touched the bell upon my chest. “Go now.”

One moment, the eyes of the leader were sharp with what seemed to be hatred, though no animal has the capacity for hate, an emotion that, like envy, humanity reserves for itself.

The next moment, his fierce eyes clouded with confusion. He turned his head, surveying the rapidly deserting throng that he had rallied. He seemed to be surprised to find himself here, at this late hour in this strange place.

When he stared directly at me again, I knew that he was now only what he appeared to be, a beautiful work of nature, and nothing else, and nothing darker.

“Go,” I said gently, “back to your home.”

As if he were more a cousin of the dog than of the wolf, he backed away, turned, and sought the path that would lead him home.

In a quarter of a minute, the fog closed all its yellow eyes, and the scent of musk faded beyond detection.

I walked unhindered to the Mercedes and drove away.

At the corner of Memorial Park Avenue and Highcliff Drive, the Salvation Army collection bin featured a revolving dump-drawer like those in bank walls for night deposits.

When I tried to lift the satchel from the trunk, it seemed to weigh more than the car itself. Suddenly I knew that the hindering weight was the same as the confrontational coyotes, and both those things the same as the curious light and the shuffling sound under the lightning-bolt drain grating, and all of them of an identical character with the phantom that had sat in the porch swing.

“Twenty pounds,” I said. “No more than twenty pounds. No more of this. The night is done.”

I lifted the satchel with ease. It fit in the bin's revolving drawer, and I let it roll away into the softness of donated clothing.

I closed the trunk, got in the Mercedes, and drove back toward Blossom Rosedale's place.

The fog gave no indication that it would lift on this quieter side of midnight. Dawn might not prevail against it, or even noon.

One redheaded gunman remained, but I suspected that he had been the wisest of that unwise crowd, that he had tucked his tail, lowered his head, and made for home, and that I would need neither bell nor bullet to dispel him.

I got Birdie Hopkins's home phone number from information and called to tell her that I was alive. She said, "Ditto," and it was a fine thing to think of her out there in Magic Beach, waiting for the next twinge that would send her in search of the person who needed her.

CHAPTER 49

IN THE COTTAGE OF THE HAPPY MONSTER waited the lingering spirit of Mr. Sinatra, my ghost dog, Boo, the golden retriever once named Murphy, Annamaria—and Blossom in a state of high enchantment.

That long-ago barrel of fire had neither ruined her life nor stolen the essence of her beauty. When she had delight in her heart, her face transcended all her suffering, whereupon the scars and the deformed features and the mottled skin became the remarkable face of a hero and the cherished face of a friend.

“Come see, you’ve got to see,” she said, leading me by the hand from the front door to a kitchen suffused with candlelight.

Annamaria sat at the table, and around her gathered the visible and the invisible.

On the table lay one of the white flowers with thick waxy petals that grew as large as bowls on the tree I had not been able to name.

“You have a tree that grows these?” I asked Blossom.

“No. I’d love such a tree. Annamaria brought this with her.”

Raphael came to me, tail wagging, wiggling with pleasure, and I crouched to pet him.

“I didn’t see you bring a flower,” I told Annamaria.

“She took it from her purse,” said Blossom. “Annamaria, show him. Show him about the flower.”

On the table stood a cut-glass bowl of water. Annamaria floated the flower in it.

“No, Blossom,” she said. “This is yours. Keep it to remember me. I’ll show Odd when he’s ready.”

“Here tonight?” Blossom asked.

“All things in their time.”

For Blossom, Annamaria had one of those gentle smiles that you wanted to look at forever, but for me, a more solemn expression.

“How are you doing, young man?”

“I don’t feel so young anymore.”

“It’s the foul weather.”

“It was very foul tonight.”

“Do you wish to leave town alone?”

“No. We’ll go together.”

The candlelight seemed to attend her.

“The decision is always yours,” she reminded me.

“You’re safest with me. And we better go.”

“I forgot!” Blossom said. “I was packing you a hamper for the road.” She hurried to the farther end of the kitchen.

“There will be sun in a few hours,” Annamaria said.

“Somewhere,” I agreed.

Rising from the table, she said, “I’ll help Blossom.”

Mr. Sinatra came to me, and I stood up from Raphael to say, “Thank you, sir. And I’m sorry for cranking you up that way.”

He indicated that all was forgiven. He put one fist under my chin and gave me an affectionate faux punch.

“I thought you might have gone by now. You shouldn’t have waited for me. It’s too important—moving on.”

He made that gesture of a magician, rolling his hands over to present empty palms, an introduction to a performance.

Manifesting now in the clothes that he had worn when he had first fallen into step beside me on a lonely highway—hat tipped at the particular cocky angle he preferred, sport coat tossed over his shoulder—he walked across the kitchen, up a wall of cabinets, and vanished through the ceiling, always the entertainer.

“How did the golden retriever get here?” I asked.

“He just showed up at the door,” Blossom said, “and he woofed so politely. He’s a sweet one. He doesn’t look like his people took good

care of him. He needed to be better fed and brushed more.”

I had seen on entering that Raphael was aware of Boo. And I had no doubt that the ghost dog led the living dog to Blossom’s place.

“We should take him with us,” said Annamaria.

“The vote’s unanimous.”

“A dog is always a friend in hard times.”

“That sounds like you’re buying into trouble,” I warned Raphael.

He produced a big goofy grin, as if nothing would please him more than trouble, and plenty of it.

“This town’s no place for us now,” I told Annamaria. “We really need to go.”

Blossom had packed a hamper to sustain a platoon, including beef and chicken for our four-legged companion.

She walked us out to the car, and after I stowed the hamper, I held her close. “You take care of yourself, Blossom Rosedale. I’m going to miss beating you at cards.”

“Yeah, right. As soon as I join up with you, I’ll whup your butt as usual.”

I leaned back from her and, in the porte-cochere lights, I read in her face the delight that had been there when she opened the door, but also a deeper joy that I had not initially recognized.

“I’ll conclude business here in a few weeks,” she said, “and then I’ll come to win this Mercedes from you.”

“It’s borrowed.”

“Then you’ll have to buy me another one.”

I kissed her brow, her cheek. Indicating the charming cottage, the diamond-paned windows full of warm light, I said, “You really want to leave all this?”

“All this is just a place,” she said. “And sometimes such a lonely one.”

Annamaria joined us. She put one arm around Blossom’s shoulders, one around mine.

To Blossom, I said, “What is this thing we’re doing? You know?”

Blossom shook her head. “I don’t understand it at all. But I’ve never wanted anything in my life like going with you.”

As always, Annamaria's eyes invited exploration but remained inscrutable.

I asked her, "Where are we going? Where will she find us?"

"We'll stay in touch by phone," Annamaria replied. "And as for where we're going...you always say, you make it up as you go along."

We left Blossom there alone, but not forever, and with the dogs in the backseat, I drove along the lane between the rows of immense drooping deodar cedars, which seemed to be robed giants in a stately procession.

I worried that the FBI or Homeland Security, or some nameless agency, would set up roadblocks, checkpoints, something, but the way remained clear. I suppose the last thing they wanted was to draw media attention.

Nevertheless, after we had crossed the town limits, for several miles south, as the fog thinned somewhat across land less hospitable to it, I continued to check the rearview mirror with the expectation of pursuit.

When abruptly I could not drive anymore, and found it necessary to pull to the side of the highway, I was surprised by how the world fell out from under me, leaving me feeling as if I had fallen off a cliff and could not see the bottom.

Annamaria seemed not surprised at all. "I'll drive," she said, and assisted me around the car to the passenger seat.

Desperately, I needed to be small, bent forward, curled tight, my face in my hands, so small that I should not be noticed, my face covered so that it should not be seen.

In recent hours, I had taken in too much of the sea, and now I had to let it out.

From time to time, she took a hand from the wheel to put it on my shoulder, and occasionally she spoke to comfort me.

She said, "Your heart shines, odd one."

"No. You don't know. What's in it."

And later: "You saved cities."

"The killing. Her eyes. I see them."

"Cities, odd one. Cities."

She could not console me, and I heard myself saying, as from a distance, “All death, death, death,” as if by chanting I could do penance.

A time of silence heavier than thunder. The fog behind us. To the east, a disturbing geography of black hills. To the west, a dark sea and a setting moon.

“Life is hard,” she said, and her statement needed no argument or clarification.

Miles later, I realized that she had followed those three words with six more that I had not then been ready to hear: “But it was not always so.”

Well before dawn, she stopped in an empty parking lot at a state beach. She came around the car and opened my door.

“The stars, odd one. They’re beautiful. Will you show me the constellation Cassiopeia?”

She could not have known. Yet she knew. I did not ask how. That she knew was grace enough.

We stood together on the cracked blacktop while I searched the heavens.

Stormy Llewellyn had been the daughter of Cassiopeia, who had died in my sweet girl’s childhood. Together, we had often picked out the points of the constellation, because doing so made Stormy feel closer to her lost mother.

“There,” I said, “and there, and there,” and star by star I drew the Cassiopeia of classic mythology, and recognized in that familiar pattern the mother of my lost girl, and in the mother I saw also the daughter, there above, beautiful and bright, for all eternity, her timeless light shining upon me, until one day I at last stepped out of time and joined her.



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1

We are buried when we're born. The world is a place of graves occupied and graves potential. Life is what happens while we wait for our appointment with the mortician.

You are no more likely to see that sentiment on a Starbucks cup than you are the words COFFEE KILLS.

Sorry, but I have recently been in a *mood*. I'll cheer up soon. I always do. Regardless of what horror transpires, given a little time, I am as reliably buoyant as a helium balloon.

I don't know the reason for that buoyancy. Understanding it might be a key part of my life assignment. Perhaps when I realize why I can find humor in the darkest of darkneses, the mortician will call my number and the time will have come to choose my casket.

Actually, I don't expect to have a casket. The Celestial Office of Life Themes—or whatever it might be called—seems to have decided that my journey through this world will be especially complicated by absurdity and violence of the kind in which the human species takes such pride. Consequently, I'll probably be torn limb from limb by an angry mob of antiwar protesters and thrown on a bonfire. Or I'll be struck down by a Rolls-Royce driven by an advocate for the poor, knocked into an open storm drain, and washed out to sea, where my remains will be enthusiastically

consumed by the teeming fish in a federally enforced no-fishing zone.

Anyway, at four o'clock that February morning, I was dreaming of Auschwitz.

My characteristic buoyancy will not occur just yet.

I woke to a familiar cry from beyond the half-open window of my suite in Roseland's guest house. As silvery as the pipes in a Celtic song, the wail sewed threads of sorrow and longing through the night and the woods. It came again, nearer, and then a third time from a distance.

These lamentations were always brief, but when they woke me too near dawn, I could not sleep anymore that night. The cry was like a wire in the blood, conducting a current through every artery and vein. I'd never heard a lonelier sound, and it electrified me with a dread that I could not explain.

In this instance, I awakened from the Nazi death camp. I am not a Jew, but in the nightmare I was Jewish and terrified of dying twice. Dying twice made perfect sense in sleep, but not in the waking world, and the eerie call in the night at once pricked the air out of the vivid dream, which shriveled away from me.

According to the current master of Roseland and everyone who worked for him, the source of the disturbing cry was a loon. They were either ignorant or lying.

I don't mean to insult my host and his staff. After all, I am ignorant of many things because I am required to maintain a narrow focus. An ever-increasing number of people seem determined to kill me, so that I need to concentrate on staying alive.

But even in the desert, where I was born and raised, there are ponds and lakes, man-made yet adequate for loons. Their

cries were melancholy but never desolate like this, curiously hopeful whereas these were despairing.

Roseland, a private estate, was a mile from the California coast. But loons are loons wherever they nest; they don't alter their voices to conform to the landscape. They're birds, not politicians.

Besides, loons aren't roosters with a timely duty. Yet this wailing always came between midnight and dawn, never in the evening, never in sunlight. The earlier it came in the new day, the more often it was repeated during the remaining hours of darkness.

I threw back the covers, sat on the edge of the bed, and said, "Spare me that I may serve," which is a morning prayer that my Granny Sugars taught me to say when I was a little boy.

Pearl Sugars was a professional poker player who frequently sat in private games against card sharks twice her size, guys who didn't lose with a smile. They didn't even smile when they won. My grandma was a hard drinker. She ate a boatload of pork fat in various forms. Only when sober, Granny Sugars drove so fast that police in several Southwestern states knew her as Pedal-to-the-Metal Pearl. Yet she lived long and died in her sleep.

I hoped her prayer worked as well for me as it did for her; but recently I had taken to following that first request with another. This morning, it was: "Please don't let anyone kill me by shoving an angry lizard down my throat."

That might seem like a snarky request to make of God, but a psychotic and enormous man once threatened to force-feed me an exotic sharp-toothed lizard that was in a frenzy after being dosed with methamphetamine. He would have succeeded, too, if we hadn't been on a construction site and

if I hadn't found a way to use an insulation-foam sprayer as a weapon. He promised to track me down when released from prison and finish the job with a different lizard.

On other days during the past week, I had asked God to spare me from death by a car-crushing machine in a salvage yard, from death by a nail gun, from death by being chained to dead men and dropped in a lake.... These were ordeals that I should not have survived in days past, and I figured that if I ever faced one of those threats again, I wouldn't be lucky enough to escape the same fate twice.

My name isn't Lucky Thomas. It's Odd Thomas.

It really is. Odd.

My beautiful but psychotic mother claims the birth certificate was supposed to read *Todd*. My father, who lusts after teenage girls and peddles property on the moon—though from a comfortable office here on Earth—sometimes says they *meant* to name me Odd.

I tend to believe my father in this matter. Although if he isn't lying, this might be the only entirely truthful thing he's ever said to me.

Having showered before retiring the previous evening, I now dressed without delay, to be ready for ... whatever.

Day by day, Roseland felt more like a trap. I sensed hidden deadfalls that might be triggered with a misstep, bringing down a crushing weight upon me.

Although I wanted to leave, I had an obligation to remain, a duty to the Lady of the Bell. She had come with me from Magic Beach, which lay farther north along the coast, where I'd almost been killed in a variety of ways.

Duty doesn't need to call; it only needs to whisper. And if you heed the call, no matter what happens, you have no need for regret.

Stormy Llewellyn, whom I loved and lost, believed that this strife-torn world is boot camp, preparation for the great adventure that comes between our first life and our eternal life. She said that we go wrong only when we are deaf to duty.

We are all the walking wounded in a world that is a war zone. Everything we love will be taken from us, everything, last of all life itself.

Yet everywhere I look, I find great beauty in this battlefield, and grace and the promise of joy.

The stone tower in the eucalyptus grove, where I currently lived, was a thing of rough beauty, in part because of the contrast between its solemn mass and the delicacy of the silvery-green leaves that cascaded across the limbs of the surrounding trees.

Square rather than columnar, thirty feet on a side, the tower stood sixty feet high if you counted the bronze dome but not the unusual finial that looked like the much-enlarged stem, crown, and case bow of an old pocket watch.

They called the tower a guest house, but surely it had not always been used for that purpose. The narrow casement windows opened inward to admit fresh air, because vertical iron bars prevented them from opening outward.

Barred windows suggested a prison or a fortress. In either case, an enemy was implied.

The door was ironbound timber that looked as though it had been crafted to withstand a battering ram if not even cannonballs. Beyond lay a stone-walled vestibule.

In the vestibule, to the left, stairs led to a higher apartment. Annamaria, the Lady of the Bell, was staying there.

The inner vestibule door, directly opposite the outer, opened to the ground-floor unit, where the current owner of Roseland, Noah Wolflaw, had invited me to stay.

My quarters consisted of a comfortable sitting room, a smaller bedroom, both paneled in mahogany, and a richly tiled bathroom that dated to the 1920s. The style was craftsman: heavy wood-and-cushion armchairs, trestle tables with mortise joints and peg decoration.

I don't know if the stained-glass lamps were genuine Tiffany, but they might have been. Perhaps they were bought back in the day when they weren't yet museum pieces of fantastic value, and they remained here in this out-of-the-way tower simply because they had always been here. One quality of Roseland was a casual indifference to the wealth that it represented.

Each guest suite featured a kitchenette in which the pantry and the refrigerator had been stocked with the essentials. I could cook simple meals or have any reasonable request filled by the estate's chef, Mr. Shilshom, who would send over a tray from the main house.

Breakfast more than an hour before dawn didn't appeal to me. I would feel like a condemned man trying to squeeze in as many meals as possible on his last day, before submitting to a lethal injection.

Our host had warned me to remain indoors between midnight and dawn. One or more mountain lions had recently been marauding through other estates in the area, killing a couple of dogs, a horse, and peacocks kept as pets. The beast might be bold enough to chow down on a wandering guest of Roseland if given a chance.

I was sufficiently informed about mountain lions to know that they were as likely to hunt in the evening as after

midnight, and in daylight, for that matter. I suspected that Noah Wolflaw's warning was intended to ensure that I would hesitate to investigate the so-called loon and other peculiarities of Roseland by night.

Before dawn on that Monday in February, I left the guest tower and locked the ironbound door behind me.

Both Annamaria and I had been given keys and had been sternly instructed to keep the tower locked at all times. When I noted that mountain lions could not turn a knob and open a door, whether it was locked or not, Mr. Wolflaw declared that we were living in the early days of a new dark age, that walled estates and the guarded redoubts of the wealthy were not secure anymore, that "bold thieves, rapists, journalists, murderous revolutionaries, and far worse" might turn up anywhere.

His eyes didn't spin like pinwheels, neither did smoke curl from his ears when he issued this warning, though his dour expression and ominous tone struck me as cartoonish. I still thought that he must be kidding, until I met his eyes long enough to discern that he was as paranoid as a three-legged cat encircled by wolves.

Whether his paranoia was justified or not, I suspected that neither thieves nor rapists, nor journalists, nor revolutionaries were what worried him. His terror was reserved for the undefined "far worse."

Leaving the guest tower, I followed a flagstone footpath through the fragrant eucalyptus grove to the brink of the gentle slope that led up to the main house. The vast manicured lawn before me was as smooth as carpet underfoot.

In the wild fields around the periphery of the estate, through which I had rambled on other days, snowy wood

rush and ribbon grass and feathertop thrived among the majestic California live oaks that seemed to have been planted in cryptic but harmonious patterns.

No place of my experience had ever been more beautiful than Roseland, and no place had ever felt more evil.

Some people will say that a place is just a place, after all, that it cannot be good or evil. Others will say that evil as a real power or entity is a hopelessly old-fashioned idea, that the wicked acts of men and women can be explained by one psychological theory or another.

Those are people to whom I never listen. If I listened to them, I would already be dead.

Regardless of the weather, daylight in Roseland always seemed to be the product of a sun different from the one that brightened the rest of the world. Here, the familiar appeared strange, and even the most solid, brightly illuminated object had the quality of a mirage.

Afoot at night, as now, I had no sense of privacy. I felt that I was followed, watched.

On other occasions, I had heard a rustle that the still air could not explain, a muttered word or two not quite comprehensible, hurried footsteps. My stalker, if I had one, was always screened by shrubbery or by moonshadows, or he monitored me from around a corner.

And then there were the horse and rider that *only* I could see. I was alert for them, often looking behind me because the stallion's hooves made no sound, and the rider was as silent as any spirit.

I have certain talents. In addition to being a pretty good short-order cook, I have an occasional prophetic dream. And in the waking world, I sometimes see the spirits of the

lingering dead who, for various reasons, are reluctant to move on to the Other Side.

Because my sixth sense complicates my existence, I try otherwise to keep my life simple. I have fewer possessions than a monk. I have no time or peace to build a career as a fry cook or as anything else. I never plan for the future, but wander into it with a smile on my face, hope in my heart, and the hair up on the nape of my neck.

If spurning a gift weren't ungrateful, I would at once return my supernatural sight. I would be content to spend my days whipping up omelets that make you groan with pleasure and pancakes so fluffy that the slightest breeze might float them off your plate.

Every talent is unearned, however, and with it comes a solemn obligation to use it as fully and wisely as possible. If I didn't believe in the miraculous nature of talent and in the sacred duty of the recipient, I would have gone mad by now.

Be assured that I am *not* insane, neither as a serial killer is insane nor in the sense that a man is insane who wears a colander as a hat to prevent the CIA from controlling his mind. I dislike hats of any kind, though I have nothing against colanders properly used.

I *have* killed more than once, but always in self-defense or to protect the innocent. Such killing cannot be called murder. If you think that it is murder, you've led a sheltered life, and I envy you.

A suspicion of homicide motivated me to prowl Roseland by night. The woman on the horse often manifested in a pristine white nightgown—but on other occasions the garment was mottled with blood. Surely she was a victim of someone, haunting Roseland in search of justice.

Far to the east of the house, out of sight beyond a hush of live oaks, was a riding ring bristling with weeds. A half-collapsed ranch fence encircled it.

The stables, however, looked as if they had been built last week. Curiously, all the stalls were spotless; not one piece of straw or a single cobweb could be found, no dust, as though the place was thoroughly scrubbed on a regular basis. Judging by that tidiness, and by a smell as crisp and pure as that of a winter day after a snowfall, no horses had been kept there in decades; evidently, the woman in white had been dead a long time.

Roseland encompassed fifty-two acres in Montecito, a wealthy community adjacent to Santa Barbara, which itself was as far from being a shanty town as any Ritz-Carlton was far from being mistaken for the Bates Motel in *Psycho*.

The original house and other buildings were constructed in 1922 and '23 by a newspaper mogul, Constantine Cloyce, who was also the co-founder of one of the film industry's legendary studios. He had a mansion in Malibu, but Roseland was his special retreat, an elaborate man cave where he could engage in such masculine pursuits as horses, skeet shooting, small-game hunting, all-night poker sessions, and perhaps drunken head-butting contests.

Cloyce had also been an enthusiast of unusual—even bizarre—theories ranging from those of the famous medium and psychic Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky to those of the world-renowned physicist and inventor Nikola Tesla.

On an Internet search, I discovered that some believed Cloyce, here at Roseland, secretly financed research and development into such things as death rays and telephones that would allow you to talk to the dead. But then some people also believe that Social Security is solvent.

Being more familiar with the deceased than I might wish to be, I can tell you from personal experience that the spirits of the lingering dead don't talk. I don't know why.

Even when they have been brutally murdered and are desperate to see their assailants brought to justice, the dead are unable to convey essential information to me either by phone or face-to-face. Neither do they send text messages. Maybe that's because, given the opportunity, they would reveal something about death and the world beyond that we the living are not meant to know.

Anyway, the dead can be even more frustrating to deal with than are many of the living, which is astonishing when you consider that it's the living who run the Department of Motor Vehicles.

From the edge of the eucalyptus grove, I gazed up the long easy slope toward the main house, where Constantine Cloyce had died in his sleep in 1948, at the age of eighty. On the barrel-tile roof, patches of phosphorescent lichen glowed in the moonlight.

Also in 1948, the sole heir to an immense South American mining fortune bought Roseland completely furnished when he was just thirty and sold it, furnished, forty years later. He was reclusive, and no one seems to have known much about him.

At the moment, only a few second-floor windows were warmed by light. They marked the bedroom suite of Noah Wolflaw, who had made his considerable fortune as the founder and manager of a hedge fund, whatever that might be. I'm reasonably sure that it had something to do with Wall Street and nothing whatsoever to do with boxwood garden hedges.

Now retired at the age of fifty, Mr. Wolflaw claimed to have sustained an injury to the sleep center in his brain. He said that he hadn't slept a wink in the previous nine years.

I didn't know whether this extreme insomnia was the truth or a lie, or proof of some delusional condition.

He had bought the residence from the reclusive mining heir. He restored and expanded the house, which was of the Addison Mizner school of architecture, an eclectic mix of Spanish, Moorish, Gothic, Greek, Roman, and Renaissance influences. Broad, balustraded terraces of limestone stepped down to lawns and gardens.

In this hour before dawn, as I crossed the manicured grass toward the main house, the coyotes high in the hills no longer howled because they had gorged themselves on wild rabbits and slunk away to sleep. After hours of singing, the frogs had exhausted their voices, and the crickets had been devoured by the frogs. A peaceful though temporary hush shrouded this fallen world.

My intention was to relax on a lounge chair on the south terrace until lights appeared in the kitchen. The chef, Mr. Shilshom, always began his workday before dawn.

I started each morning with the chef not solely because he made fabulous breakfast pastries, but also because I suspected that he might let slip some clue to the hidden truth of Roseland. He fended off my curiosity by pretending to be the culinary world's equivalent of an absentminded professor, but the effort of maintaining that pretense seemed likely to trip him up sooner or later.

As a guest, I was welcome throughout the ground floor of the house: the kitchen, the day room, the library, the billiards room, and elsewhere. Mr. Wolflaw and his live-in staff were intent upon presenting themselves as ordinary

people with nothing to hide and Roseland as a charming haven with no secrets.

I knew otherwise because of my special talent, my intuition, and my excellent crap detector.

When I say that Roseland was an evil place, that doesn't mean I assumed everyone there—or even just one of them—was also evil. They were an entertainingly eccentric crew; but eccentricity most often equates with virtue or at least with an absence of profoundly evil intention.

The devil and all his demons are dull and predictable because of their single-minded rebellion against truth. Crime itself—as opposed to the solving of it—is boring to the complex mind, though endlessly fascinating to the simple-minded. One film about Hannibal Lecter is riveting, but a second is inevitably stupefying. We love a series hero, but a series villain quickly becomes silly as he strives so obviously to shock us. Virtue is imaginative, evil repetitive.

They were keeping secrets at Roseland. The reasons for keeping secrets are many, however, and only a fraction are malevolent.

As I settled on the patio lounge chair to wait for Mr. Shilshom to switch on the kitchen lights, the night took an intriguing turn. I do not say an *unexpected* turn, because I've learned to expect just about anything.

South from this terrace, a wide arc of stairs rose to a circular fountain flanked by six-foot Italian Renaissance urns. Beyond the fountain, another arc of stairs led to a slope of grass bracketed by hedges that were flanked by gently stepped cascades of water, which were bordered by tall cypresses. Everything led up a hundred yards to another terrace at the top of the hill, on which stood a highly

ornamented, windowless limestone mausoleum forty feet on a side.

The mausoleum dated to 1922, a time when the law did not yet forbid burial on residential property. No moldering corpses inhabited this grandiose tomb. Urns filled with ashes were kept in wall niches. Interred there were Constantine Cloyce, his wife, Madra, and their only child, Timothy, who died before his ninth birthday.

Suddenly the mausoleum began to glow, as if the structure were entirely glass, an immense oil lamp throbbing with golden light. The phoenix palms backdropping the building reflected this radiance, their fronds pluming like the feathery tails of certain fireworks.

A volley of crows exploded out of the palm trees, too startled to shriek, the beaten air cracking off their wings. They burrowed into the dark sky.

Alarmed, I got to my feet, as I always do when a building begins to glow inexplicably.

I didn't recall ascending the first arc of stairs or circling the fountain, or climbing the second sweep of stairs. As if I'd been briefly spellbound, I found myself on the long slope of grass, halfway to the mausoleum.

I had previously visited that tomb. I knew it to be as solid as a munitions bunker.

Now it looked like a blown-glass aviary in which lived flocks of luminous fairies.

Although no noise accompanied that eerie light, what seemed to be pressure waves broke across me, through me, as if I were having an attack of synesthesia, *feeling* the sound of silence.

These concussions were the bewitching agent that had spelled me off the lounge chair, up the stairs, onto the grass.

They seemed to swirl through me, a pulsing vortex pulling me into a kind of trance. As I discovered that I was on the move once more, walking uphill, I resisted the compulsion to approach the mausoleum—and was able to deny the power that drew me forward. I halted and held my ground.

Yet as the pressure waves washed through me, they flooded me with a yearning for something that I could not name, for some great prize that would be mine if only I went to the mausoleum while the strange light shone through its translucent walls. As I continued to resist, the attracting force diminished and the luminosity began gradually to fade.

Close at my back, a man spoke in a deep voice, with an accent that I could not identify: “I have seen you—”

Startled, I turned toward him—but no one stood on the grassy slope between me and the burbling fountain.

Behind me, somewhat softer than before, as intimate as if the mouth that formed the words were inches from my left ear, the man continued: “—where you have not yet been.”

Turning again, I saw that I was still alone.

As the glow faded from the mausoleum at the crest of the hill, the voice subsided to a whisper: “I depend on you.”

Each word was softer than the one before it. Silence returned when the golden light retreated into the limestone walls of the tomb.

I have seen you where you have not yet been. I depend on you.

Whoever had spoken was not a ghost. I see the lingering dead, but this man remained invisible. Besides, the dead don't talk.

Occasionally, the deceased try to communicate through the art of mime, which can be frustrating. Like any mentally healthy citizen, I am overcome by the urge to strangle a

mime when I happen upon one in full performance, but a mime who's already dead is unmoved by that threat.

Turning in a full circle, in seeming solitude, I nevertheless said, "Hello?"

The lone voice that answered was a cricket that had escaped the predatory frogs.

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