

DREG

by
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This novel is dedicated to the people whose love, encouragement and faith have kept me going, despite the 11th hour disappointments, detours and the loneliest profession known to man. This is for my grandmother, Kitty, who indulged a little daydreamer and taught me life's most important lessons; she is the most incredible person I know, and I still aspire to be half the person she is; my wife, Tracey, who truly must love me, for the grief I cause her. She is the person most responsible for this. She has sacrificed on numerous levels to see my dreams come true, and her kindness is still an inspiration to me; Glenn Chadbourne, whose interest and hard work made *DREG* known before this long journey had reached its end; my best friend Daniel Burr, who has been there every step of the way; for Joe Monks, who gave me my start and whose courage and tenacity still inspires me; my cohort in crime Stew Noack, who has been an invaluable ally; David B. Silva, the man I respect most in the horror genre, who took the time to encourage and nurture me in my formative years as a writer (as he has done for many); and most especially to Wally and Stacey Bender, who championed this cause long before anyone else. You all have my eternal gratitude and love.

TMW

PROLOGUE

*Deep in the Pointe Au Chien, Louisiana
Summer, 1940*

The father shoved the rifle into his son's hands. "Take it, boy. Time you learned."

The boy looked at the weapon. Sunlight peeked through the dense foliage of the forest and glinted off of the blue barrel of the shotgun. The father scratched his moss-like beard, peering into the forest. "Tracks go strai' ahead," the father said, pointing to the fresh prints in the mud that encroached the swamp, which was surrounded by a thick growth of trees.

"It's getting dark. We gotta get him. If'n we don't, he'll get away or the gators will have him. C'mon, boy." The father began to work his way into the forest, thin branches scraping his sweat-saturated tank top. He looked back at his son. The boy, barely twelve, stood rooted to his spot, staring blankly at the weapon in his small hands. Fear was in his eyes and stomach, twisting his insides around the yeast bread and honey he had for breakfast. The father stomped back to the boy and pulled the shotgun away. He smacked the boy on the back of the head. "You got to hunt like Le Louf, boy. You got to learn to kill. Curs and jackals pick bones. Wolves have their fill o' meat. You want to end up a jackal, boy? Begging for scraps with a tail 'tween your legs?"

"No sur," the boy croaked, his throat dry.

"You gotta hunt to survive, lessen you want to end up a purty boy, kissin' uptown men in Orleans?" The boy shook his head, reaching for the weapon. The father let him have it. "Then take this and do your papa proud. Be the wolf. C'mon, boy. The sun be sinkin' fast."

The boy followed his father into the brush. Thorns and branches worked at the boy's tender flesh. The ground was becoming softer with every step; swamp water filled their footprints as soon as they made them. The boy pressed on, dogging his father's steps, as the swamp became visible. The

father paused, pressing a finger to his cracked lips. He leaned close to the boy. His reeking breath, sour with dental decay and at the same time sweet with corn squeezings, splashed the boy's face as he whispered: "Stay here, yeh-huh? I's gonna flush him out. Aim for the head. We jes' gonna cut it off and feed it to the sows, anyhow. Don't let me down, boy." The father slinked away to the left. The brush rattled for a second, then became still as the boy's father moved through the forest like a ghost.

The boy stood on the bank, his hands trembling. The piece of iron in his grip felt like a steel girder. The boy, Dreg was his name, was a good shot. Dreg could pop melons at a distance of thirty yards or better. But melons did not run, breathe or bleed. A melon did not look you in the eye, panic stricken, or piss and shudder after you shot it. Dreg's stomach churned into a tighter knot.

The oppressive humidity of the swamp dampened his clothes. He wanted to peel off his shirt, but feared laying the gun down. The sweat that ran from his pores was contaminated by the fear curled and festering in his belly. The sweat stung his eyes and tickled his bald armpits.

Something brown and sleek dove off of a nearby stump into the swamp, disappearing under the murky water. Dreg caught the action from the corner of his eye and leveled the shotgun at the water. His heart pounded and his bladder suddenly felt full. Dreg cursed in French; though he knew *Le Louf*, lord above, did not take kindly to such, because now he would have to lay the weapon down to relieve himself. He was not about to risk shooting off his business while juggling the shotgun from hand to hand as he undid his fly.

He was about to lean the weapon against a tree when the treetops shook as birds pounded their wings and screeched. The whole forest came alive with activity and animal screams. Dreg's stomach was so sour that he considered sticking a finger down his throat to let the bile free.

"He comin' your way, boy!" Dreg's father shouted from the distance. "Be ready, boy! Here he comes!"

Dreg really had to piss. His stomach felt as if it were going in two directions, up his throat and into his bowels. Despite his discomfort, the boy held the weapon poised, his throat now so dry that he couldn't swallow. His flat, sunburned belly felt as if it were devouring itself.

"Be ready, Dreg! Be ready, boy!" his father advised from the bush.

Dreg tensed as he heard branches crack and soil slosh. Suddenly, the prey sprang from the bush. The prey froze, staring with wild eyes at Dreg. It

jerked and began to bolt. Dreg pulled the trigger, driving the butt of the shotgun into his shoulder.

The prey's throat exploded. Blood flowed from a blackened, jagged jugular vein down its chest. The prey gurgled as vomit poured through the hole in its throat and it fell to the mud, thrashing the swamp water with its legs. Warm urine ran freely down Dreg's legs. He finally set the weapon down, turned and retched into the swamp. Very little came from his stomach. Though empty, Dreg still felt sick.

The father appeared from the brush and howled his approval.

"You done me good, Dreg. You done me real proud." The father surveyed the prize, grunting and nodding at the neck wound.

"Good boy. Sow food anyhow, like I said." The father took a ball of thick twine from a pouch on his belt. He wrapped it around the prey's ankles, found a sturdy limb overhead and hoisted the meat off of the ground, tying the twine off around the tree's trunks.

"C'mere, boy," the father said, grinning with black teeth. Dreg went to his father, staring intensely at his kill. It was a man in his early twenties.

He was wearing a camouflage T-shirt and corduroy pants. He was most likely a city drifter who had decided to sightsee through the untamed parts. He had probably gotten lost, driving deeper into the swamp forest than any sane city man ever would.

Dreg absently stroked the man's sticky, brown hair. The eyes of the man, dead and glassy, were fixed on him. Dreg closed them, shuddering at the sensation of already cold flesh.

"You a wolf now, boy," the father said, dabbing with his fingers at the dead man's wound. The father spread hardening blood on the boy's cheek. "I's proud, son," he said, and then noticed that Dreg had pissed his pants.

The father, glowing with pride, suddenly went benign. He stroked Dreg's head gently.

"You get used to it. I shit my britches first time I killed. It hard at first, but you brave wolf."

The father took a step back from his son.

"Show me the paw you hunt with," he said expectantly. Dreg held up his left hand, smooth palm facing his father. The hand shook.

Father gripped Dreg's hand with his own callused left hand. "You a traiteur, good and proper, boy. You know the secrets. You carry on wi' the truth, pass it to yo' cubs who have the sign of magic. Got it, boy?"

"Yes sur," Dreg replied, feeling some pride at being the only cub with the

sign of left-handedness. It made him special. It made Father look upon him more favorably than his brothers or sisters. It created a bond between he and Father that only one per new generation fully embraced and comprehended. He was the chosen one. He would carry the truth to his special cub one day.

Father embraced Dreg, holding him up toward the darkening sky. The falling sun's final illumination caught the boy's fair hair and beaming face, forcing him to shut his eyes.

"Le Louf!" father shouted above his son. "Hunter of hunters! Lord above! Look upon this cub! This traiteur! He has taken prey this day! Gaze upon yo' earthly cub! He does you proud, Le Louf!"

Father let Dreg back down, who was ecstatic with his father's praise. Father took a long knife from his boot sheath. "Now, boy, I teach you to gut. Maybe you get sick, but I gotta learn you. So watch now, hear?"

"Yes sur."

Father cut away the prey's clothing. "We eat like uptown folk tonight," he grinned, cutting into the dead man's belly.

CHAPTER 1

Texas highway patrolman Ross Carson cruised Highway 45, fifteen minutes north of Madisonville, Texas. He took a sip of cold coffee, grimaced and came to the conclusion that slow, uneventful nights were worse than crime sprees. Ross' eyes ached and his ass was numb. Without outside activity to occupy his mind, his thoughts drifted back to the conversation he had with his wife, Florence, that morning.

She had slapped all of her worn, creased cards on the table. Flo wanted Ross to leave the force. He had known for months that something was troubling her. Though he was relieved that it was finally out in the open, he was also frustrated by her unreasonable request. How could he quit the force? Sure, it could get pretty hairy sometimes. The bullet Ross had taken in the shoulder in '75 had nearly ruined his marriage.

He had pulled over a Corvette with gray primer and a rust eaten bumper for doing 120 mph. Before he made it to the car window, a shot rang out, pain exploded in his left shoulder, and dust and gravel showered his face as the Corvette took off. It had scared Flo out of her wits. It had pissed Ross off. He cruised 45 looking for the Corvette months after recuperating. Ross had to admit that he was probably the worst kind of cop. He enjoyed his job. The dangerous aspect of wearing the badge thrilled him like a penny-whore on payday. The threat of death gave him a rush and teased a small part of him, deep inside, that welcomed oblivion. Hell, his life sucked. He paid alimony to an ex-wife and child support for two other children. He and Flo's daughter, Becky, had been born with a heart murmur that had kept her in and out of the hospital for ten of the girl's twelve years. So let the Corvette come back and take me out, he thought. An even better fantasy was going out and taking the cop shooter with him.

And, if it was any consolation to nagging but priceless Flo, his life insurance policy would be a better provider than his twelve years on the force had been. It would give Becky the medical attention she needed. It

would put braces on Becky's crooked teeth. It would pay off the mortgage. It would take Flo out of the greasy, Midway café, clearing her complexion and enrolling her in the beauty school that seven dollars in tips a night could never pay for.

Hell of a note. Better dead than poor.

Ross finished off the coffee, almost gagging on it. Maybe he would make a coffee run; go on up to Midway, sneak up to Flo and pat her on the ass to see if she thought he was someone else. He turned on the radio but the damned reception was bad and he had forgotten to bring his Hank Williams Jr. cassettes. He turned the sputtering static off and started humming (his singing voice was so bad that even he couldn't stand it).

The freeway was deserted; only the dark road, which loomed liked oblivion's tongue, and the heavy forest on both sides of the highway kept him company. Ross drove a good five minutes before he passed an indication of civilization, a Texaco station that was closed and darkened. Fine with him. Let the wildlife thrive. Didn't need them all-night pizza parlors and peep show places in the Baptist sticks. Let New York and California cater to such.

Ross glanced at the clock on the dash. It was 3:00 a.m. Two more hours until his shift was over. He yawned and realized he would not make it without another thermos of java. He had to watch it, though. Pace yourself, son. Drink just enough to keep your eyes open and not enough to keep you up when you get home. Sleep for Ross was becoming a rare commodity, surpassed only by sex (Flo was just as haggard as Ross when they bedded down in the morning).

He could not remember the last time he had felt Flo's shapely legs around his flabby hips; heard her soft, subdued moan of pleasure (Becky's room was next to theirs and the walls were all but transparent); tasted her spearmint flavored mouth (Ross feared Flo was addicted to breath mints); smelled the residue of strawberry shampoo on her short, auburn hair.

He made a mental note to send Becky to Houston for a weekend visit to Flo's mother so he could surprise the hell out of Flo.

Ross tugged at the awkward position of a schoolboy erection and smiled to himself.

"Won't do at all," he said, snickering. "Having a hard-on on the job."

Maybe he would twist Flo's arm a bit by kissing her where she liked it most when he got home that morning.

Ross looked down the dark stretch of Highway 45.

Just like oblivion's tongue, he thought again, leading to the mouth of nowhere. That was pretty creative, he mused, and considered even jotting it down. Now, it appeared he was closing in on that mouth. In the distance, wavering at the infinite edge of oblivion's maw, a dark figure was walking between the lanes of Highway 45.

Ross switched on the patrol car lights, but saw no reason to hit the siren. He was confused by the wanderer. Houses in these parts were deep beyond the freeway and miles apart from each other. If the guy's car broke down, why hadn't Ross passed it? The guy was heading in the other direction. Ross grumbled at this slight detour from his coffee run, but decided to be pleasant and see if he could help out.

As Ross drew closer, the man stepped to the shoulder of the road, as if to allow Ross to continue on his way. Ross pulled the police car to the shoulder and put it in park. He stepped out of the car, expecting one of two things: Either the man had some motor trouble and would be grateful to see the officer, or he would be on an innocent stroll (though that still seemed unlikely to Ross) and he would assure the officer he was fine. What Ross got was indifference. The man shuffled on, ignoring the highway patrolman. By the light of the car headlights, Ross could see the back of the man.

He was tall and lanky. He wore dirty gray pants and an olive, short sleeve shirt. The man had shoulder length, silver hair and he was carrying a duffle bag over his shoulder. "Hey, pal," Ross called out, trying to close the distance between him and the man. Christ! The old guy was fast. "Hold up! I want to talk to you!"

Ross had to get the old man off of the highway, what with the Keepsake Killer once again stalking 45. Didn't the crazy old codger read the papers? A recent series of gruesome deaths strung out on the highway like road kill would make even the stupidest fella stay in a broken-down car with his hazards running.

The man continued at his pace. Was he stone deaf? No, Ross could sense an air of arrogance in the man's walk.

"I said hold up, old-timer. *Now!*" Respect was a two-way street to Ross. He gave it and expected it. People who had a problem with authority ran into a two hundred and seventy pound wall when they fucked with Ross Carson. Old man or not, this guy was pissing off Ross, and that wasn't a very healthy thing to do. You only had to ask fifty or so inmates at the Huntsville State pen about Ross in a bad mood and they would tell you: Keep your mouth shut unless you are saying yes sir or no sir.

The man continued to walk. "I said FREEZE!" Ross shouted.

The old man stopped. He slung the duffle bag to the ground. Ross heard something wet and heavy within the bag thud against the road. The old man turned and faced Ross. Ross had seen many bad things in his tenure with the highway department. Mangled bodies from car wrecks. Roadside slayings so hideous that he lost his three daily meals at the sight. And he was sure that everything ugly he had ever seen in his entire life was in preparation for this particular night.

Ross nearly gasped at the sight of the old man's face. The eyes were black and beady, belonging more to a snake than a human being. His nose was huge and pitted. But his mouth, that was the man's most horrible feature. It was large, too large. The lips were grey and the teeth were pointed, like canines. The man looked like Uncle Creepy from the old Warren horror magazine (a childhood pastime of Ross' consigned to a waste bin by his fretting mother).

Ross' hand wanted his revolver, and he chastised himself. *It's just an old man, spooky or not.*

The old man's disgust and impatience was very evident in his stance and narrowing eyebrows, which were silver and thick. "What you be wantin'?" the old man snarled.

Ross recognized the man's accent. He was Cajun. The man's tone was gruff and his words were forced. English was a second language to the man. Cajun French was most likely his native tongue.

"I'm just wondering what someone is doing out here this time of night. Forty-five can be a dangerous place, fella. Haven't you heard about the Keepsake Killer? We was hoping we'd seen the last of him two years ago. Bastard makes Henry Lee Lucas look like a pussy so you better come along with me. Do you live around here?"

"No, jes' let me be." The old man put his hands on his hips contemptuously. "Why you be givin' me grief? Dreg be big boy, yeh-heh? Can take care of hisself. Been on the road since you suckin' mama's tit. So leave Dreg be, cowboy-man."

Ross wore a cowboy hat. It wasn't regulation; more of a John Wayne fetish. Ross eyed the old man's duffle bag, finding what could be considered a legitimate reason for stopping him.

"What's in the bag?" Ross asked, pulling his billy club from its belt loop and caressing it for effect. It was time this old geezer got a lesson in cooperation.

“It be none of your know-how,” the old man snapped, unfazed.

“Back away from the bag. Now, when someone acts like an asshole, we call that suspicious behavior. So you’re the most suspicious son of a bitch I’ve ever met. I’m going to see what you’re haulin’ around at this time of night. Then we are going to get in my nice, safe car and figure out what to do with you from there.”

The old man grinned. It was a vulture’s grin, a vulture that had just spotted a dying thing and knew supper was soon to come. “You want a look-see, cowboy-man? Help yerself.”

The guy was really getting to Ross. He shook it off and insisted to himself that this wicked-looking old fart was only guilty of being antisocial and Ross was trying to humble the ugly fucker. He didn’t like having smoke blown up his ass, especially by dirty old vagabonds. He would look in the bag, find some collected squalor that this guy had picked up off the road for dinner and then he would drop him off at a rest area where the guy could get some sleep without worrying about wild animals or speeding diesels. The rest areas were also too well lit for the Keepsake Killer to prey, though a sick part of Ross enjoyed the prospect of this old man running into the psycho as an ultimate I-told-you-so. But, he was sworn to serve and protect. Even old Cajun assholes.

Ross tilted the bag toward the headlights of his patrol car, where he could get a good look into the bag. The light didn’t really help much; he was too far away from his car. He opened the bag further and reached inside. He gripped something cold, and slick. He pulled the prize out, holding it toward the light. “Holy Jesus!” Ross exclaimed, dropping the severed hand.

It’shimgoddammitthekeepsakekillerholysshitmotherfucker, Ross thought, his actions as quick as his chaotic thoughts. He twisted toward the old man, Ross’ football scarred knees protesting as he tried to stand.

The old man tore the billy club from Ross’ grip. Ross reached with his gore covered hand for his revolver. Ross was quick. The old man was quicker. Ross had the piece halfway out of its holster when the old man brought the club across Ross’ temple. The nine millimeter flew out of Ross’ hand, skipping across the pavement.

Ross sucked in wind, a white light flashed in his brain and a metallic taste crept into his mouth. He opened his eyes, trying to catch his snap. The world was fuzzy, like an empty television station. Focus finally came, and Ross saw the old man standing over him, the ravenous grin threatening to spread past his ears.

Ross knew pain, terror and shock. There was no time for his dazed mind to comprehend anything else. The old man gripped his head, bent forward, and bit Ross' left ear off. Ross screamed and his mind twisted with new agony, a new distraction to keep his brain from reasoning. He was at this man's mercy. He was the humble one, bent over and cradling his head. The old man chewed the ear up and swallowed it, grinning with blood soaked teeth.

"I is the wolf, and you is the sheep, cowboy-man!" the old man cackled. He kicked Ross in the ribs.

Ross sprawled on his back, his existence now one of pain and fear. The old man brought the club down on Ross' face. He brought it down again, splintering Ross' nose. He brought it down again. And again, leaving Ross' body beyond recognition.

And life.

CHAPTER 2

The first thing that struck Lucas Glover was the odor. The summer weather was sweltering. Standing at the threshold of the crime scene, Luke's nostrils were burnt by the rancid scent of stale death. The body had been carted off long ago, but the odor stayed; an overpowering human musk that mingled with feces, urine and decay. He stepped into the apartment, eluding the sun and almost gagging on the stench, which was much stronger once he entered.

Detective William Harlson, who flanked Luke, gripped the psychic's shoulder. "You okay, sport?"

"Fine," Luke insisted, pretending to wipe sweat from his face with a handkerchief. *What the hell am I doing here?* Luke wondered. He was no stranger to carnage. He had used his mind's eye to locate dozens of decaying murder victims, usually lying in shallow graves or totally exposed to the elements in thick, dense forests. And the majority of those victims were children. But his sixth sense made him only spectator. Here all of his senses were assailed and he didn't like it at all. He was a psychic hound for missing persons. Now he was being used to catch the Jack The Ripper of his generation; a sick, elusive gent dubbed the Keepsake Killer who was setting mass murder records in three states.

Luke shoved his handkerchief in his breast pocket and tried his best to adopt a Clint Eastwood grimace.

Harlson, the grizzled veteran cop with a face so dark and weathered that it resembled aged leather, wasn't fooled. "Takes some getting used to, doesn't it?" Harlson spoke, not particularly proud of the fact that he was used to scenes such as this. "I know your rep for spotting missing kids and lost puppies, but have you ever been to a murder site before?"

"No," Luke replied, after taking a shallow breath. "Finding murder victims in their own apartments takes something away from psychic work."

Harlson chuckled and slapped Luke's back. "Well, I'm sure you'll discover that this ain't parlor tricks. Welcome to HPD homicide. The pay ain't great,

but you get all the vomit bags you can carry.”

The contempt in the officer’s voice was very sharp and clear.

“Whatever you say,” Luke muttered, trying to shake off Harlson and plug himself in, as he called it. He shut his eyes and rubbed his temples. His head ached already, and he wasn’t even attempting any sort of reception yet. Damn migraines. He had suffered them since his early twenties and they were getting worse. *Much worse.*

“You alright?” asked Harlson.

“Be quiet, please,” Luke said politely.

Harlson complied, albeit with great reservations. He did not believe this psychic crock for one minute. If the heavy brass were not backing this golden boy seer, Harlson would find a way to put this bastard’s prick in a vice.

Luke could sense Harlson’s skepticism, musing that a sledgehammer to the head would have been more subtle and less painful than the pain swelling at the base of his skull and encroaching on his brain, despite the prescribed painkiller that was circulating in his system.

His hide was tough, but a small part of him wished for Harlson’s comprehension. He could grip the officer, force a vision and try to reveal a secret that only the officer knew, but he loathed such an act. He had been grilled before by the best charlatan busters around and he would not be reduced to that level by a flatfoot. *Fuck him if he didn’t believe.* Luke knew otherwise, to his deep regret. But, no. No time for memories, which inevitably lead to his stepping in messes of angst. He had an hour’s drive back home for that shit.

“How many does this make?” Luke asked, hoping an update would help stimulate his psychic antennae, or third eye, or whatever the hell it was that granted him his abilities.

“Seven, this year,” Harlson replied, “Eight, if you include Ross Carson, the highway patrolman. That’s what we suspect at this point. The officer is missing, squad car and all.”

“Were all of the murders in this area?” Luke inquired further, having only caught bits and pieces of the Keepsake Killer’s recent rash on the evening news.

“Weren’t you already briefed on this?”

“No, detective. That’s why you’re here,” Luke said, marveling at the nerve a gun and badge could buy a man.

Harlson grunted. “Five of the murders took place in this area. Two bodies, or what was left of them, were found on the shoulder of forty-five past

Huntsville. Their I.D. was lifted, so we've got missing persons working on their dental records. Their vehicle was taken, so we can't find out who owned the car they were driving through motor vehicles."

"Why do you think the killer has preyed mostly on the people in this complex?"

"It's a government project, sport. Easy pickings. So much shit goes down here that it's impossible to distinguish murder from a domestic squabble. Most of the tenants are sort of shy of us blue boys. They have a tendency to go blind, dumb and deaf quicker than Helen Keller when we question them."

"Do you think the killer might be staying here? Or near here?"

Harlson shrugged. "Could be, though I doubt it. Our boy's a real wanderer. This clown makes your normal serial look like a manicurist. You know, most of your serials want to be caught. That's usually the only way we catch them. Some subconscious slip. They leave a string of random clues like the pieces of a puzzle for us to put together. Not this guy. Oh, sure. We've found prints, skin tissue and strands of hair, but without priors, the son of a bitch doesn't exist to us. He may as well be invisible."

Harlson motioned to the dry blood that had bathed the hallway rug, ending a trail of gore that began from the back bedroom. "Messy bastard. A straight vivisectionist. No sexual tampering or evidence of cult affiliation. He just likes to cut parts off of people and take them with him. He also takes their driver's licenses and a lock of hair. That's why the press calls him the 'Keepsake Killer', you know."

"Yes," Luke replied, staring at the blood and glad that his wife, Tammy, was a good hour's drive away in southwest Houston.

"Want to see the bedroom?" Harlson asked.

"Not really. But I guess I have to. Lead on."

They walked down the hallway, following the trail of hardened blood to the bedroom. Harlson was unfazed; twenty years on the force did that to a guy. Luke tried to find the tingle in his stomach and squash it. He also felt more than a little lightheaded. He would not be of much use if he could not master his emotional reaction. Yes, it was horrible. Yes, he would have liked to have fled the apartment. If he did though, this maniac the press was labeling the "Keepsake Killer," much to the annoyance of the local and federal authorities, would continue his bloody orgy.

A very good motivation for Luke to continue was the thought of Tammy falling prey to this psycho. It was very unlikely, since they lived such a distance from the murder sites. Still, it proved effective. Luke inhaled deeply and

stepped into the bedroom, hot on the heels of Harlson.

The first thing that Luke noticed, besides the blood that seemed to cover everything from the walls to the bed, was the corpse outline on the hard wooden floor. The white tape made the form of a head and torso. No arms. No legs.

Luke shot a look at Harlson.

The detective nodded, grimly. "And she was also gutted," he said, fishing a cigarette out of his shirt pocket.

Luke groaned and wrung his hands together, finally betraying his bravado. "This may take a while."

"I understand." Harlson recalled the first time he had witnessed death. It was not as spectacular as this, mind you. He was still a brash rookie for the Houston Police Department. One good cop who was going to save the world. One afternoon, he and his partner responded to an apparent suicide. It was standard procedure; have a look-see and make sure everything was on the up and up before the stiff was shipped to the medical examiner. The deceased turned out to be a twelve-year-old girl who was found sitting on the shitter with slit wrists. Harlson would never forget her glazed eyes, which had stayed open. Her flesh was so pale, devoid of blood, that she had looked like a part of the porcelain toilet she sat on. The most disturbing thing though, was that she had managed to extend both middle fingers on her stiffening hands. "*Fuck you, world,*" a dead twelve-year-old girl, who should have been going through the first stages of boy crazy and playing with dolls, had conveyed in that bathroom.

Death was not glamorous, for little girls or anyone else. People shit, pissed, came and drooled when they died. Death was as appealing as its name. Death sucked.

Harlson glanced over at Lucas, who was still visibly shaken by the bloody spectacle. "Can I get you anything?" he offered.

Yes, a brandy and tranquilizer, thank you very much.

"No, thanks. Tell me more about this one."

Harlson complied, warming up to Luke despite himself. It wasn't that Harlson didn't like Lucas Glover. The detective had a reputation for not liking anyone. Seeing Luke fight to keep from freaking out at the sight of this bloodbath, Harlson scraped up just enough sympathy to stay off of the guy's back. He still had problems with the psychic ability crap, however. "Her name was Tonya Lawley. She was a freelance photographer. A real ambulance chaser. You know, always looking for a good car wreck to snap.

She was twenty-seven, white and single. We're still looking for her next of kin."

"There's no pattern with the other victims, right?"

"Nope. Two of the victims were white, two were black, one was Hispanic, and then there was that Mr. and Mrs. Doe on the highway. They were Vietnamese."

"Well, that's refreshing." Luke said, sarcastically. "At least he's not a racist."

"Nope. We got us an equal opportunity psychopath," Harlson replied. "This guy breaks the standard mold."

"I don't mean to be rude, but could you give me a little while here to myself?"

"No problem," Harlson said, having a hankering for some hot coffee, anyway. "There's a diner up the road. I'll go there for an hour or so."

"That would be perfect."

"Can I bring you back something?"

"Coffee would hit the spot."

"You got it, sport."

Harlson left.

Once alone, Luke closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind, thinking of a calm stream. It was a bid at tranquility. Intense emotion hampered his abilities.

He had to lose his irrational side and emerge like Mr. Spock. He had always liked Mr. Spock. And Bones. Scotty. "*This is Captain Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise...*"

Luke sighed. He was rambling. *Stalling, you dickless wonder. You don't want to see this, do you?* He shook his head. *Well, you didn't want to see your father die, either, but you got a front row for that one. You're committed to this now, pal. You realized years ago that Daddy had been the catalyst and to shirk your duty would be spitting on his grave.*

I'm older now and not in the greatest shape. This shit is taxing. I could just say I didn't pick up any vibes and be on my merry fucking way, he thought. *Will you be able to live down not even trying when this guy strikes again?* He would not. He would feel like total shit. Luke went to Tonya's dresser and began touching her personal items. Hairbrush. Compact. Jewelry. Perfume bottles.

Nothing.

He opened her dresser drawers and thumbed articles of clothing.

Nothing.

Luke tried the bed. Pillow. Night table. Lamp. Digital clock. Knick-knack shelf. Knick-knacks.

Nada.

The closet was next. The result was the same.

Frustrated, Luke sat on the bed, cradling his aching head. He suffered from cluster migraines, the kind that drove lesser men to acts of Hari-Kari. He suspected they were a side effect caused by his gift (*or curse. Sometimes it was a curse*). He noticed that the migraines were becoming more and more painful. Using his power seemed to take a lot out of him these days. Dr. Spencer, Luke's neurologist, could find nothing wrong. No tumors. No bruises on the brain. No evident chemical imbalance.

"You just think too much," Dr. Spencer was fond of saying.

Luke had a dreadful feeling his problem went much deeper than job-related stress. But that was for consideration at another time. Right at the present, he had a sicko/Nazi/fiend from hell to catch.

He tried the bedroom door. A Norman Rockwell print had been knocked off of the wall. Luke tried it. He tried the spot on the floor where the body had been found and fell back as an excruciating pain shot up his spine. He rolled into a ball, his shoulders shivering. He had no vision, only pain; unbearable pain that lit his limbs and extremities on fire.

Fortunately for Luke's sanity, the pain quickly vanished, leaving him only the migraine to contend with.

"Son of a bitch," he whispered, catching his breath.

He collected himself, wondering if that was the pain Tonya had experienced or if his own condition was worsening. He would have to make an appointment with Dr. Spencer. He went back to the dresser and looked in the oval mirror that hung above it. He looked haggard. The dark half-moons under his eyes were permanent; part of the cause was iron deficiency (Tammy tried her best, but could not get Luke in one spot long enough to feed him a decent meal) and the other culprit was insomnia. He slept maybe three hours a night and cat-napped during the day. The dark hair on his head had yielded to premature gray when he was in his late twenties. Laugh lines, crow's feet and worry wrinkles littered his face, making the fortyish man look like he was scant years from collecting social security.

He took one of Tonya's tissues, not thinking she would mind, and mopped the sweat off of his face. Luke noticed a snapshot taped to the lower corner of the mirror. He assumed it was of Tonya. She sat cross-legged on the

bedroom floor, hugging a brown cocker spaniel. Such a pretty girl, he thought. She had curly brown hair and matching eyes. She was giving the camera a toothy smile. Her hair was slightly mussed and she wore a terrycloth robe. The picture had been taken one morning. But by who? Unless she had taken the picture of herself with a remote, Tonya had a beau. Luke would mention the photo to Harlson.

The dog in the picture, though. Where was the dog? Luke had not seen or heard the dog the whole time he was in the apartment. He whistled, and heard a scratch on the wooden floor from under the bed. He got on his hands and knees, being sure to avoid contact with the corpse outline that he treated with the same respect one would have for a live subway rail. He peered under the bed. Against the far wall, beneath the head post, he could see the dog. It was curled into a furry ball and shuddering violently.

“Hey, fella,” he said, in the same soothing voice he used with children. “It’s all right, baby. I won’t hurt you.”

The dog did not seem to believe him. Luke went to the side of the bed and gently pulled the dog out into view. He set the dog on the bed, stroking its head and back. The dog continued to shudder and whine pitifully.

“Easy now. You’re okay.”

The dog looked at Luke. Its right eye was useless; milky white and blind. Luke continued to pet the dog...and then a vision came to him.

The perspective was black and white.

He looked up at Tonya, who was standing in the bedroom, wearing a skimpy red nightgown. Her hair was rolled into big plastic curlers. She wore no make-up. Tonya looked down at him, concern on her face.

“Did you hear that, Buffer?” she whispered.

Part of the picture was cloudy, possibly because of Buffer’s blind eye, Luke wagered. This was the reason he could not see the face of the figure that caught Tonya from behind, claspng a hand over her mouth. Tonya’s eyes widened as the figure’s other arm pinned her flailing limbs to her side before she could struggle further. Tonya and her attacker lurched forward, causing Buffer/Luke to retreat slightly.

“Keep back, cow dog!” the attacker, his visage still distorted, said in a gravelly voice.

A leather boot lashed out and caught Buffer/Luke in the ribs. Luke felt his ribs crack and a hot rasp of pain escaped from his lungs, causing him to yelp and scurry under the bed as the screaming started and then came to an abrupt halt.

The vision dissipated, like a thin fog under the sun, and Luke found himself once again stroking Buffer's back. This was one for his memoirs, he noted, still feeling a tinge in his ribs. He had actually seen something through an animal.

His excitement over the phenomenon would have been greater had he seen more than a jean-clad leg and a leather boot. I'm about as useful as a football bat, he thought, clenching his fists.

He had to get his act together. Others would die, like Tonya, if his abilities did not return to par. *Come on, seer*, he thought. *Open your goddam eyes!*

Harlson returned, toting a paper cup. "Hey, where did the dog come from?"

"This is Buffer. He belonged to Tonya. He saw the murder and hid under the bed. Poor thing still seems to be in shock. I think his ribs are cracked. Needs to be taken to a vet."

"I'll have one of the rookies outside take care of that chore, then I'll let the lab boys take a gander at the pup. Did you get anything?" Harlson asked expectantly.

"Not much," Luke admitted, with a downcast look. "Not enough."

His head was pounding fit to burst.

CHAPTER 3

Luke pushed his roast beef on rye aside and opted for one of Harlson's cigarettes.

"I'm trying to quit these things," Luke said, as the detective lit the cigarette for him.

Luke and Harlson sat in a corner booth of Gil's Diner, some twenty minutes from the government project.

A lunch crowd, consisting mostly of truckers who were guzzling coffee while their rigs hummed in the parking lot, sat at the bar stools in front of the grill.

A plump waitress walked over to Luke and frowned at his nearly full plate.

"Anything wrong?" she asked pleasantly.

"No," Luke insisted, "I don't have much of an appetite is all."

The waitress nodded, then spirited the plate away.

"I'm sorry I didn't come up with anything," Luke said to Harlson, flicking ashes into a green, tin ashtray.

"Don't sweat it, sport," Harlson said, dropping a used napkin onto the remains of his Mexican omelet. "If it was that easy, I'm sure you would have broken the casinos in Vegas by now."

There it was again. Why did the force have to team Luke up with such a close minded person? Harlson was being more pleasant than earlier, but he was still wearing that ugly shade of doubt on his sleeve.

"So, what aren't you telling me?" Luke said, determined to prove to the good detective that there was more to this psychic crock than he thought.

"What are you talking about?" Harlson replied curiously.

"You're not playing straight with me and I don't appreciate that. There's something to this Keepsake Killer that you're covering up," Luke said.

It was a gut feeling, a pure hunch. He could feel Harlson's confusion, and he could feel something that went beyond the headlines and live at five reports.

“Okay,” Harlson said, nodding.

“I’ll come straight with you. How long have you known about this Keepsake Killer?”

“About five years,” Luke admitted. “He strikes for a couple of months, disappears, then reemerges again.”

“He’s been at it for nearly twenty years,” Harlson confessed. “He’s the biggest fucking embarrassment to law enforcement there is. He stops here then pops up in Louisiana. When he’s finished there, he pops up in Arkansas. He follows a pattern, like a migrating bird, but he’s not consistent. Sometimes Texas during the summer, Arkansas during the fall, Louisiana during the winter. Other times Louisiana during the summer, Texas during the fall, Arkansas during the winter. The news claims that he’s killed upwards of about thirty people in the last five years. He’s killed at least a hundred, twice that if you count the unsolved cases lazy detectives tack on him. We know his routines but he’s never around in one spot long enough to get a fix on him.”

“If he’s been around so long, how come the public hasn’t heard of him until the last five years?” Luke asked.

“The authorities were so damned determined for so long to keep their frigging Waterloo out of the papers that they changed the MO in a lot of cases. It was easy, especially with roadside slayings where the victim was so mutilated that positive I.D. was never made. They made the murders look like random cases and denied connections with other states. They had to. They couldn’t catch the bastard. Nowadays, though, the press will do anything to get a story. Some everyday Joe cop got a little help with his mortgage and now everyone knows. If the public finds out how far back this goes, the heat will never stop. That’s why you were brought in. The commissioner has only been at the job for a few months, and he wants to be the top dog son of a bitch responsible for catching the killer.”

“So, the authorities placed the public in danger for, oh, let’s say fifteen years by not letting them know there was a killer out there,” Luke said, putting Harlson on the receiving end of distaste.

“It wouldn’t have mattered if the public knew,” Harlson said, defensively. Harlson could criticize the force, but he would be damned if anyone else would. “The public knew of the murders, they just weren’t privy to the details or that it was suspected that there was one perpetrator. Times were different then. Only the tabloids pandered to sensationalism. Nobody reputable in the media wanted to give the public the gruesome details. The public would

have freaked. Remember, an animal paralyzed by fear is easier to slaughter. We might have done more harm than good by making a big deal out of it. What happens now when a weird case becomes public knowledge? You have copycat killers imitating the crimes and taking credit for previous murders. You have citizens arming themselves and blowing away anyone who approaches them on the street because they're afraid." "I still don't believe the public should be kept ignorant of things like that," Luke maintained, crushing out the cigarette. "They have a right to know if they are in danger."

"That's neither here nor there," Harlson said. "We weren't brought together to start a debate team, okay? Why don't we forget the past and concentrate on catching this bastard?"

Luke took a sip of coffee, staring thoughtfully at the table. "You said it was suspected that there was only one perpetrator. What evidence is that based on?"

"The way he cuts his victims up and tidbits of physical evidence. He's by no means a surgeon, but he's definitely a hunter. He also always takes the same body parts. We have another notion about him, one we've been able to keep under the table."

"What's that?"

"This goes no further than us, sport. He might be a cannibal."

"Christ," Luke muttered, setting his cup down. "Has he..."

"No," Harlson said, shaking his head. "We haven't found partially devoured victims or anything. It's just, the way he carves his victims up. He does it the same way a hunter would gut and clean a deer. I mean, my hide is tough, but just thinking about it gives me the fucking chills."

Harlson's shoulders shuddered slightly, as if for effect.

"Anything else you should tell me?" Luke asked.

"I think I've covered it all."

"I thought you said you were going to come clean with me, detective," Luke said, fuming. There was more. He could feel it.

"I did," Harlson protested.

"No, you didn't. There's something else. Something very important for me to know."

Harlson regarded Luke for a moment, with either respect or contempt on his face; Luke couldn't decide which. "I'm that transparent, huh?" Harlson half grinned.

"I can see the table behind you."

“We brought a psychic in ten years ago,” Harlson said, matter-of-factly. “Maybe you’ve heard of her, a little old lady by the name of Bertha Hobbs?”

“As a matter of fact, I have,” Luke said. “She died in a retirement home, oh, three years ago I guess. She was a pioneer in the psychic field. One of the first in these parts to come forward with her abilities.”

“Well,” Harlson continued, “Ms. Hobbs was contacted by the former police commissioner and asked to help with the case. What nobody thought about was that she had never helped the police with a case before. Sure, she helped people locate lost items and pets, but she had never seen a dead body before. And Christ, she was near seventy when she agreed to help. We took her to a crime scene, like I did with you today. The only difference is, she found something. And it made her lose her mind. She had a seizure and kept babbling over and over, ‘the wolf, the wolf’. I don’t know what she saw, but she was never the same again. The experience left her catatonic and she was put into the nursing home without as much as a peep to the press. That’s why we waited so long to bring in another psychic. One more used to police work and considerably younger than Ms. Hobbs.”

“Thanks for not telling me sooner,” Luke said, thinking that information could have helped him at least buffer himself. Old or not, Bertha Hobbs had been a powerful psychic. He was growing very angry at not being fully briefed.

“What are you worried about?” Harlson asked, shrugging. “She was an old, frail lady. You’re supposed to be the best there is. That’s what I’ve heard anyway.”

“So the fucking department has been priming me for this? I don’t like being fattened up like someone’s dinner, pal. And I also don’t like working for someone who doesn’t put his cards on the table and all but calls me a fraud,” Luke exclaimed, pain flaring in his head as his temper rose.

“Take it easy. I’m a realist, so sue me,” Harlson said. “I don’t buy into mystic shit that easily, but to tell you the truth, sport, I hope you’re on the up and up. You lead me to the Keepsake Killer and I’ll be your biggest advocate. I want to feed that fucker his balls. I didn’t want to scare you away from this case and if you ask anyone about me they’ll tell you I’m the biggest prick around. But I’m also a detective who’s never lost a collar. This shit was dumped in my lap and so were you. So let’s make the best of it or tell each other to fuck off and return the wedding presents.”

Luke calmed down, respecting the building pain in his head rather than Harlson. “I’ll help you, but don’t withhold information from me. It pisses me off.”

“Okay,” Harlson said. “I’m sorry. For better or worse, we’re partners and I should have been more up front with you.” Harlson looked at his watch. “Oh, Christ, I gotta get downtown. I’ll settle the bill. Meet me at the station around ten a.m.?”

“I’ll be there,” Luke agreed, standing.

“No hard feelings, huh?” Harlson said, extending his hand. “A dog shouldn’t shit were he has to eat. I’ll do you right from now on.”

“Okay,” Luke said, shaking Harlson’s hand. Upon contact with the detective, Luke was filled with dread. There was something wrong with Harlson. Terribly wrong. An air of impending doom surrounded the detective.

“Are you okay?” Harlson asked, a look of concern on his face.

“I’m fine,” Luke replied, shrugging off the feeling. It was the pain and the anger, Luke decided. Intense emotion triggered a false alarm every once in a while in his head. There was nothing wrong with Harlson that a personality transplant wouldn’t remedy.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Luke left the diner.

Well, I’ll be damned, Harlson thought. *The son of a bitch knows.*

CHAPTER 4

Luke passed the Good Year blimp station; home was only one hour away, if the traffic on Highway 45 stayed smooth.

He gazed at the green fields on the side of the highway, frowning at the patches of dead, yellow grass and hoping that this summer would not bring another drought.

He had the car air conditioner turned full blast, and had thrown his suit jacket in the back seat. He had lived in Texas most of his life, and was amazed that he was not yet used to the cruel summer heat. Either that hole in the ozone layer was expanding, or he was a real wimp.

Luke turned on his radio and tuned in a talk show on his a.m. dial. Some woman with a voice softer than silk was explaining the procedure necessary to sustain delicate African Violets, so Luke shut the radio off.

His migraine had settled down somewhat, making him only want to claw out one of his eyes. Though still in agony, he was grateful that the torture was a little more tolerable.

He cracked his window and took a breath of fresh air, inhaling the aroma of manure.

“I’m still too far from downtown,” he muttered, grimacing and rolling the window back up.

He fished the fresh cigarette pack from his shirt pocket and opened it.

He had promised Tammy that he would quit, considering how his health was diminishing so severely, but without his nerve soothers, he thought he would go mad.

Luke lit one up and took a drag that burned a good inch off of it. There goes fifteen minutes of my life, he thought, recalling the sermon his mother used to give him about smoking. She claimed that every cigarette a person smoked took fifteen minutes off of a person’s life.

If that were true, then Luke, in his twenty years of burning tobacco, had forfeited a good one hundred and twenty years of his life, he wagered.

Thinking of his mother brought back memories of growing up in Pleasant Storm, Texas to his mind. His father, Richard Glover, had owned a feed store in neighboring Mercury, Texas. Farmers from three counties used to buy their livestock from the Glover Rural Supply store.

It was Richard Glover's policy for getting whatever a person needed in a short amount of time that made him so popular with the locals.

Luke recalled the accident at the store that had brought about his psychic awareness.

It was a stupid thing, actually. The kind of thing grown men remember and wonder why their prime had to be spent in an adolescent stupor.

His father had hired a local seventeen-year-old by the name of Darryl Presley to help stock the inventory.

Presley was a stout youth, with a muscular body that he had built to counteract his height of five foot three.

Luke, who was also working at the store during the summer to save up for a car, found himself growing with resentment and jealousy at Darryl's presence.

His father showered Darryl with compliments on his work performance.

Lucas, who was tall, lanky and all thumbs, seemed to only draw harsh criticism from his father for being so clumsy.

One afternoon, Luke was sent into the back, seeing Darryl toss extremely heavy chicken feed bags onto an upper decking. The back of the shop resembled a barn, with a flight of stairs that led to the second floor where the stock was kept.

Darryl smiled, with teeth that needed braces, and told Luke that climbing up the stairs took too much time.

It was much easier to just toss the bags up there. They were only fifty, maybe seventy pounds, for Christ's sake. No challenge for a real man.

The distance to the loft was a mere three feet above Luke's head, so he immediately jerked up a bag, held it over his head with both hands, and tossed it straight up into the air.

It was like tossing a basketball into a hoop. Flip your wrists to give it a little vertical action, arch your heels to get the perfect arc, and two points.

Unfortunately for Luke, he had never played basketball with a concrete basketball.

The feed sack went two feet above his head, then came down, slipping between his hands and landing on his head. Luke had fallen like a puppet that had its strings cut.

He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

The doctor, who was sitting next to the bed at the hospital when he awoke two days later, told Luke that he was lucky his neck hadn't been broken.

Luke was released a day later, diagnosed with a mild concussion that he didn't think was very mild, considering the perpetual migraine he had suffered for a week afterward. Had he known at that age that the pain of a cluster migraine would one day rule his being, in retrospect Luke suspected he would have killed himself.

The power came to Luke a month later. He had just finished helping his mother, Glenda, wash the dinner dishes. Richard was at the store working on his books, so the dishes were a small task that night.

Luke went into the restroom and washed his hands in the basin. As the lukewarm water rinsed homemade lye soap suds off of his hands, Luke was suddenly riddled with an image of his father clutching his chest, falling from his desk chair and trying to get back on his feet.

Richard kept one hand clutched to his chest, and clawed at the air with his other, reaching for the phone. The vision ended with Richard slumping to the floor, his eyes closing and hand falling from his chest.

Luke was filled with dread. He didn't know what to make of the vision.

He hurriedly told his mother about the vivid image, and she quickly discounted it as an overactive imagination.

Luke was persistent enough to have Glenda call the shop. There was no answer. An hour passed before Glenda agreed to drive to the store. She was visibly growing with alarm.

Luke didn't know if it was the prospect of being a widow or having a freak for a son that scared her the most.

When they arrived at the store and went into Richard's office, they found him dead, the victim of a major heart attack.

The incident brought about a fear that rivaled Luke's grief. The bar of soap he had used the night of his father's death was the bar that his father used more than anyone else to clean the daily grime from his hand.

Another month passed before Glenda acknowledged Luke's ability. She told Lucas of the witch burnings in Salem, and warned him never to reveal his gift to anyone, especially in a southern state like Texas where Baptist preachers insisted on counties dry of liquor and promoted the burning of controversial books and the alienation of anyone who questioned the function of religion in modern society.

He kept the power to himself until his second year at North Texas State

University in Denton, Texas. It was at night in his dorm room, sitting with four friends and a free spirit named Kelly Bartlett who had graciously liberated him from his virginity the year before, that Luke spoke of the experience.

Three healthy tokes from a bong had loosened him up and his friends were already on the subject of psychic power, so he shared the accident at the store and the night of his father's death.

Lucas, who had lived a rigid existence under his mother's supervision, especially the two years that elapsed after his father died, found a certain, philosophical freedom among the fellow draft dodgers and frustrated artists who attended his school.

By the time he had received his degree in English, he had already decided to follow it up with a degree in parapsychology, a field that was just gaining recognition at a small college in Weatherford, Texas.

And the rest is history, he thought, crushing the remainder of his second cigarette out in the car ashtray. He had decided to devote the rest of his life using the ability that either God Almighty or a bag of chicken feed had granted him.

Now, though, Luke was really beginning to believe that his gift was taking some kind of toll on his body.

He used a portion of his brain that not many other people used on a regular basis. He had often wondered why it was said that people only use a small fraction of their brain. Maybe it was because the unused majority harnessed abilities that would wither their flesh in an instant.

One radical parapsychology professor of Luke's had a theory that the dormant brain power that lies untapped in man's brain contained a power that rivaled God's, if there was such a being. Luke didn't buy much into that theory, but he was glad that there was some sort of barrier that kept man away from the inner workings in the skull.

The thought of a man, any man, being able to utilize total brain power scared the hell out of Luke.

He utilized more than the average man, but not much more.

He lit another fifteen minutes off of his life and fussed with the radio some more. He managed to get a station that was playing elevator music. It would suffice. More nonthreatening melodies followed. Luke left the station on, deciding that the bastardizations of classic songs were soothing. He passed downtown Houston as the tall, glass buildings that huddled together like a football team down in score glinted under the sun.

Houston was a big town, but downtown was a speck compared to other

big cities. The majority of space in Houston was taken up by suburban communities and small businesses that opened one day and closed the next. These were the sights closer to downtown, anyway.

Luke realized that any out-of-towner who came to Houston looking for a modern day Dodge City would be quite shocked at the yuppie infestation of the once rustic city.

There were still farmers and cowboys, but the majority of them despised the cultural injection from immigrants and nonnatives who had moved to Houston for better job opportunities. The die-hard Texans lived in towns like Humble or Dickinson on the outskirts of Houston.

Luke was on Highway 610 now, fifteen minutes from his home in the suburb of River Oaks. He decided to hide the pack of cigarettes so Tammy would not be upset with him for breaking his vow to lead a nicotine free life.

He had hardly thought about the Keepsake Killer after lunch, and that was intentional. Tomorrow would be another day to search for the maniac.

This night would be better focused on the object of his desire for well over a decade: his wife, Tammy Glover.

CHAPTER 5

“What should I do?” Tammy Glover asked, wrapping the phone cord nervously around her free hand.

“I would suggest a very long vacation,” Dr. Spencer replied over the phone.

Tammy groaned and sagged against the small bar that separated the kitchen and dining room.

“I haven’t been able to convince Lucas that time off will help his condition, doctor. He thinks that working harder will help him with his block.”

“I don’t want to alarm you, Tammy, but some experts have a theory that people with supposed psychic abilities can tax themselves into an early grave. Using their talents can affect their physical state. Luke has been at this a very long time. I urge you to stress the importance of a break from his routine. At the rate he’s going, he’ll kill himself.”

“I don’t care if I have to sedate him and spirit him away in the middle of the night,” Tammy vowed, rapping the bar with her knuckles.

“That’s a girl,” Dr. Spencer replied. And though Tammy considered herself a feminist, she took no exception to the doctor’s use of the word ‘girl’. He was a kind old man who reminded Tammy of her long deceased father.

“If Luke will realize the importance of relaxation,” Dr. Spencer continued, “he might live to see Christmas.”

Spencer was only joking, but it still chilled Tammy to the bone. The doctor was not famous for tact.

“You’ve been a tremendous help, Dr. Spencer.”

“I wish it were more than speculation. Still, in all, a week or two at a nice cabin close to a river couldn’t hurt. Hell, I might pack up Mrs. Spencer and join you.”

“Sounds good to me. If I can’t get through to him this time, I’ll give you a call.”

“You do that. Give Luke my best.”

“Will do. So long, Dr. Spencer.”

Tammy put the receiver back in its cradle, her resolve and determination at their peak.

Lucas was running himself into the ground.

He had spent over ten years assisting the authorities with numerous investigations. His best-selling memoirs had afforded him a lasting financial security. There was no sense in Luke continuing with what Tammy regarded as his self-imposed civic duty. Let them get another seer. Luke had given his prime years to the force. He was tired now and he deserved a rest.

She was so vehement about Luke washing his hands of the strenuous police work that she considered threatening him with divorce if he did not listen to reason. She would not stand idly by while the man dug his own grave. Tammy looked at her watch and grimaced, realizing that Luke would be home soon.

She opened the oven door and checked the shepherd's pie she was preparing for dinner. She gave the dish another ten minutes, closed the oven door, then went to the refrigerator and pulled a few frozen vegetables out of the freezer.

She popped a packet of broccoli and cheese into the microwave oven and set the time.

Tammy walked over to the bar and sat down. She looked at the bar, noticing circulars that were already advertising back-to-school sales, although summer still had a month or so to go.

This time of year depressed Tammy. She and Luke were childless. They had tried for years to have a baby before going to the doctor and having tests run. Luke was sterile, a condition that Tammy sometimes suspected was brought about by Luke's abilities.

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, as her God-fearing yet nondenominational father would have put it.

Tammy swept her long blond hair out of her blue eyes, which were misting. She quickly wiped them dry, remembering that this day would be served addressing the issue of Luke's retirement from the force.

Tomorrow she would realize the few remaining childbearing years she had left and she would cry over it then. Tonight she had to save her husband's life.

Tammy looked down at her hips, which were a little too big for her taste. She rubbed her denim jeans, trying to gauge the exact width of her hips. She remembered a nutty old aunt who used to tug at Tammy's hips, when Tammy was only seventeen. Aunt Thelma used to tug at her niece's hips, smile and

say, “These hips were made for having babies. You’re going to have a mess of younguns, Sassy.”

Sassy was Tammy’s nickname. Her father had given it to her because of Tammy’s penchant for sarcasm.

Tammy shook her head, feeling so many things wearing her down. Not having children, missing her father, who had died of emphysema seven years ago, and dealing with a husband evidently bent on suicide.

She pledged her time to local charities to keep her mind busy and maintained her household, but she couldn’t stay busy enough to salve the depression which always returned.

Her grandmother was a manic depressive, and she was beginning to wonder if the condition was hereditary. She suspected that her next step was going to a therapist.

That idea in itself was depressing. She had an image of pouring her heart out to an analytical monster who would probably think, “What’s this bitch crying about?”

Yeah, she thought. Come on, Tammy. There are people starving in Ethiopia. There are people sleeping on city streets and you’re complaining. What right do you have? Maybe that’s why other countries hate America, Tammy thought. We seem to have everything and we’re the biggest bitches and moaners in the world.

Tammy bit her lower lip as she heard Luke’s car pull into the driveway. She had psyched herself up for the confrontation, but now felt her edge slipping. She did not want to verbally rip into Lucas. Lord knows she could be a bitch when she wanted to. She was called Sassy for a good reason. But she had to make him understand that he would never get well unless he stopped using his gifts.

Luke entered the kitchen through the garage door. At the sight of her haggard, sickly husband, Tammy felt the inner fire surge through her once more.

Luke smiled. It was a soft smile, a warm smile that he used to assure her that everything was fine and dandy. She had seen that smile many times before, first on the face of a shy, young college student and most recently on the face of a devoted husband. But now the smile reminded her of a pretty wind chime tacked to the door of a mausoleum.

“I talked to Dr. Spencer today,” Tammy said, not returning Luke’s smile.

“Really?” Luke said, his expression sagging back to the more familiar mask of lethargy and pain. He sighed, deciding that Tammy wouldn’t be

very receptive to a “honey I’m home” kiss and shrugged his jacket over the bar. He walked into the living room, plopped down into his recliner, and loosened his tie.

Tammy fumed, anticipating a knock down, drag out fight. She walked over to Luke’s recliner. “Are you interested in what he had to say?”

“Sure, if he had something other than mere speculation to offer. I don’t know why I keep going to that quack. The worse my migraines get, the more confused he gets. I’m surprised the old codger hasn’t tried to bleed the bad spirits from my brow with leeches.”

“Dr. Spencer happens to be one of the best neurologists in Texas. He thinks you should quit using it, Luke. He said you should retire, keep writing your memoirs and take a long vacation as soon as possible.”

Lucas shook his head and gripped the armrests of his chair. “It’s not that easy, baby. I have...”

“A responsibility to your fellow man!” Tammy snapped. “Boy, do I know this song and dance. Don’t give me your good Samaritan bullshit. What about your responsibility to me? You’ve gone way beyond the call of duty. It’s time you started thinking about us. I won’t sit around waiting for you to die from a cerebral hemorrhage or a stress induced heart attack. You can’t expect me to keep living like this. I won’t live with this fear.”

Luke rose from his chair and gripped Tammy by the shoulders. “Honey, there’s a maniac running loose out there that the police have been trying to catch for a long time. A lot of people have died. I’m the only chance they have.”

Tammy chuckled sarcastically. “Well, when your brain explodes, should they add your name to the killer’s list of victims?”

“Be reasonable.”

“No!” Tammy shrieked, pulling away from Luke. “You be reasonable. I love you, but I can’t handle this anymore.” Tears were streaming down Tammy’s cheeks. Tears of frustration, anger and fear.

“I’m living with a dead man,” she sobbed, running to the bedroom and slamming the door behind her.

CHAPTER 6

“What the hell is a pilgrimage?” Lorrie asked, taking the joint from Shaw and drawing on it, long and hard, while Shaw exhaled a cloud of smoke toward his bedroom ceiling fan.

Shaw ran a hand through his long, brown hair and slumped against the wall at the head of the twin bed he had outgrown seven years ago.

“A pilgrimage, man,” Shaw said to Lorrie, who was sitting Indian style on the bed in front of him. “Haven’t you ever heard of a pilgrimage?”

Lorrie handed the joint back to Shaw, her blue eyes gazing down at the calico quilt that covered Shaw’s bed. Shaw’s mother had put it there. It didn’t go with the posters of heavy metal bands that adorned the walls. And it definitely didn’t go with the assorted bongos Shaw kept hidden in his closet.

“No,” Lorrie admitted, tugging nervously at a lock of auburn hair that was lazily draped over her shoulder. She hated it when Shaw went on about sixties bullshit. He could make her feel so silly and stupid, prattling on about free love and the peace movement and cartoon stickers that could make you soar.

“A pilgrimage, baby,” Shaw continued, putting the remainder of the joint in an ashtray on his night stand. “I’m talking about a fucking quest. My dad did it when he was our age.”

Lorrie giggled, picturing Shaw’s father; a middle-aged, balding car salesman who played golf every Sunday and waxed his BMW twice a week. Lorrie couldn’t picture Shaw Christopher Austen Senior doing anything she and Shaw Jr. would do. She couldn’t even picture Shaw’s dad at the age of seventeen.

“Come on,” Shaw scolded her, softly. “I’m serious.”

“You’re stoned,” Lorrie corrected him, prodding his knee with her foot.

“And so are you, Lorrie Magoo!” Shaw teased, flashing a triumphant smile. It was Shaw’s favorite move. Whenever Lorrie wasn’t into what he was saying, or being “receptive to his needs,” as he was fond of saying, he

would bring up the nickname that had stuck with Lorrie since elementary school.

“My name is Lorrie Macroon, not Magoo!” she insisted, having no idea why the name bothered her so much. It just did. And Shaw knew how much it annoyed her, that shit!

“Magoo! Magoo! Magoo!” Shaw shouted, squinting his eyes and drawing out the name like a chattering monkey. “*Magooooooooooo!*”

Lorrie lunged toward Shaw, her small fist aiming for his head. She wasn’t with Shaw anymore. She was back in second grade, on the school playground. And a chorus of snotnosed buttheads wrapped in winter coats were gleefully torturing her, their breaths materializing in the air behind their taunts.

“Take it easy, babe,” Shaw said, catching Lorrie’s fist. The realization that his own girlfriend was going to smack him registered in Shaw’s hazy mind a second later, and he laughed heartily, pulling her close. “Jesus, baby! You were really going for my throat!”

Lorrie buried her head in Shaw’s chest. “You know how I hate that name, Shaw Austen!” she complained, her angry breath warming Shaw’s chest.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Shaw said, stroking Lorrie’s head softly. “I’ll never do it again.”

Lorrie pulled away. “That’s what you always say,” she moaned, resuming her position on the other end of the bed.

“If it didn’t bother you so much, no one would say it,” Shaw insisted.

“But you know it bothers me. What do you do when you’re alone, pull the wings off flies?”

“Come on, babe,” Shaw said, reaching toward Lorrie, but coming up empty as she shied away from his touch. “I’m just trying to help you with that hang up.”

“If you want to help me, then never mention that name again,” Lorrie insisted.

“I won’t. I swear,” Shaw promised, taking a scout’s honor, though he had never been a boy scout.

“Well,” Lorrie said indignantly at first, “okay. But I’m serious, don’t call me that again. So, what is a pilgrimage?” She crossed her arms and sighed resignedly, knowing that she would be enlightened on the subject whether she wanted to or not.

“It’s simple,” Shaw said. “We just pack a couple of back packs and start walking.”

“Where to?” Lorrie asked.

“Wherever we want!” Shaw exclaimed, spreading his arms wide. “As long as it’s far away from Bellaire. This snobby fucking neighborhood and that damn high school is driving me nuts. You know, that school reminds me of those Stepford movies. Maybe all of those fucking yuppies are robots. Maybe they’re coming for us next, Lorrie!” Shaw exclaimed, clutching his throat. “We have to get away, before it’s too late!”

“I don’t know,” Lorrie said. “School starts soon and I’ve never been away from Houston. My mother will have a cow.”

“Let’s be adventurous!” Shaw shouted. “Let’s see the world! Let’s take one of my dad’s credit cards so we can eat!”

Lorrie giggled. “I’ll think about it.”

“Well, I’m going soon,” Shaw said, matter-of-factly. “So, let me know. You know, in case I need to arrange another companion.”

“Oh,” Lorrie said, shaking her head and smiling, her eyebrows arching. She began to move slowly toward Shaw, like a stalking panther, kicking the quilt off of the bed with her feet. “You bastard.”

“That’s why you love me,” Shaw said as he leaned over and began unbuttoning Lorrie’s blouse.

CHAPTER 7

Lucas opened the oven and pulled his charred dinner out with an oven mitt. He sat the square pan on the stove top, trying to determine exactly what Tammy had been cooking before their argument.

Whatever it had been, it was landfill material now, so Lucas tossed the oven mitt on the counter and decided that he wasn't really hungry anyway.

He went to the breakfast bar and poured himself a full snifter of brandy.

Lucas left the bottle on the bar, anticipating a refill in a few moments. And maybe another after that. He went back to his recliner, sipping the brandy earnestly.

What have I done to my wife? he wondered, glancing at the bedroom door where Tammy was holed up. He forgot sometimes how hard it was on Tammy. He wished he could hide his pain, but he couldn't.

Even if he were able to disguise the agony, Tammy would see through it. She was his wife. She knew him better than anyone.

He had never been able to hide anything from her, including an affair he had with an exotic dancer after five years of marriage.

Long after the pain had faded and the past seemed more like a surreal nightmare, Tammy jokingly inferred that Luke's abilities must have rubbed off on her.

She had known it the moment he had walked into their apartment that night. Lucas was teaching eighth grade English at the Bellaire Junior High School. Tammy was working as a receptionist for a condominium complex.

They had lived in a small, one bedroom apartment on Old Spanish Trail, a tiny residential section at the time. It wasn't the prettiest or the safest place to live, but the Astrodome traffic on the adjoining highway kept the rent low.

Luke had just finished his first nonfiction book on psychic phenomena and was trying to find a publisher for it. He had helped the police locate a missing child; the victim of spousal kidnaping.

The police had called on him after he had appeared on the local television

show where he had played ‘this is your life’ with the host and co-host of the show.

The parents of the missing child were in the midst of a messy divorce and the father spirited the child to Arkansas in the middle of the night.

It was his first case, and he had hoped that the local recognition would help pitch his book. Lucas tried for months, but no one would pick up his book, and he began to consider the possibility of teaching school for the rest of his life.

He went through a period of feeling trapped, cornered into an existence he wanted no part of. He began drinking heavily and spending long hours at a local topless bar, The Harem Lounge.

At the bar one night, he met a dancer known only to him as Cottontail, because of her penchant for wearing a bunny costume. Cottontail was statuesque, beautiful and reminded him of Kelly Barlett, his free spirit sometime lover from college.

The alcohol liberated him enough to give into temptation. He got home, after leaving Cottontail’s apartment in the north side of town, at five o’clock in the morning.

When he walked in, Tammy was waiting for him, an imposing figure of fear, rage and relief positioned on the sofa. And she knew right away...not with whom, or where, or exactly when, but she looked into his eyes and she knew.

And there were tears. And angry words. Luke would never forget that night. Several days would pass and Luke would think that the memory was buried and Tammy would suddenly burst into a fresh cycle of tears and curses.

She left him for several weeks, leaving him alone with the guilt. When she finally returned, it had to constitute as the best day in his life.

Needless to say, he had no urge for monkey shines with exotic dancers anymore, thank you very much.

His book sold, his work with the police expanded, giving him more to write about, and most importantly, Tammy had forgiven him.

Luke finished off the brandy, wondering how he could have foolishly jeopardized their marriage. He was so self-destructive back then, a trait found in most young men striving for the brass ring and failing to procure it.

Was he being as self-destructive, now? Was he afraid of giving up that ring, passing it to the next champion?

Lucas went for another brandy. His heavy consumption of brandy would eventually lower a veil upon his senses that would regard the pain in his head

only vaguely.

I have nothing to prove, he thought, refilling his glass. I've given my all to finding missing children all these years, sometimes to reunite them with their parents, sometimes to bring them back for a proper service.

Why is catching the Keepsake Killer so important?

Luke headed back to his recliner, bringing the bottle with him this time. My books are bestsellers, he thought, tossing back his second brandy as if it were water. The royalties will keep me and Tammy going for a long time. Does pride have something to do with this? Am I afraid that Detective Harlson will call me a coward?

He tried to convince himself to let this one go, to just level with Harlson and drop out of the investigation. He tried to convince himself that retirement was more than waiting for false teeth, pacemakers and the Reaper. He tried to convince himself that he could walk away from this particular car accident, oblivious to the carnage that would come and come and come as it had for years.

He tried to convince himself that, despite the killer's luck at not being caught for so long, he would finally goof and some rookie fresh out of the academy would swoop the sucker up in a huge net.

He tried, but he couldn't.

I'm not a super hero, he thought. I'm not indestructible or flawless. I'm flesh. I'm blood. I'm way out of shape and I hit the brandy too hard. He poured another.

But I can't let this one go, he concluded, feeling some sense of honor and loyalty, as well as the usual pang of guilt for the concern and dread he would invariably draw from his wife.

I won't let this one go...but it will be my last.

Yes. That would be some sort of consolation for Tammy. She would still worry. She would still wait for him to drop dead of a heart attack, or for his head to explode.

He could feel the work sucking a little bit of life out of him at a time, but he was sure he could make it. Tammy had one more bridge to cross, but the land of fishing every day and trying to adopt a child and spending painless, romantic nights together beckoned on the other side.

"Walk just a few more feet with me, baby," he muttered, reaching for the television remote. He decided to watch the news and give Tammy a few more moments to herself.

Luke switched on the news, and listened as the newscaster, who looked

like some generic cue card reader to Luke, droned on with a smile, reading the menu of tragedy like specials of the day. What a bargain! Only two brutal murders today instead of six! Another city official has been fired for using a racist remark. The city jails are so filled up that there is a chance rapists and first time murderers will be picking up garbage off of the streets as their penance. Tomorrow will be hot, and the Keepsake Killer is still at large.

Luke switched off the television when the sportscaster appeared. He attributed his indifference to the male ritual of sports as one of the few remaining reasons he wasn't divorced.

He put the brandy away, and steeled himself.

On a wing and a prayer, he thought, walking to the bedroom door.

"Tammy?" Luke whispered, stepping into the darkness of the bedroom. There was a slight stirring noise, the sound of Tammy arching up on the mattress, but no response.

"Should I sleep on the sofa tonight, honey?" Luke offered, hoping that he wouldn't have to.

He wanted to clear the air before going to sleep. But, then again, his father's favorite saying came to mind: never argue with a tired woman or a rested one, for that matter.

"Don't be so melodramatic," Tammy scolded him in a sleepy voice. "Come to bed."

"I've been thinking, honey," Luke said, feeling around in the dark for the bed. He wasn't about to turn the overhead light on.

Tammy was in a bad mood and the sudden shock of a brightly lit room would send her over the edge. It was one of her biggest peeves. Luke loved her desperately but had to admit that Tammy reminded him of King Kong whenever bright lights were shined in her eyes.

"What were you thinking about?" Tammy asked, yawning loudly.

Here goes, Luke thought. I'm laying the sacrificial lamb upon the altar to appease the gods.

"I'm retiring after this case."

He waited for a response.

"I'm serious," Luke insisted, taking the silence as one of disbelief. He started to unbutton his shirt, then decided that he shouldn't get too comfortable before hearing Tammy's reply.

They had a strong marriage, but Luke was still very well acquainted with the living room sofa. Shit happens.

“I can’t just drop out of this investigation,” Luke continued. “The police commissioner practically came to me on his hands and knees. They’ve been trying to catch the Keepsake Killer for a long time. He’s a monster, honey. The things he does to his victims. I know you think my moral responsibility speech is a load of bunk, but I can’t help the way I feel inside about this. I have to see this through or I’ll never feel safe again, for either one of us. I’ll help them all I can, then you and I are going to take the longest vacation possible. Could last, oh, twenty or thirty years.”

There was still no response. Luke sighed, and started to rise from the bed. He felt Tammy’s hand caress his back.

“Do you promise?” came her voice, soft and relieved.

“I will publicly swear to it on a stack of bibles if it will convince you,” Luke said, turning toward Tammy and holding her hand.

“If you don’t retire, I’ll leave you. I love you, but I’ll still leave,” Tammy said, squeezing Luke’s hand.

The threat filled him with dread, making him wonder if he had fully intended to back the promise. He intended to now. He couldn’t live without Tammy.

“You won’t have to do that. You’ll see,” Luke reassured her, kissing the back of her hand.

Luke changed into boxer shorts (sterility doctor’s orders) and climbed into bed. As he rolled over and wrapped his arm around Tammy, he felt that the edge of her pillow was damp.

“Are you as tired as I am?” Luke whispered.

“If you pass out, Lucas Glover, then I’m really going to get mad,” Tammy teased jokingly, pulling Luke close.

Luke put his pain, fear and frustration out for the night. He lost himself in his wife.

CHAPTER 8

Hellhole sweet hellhole, Detective William Harlson thought, stepping into his studio apartment. It was late, which was a blessing.

The gym below his place was closed now, so he wouldn't have to listen to the grunts spar in the ring and throw free weights to the floor.

He tossed a handful of unpaid bills, all marked "final notice," onto a small coffee table cluttered with empty beer cans and a ceramic ashtray that was overflowing with cigarette butts. Harlson dropped his jacket on the floor, mere inches from a coat rack, and plodded into the kitchen for a beer.

He opened the refrigerator door, grimacing at the odor of rotten milk. "My science project," Harlson muttered.

He retrieved a beer and slammed the door. Harlson drained half the can in one swig. He spotted the small red light on his answering machine through the darkness of the living room.

"Hello, Mr. Harlson," a feminine, Hispanic sounding voice said after he hit the playback button. "This is Maria Watson with the Southern Collection Agency. Please give me a call so we can work something out with these delinquent accounts. We really don't want to take you to court."

"Take this to court," Harlson grunted, clutching his groin.

There was a beep, then a second message played.

"Hi, Billy," a sultry voice cooed. "This is Nicole. I'm lying on my bed, wearing that little thing you gave me. Why don't you come by and let me walk the dog, handsome? Call me."

"Oh, sweet Nicole," Harlson said, finishing off his beer. He sat the can on the already crowded coffee table, knocking several cigarette butts on the carpet. "Not tonight, angel. I'm out of vitamins."

One final message played.

"William?" A female voice. Concerned, strained, on the verge of panic. "I talked to Dr. Tibbels. How could you, William? I'm coming by. You won't return my calls so I'm going to risk being raped or killed and come to

downtown Houston to visit you. I shouldn't have to come, William, but you're too damn stubborn to leave me a choice."

The machine clicked off. Harlson stared at it as the tape was rewound. "Babbs," he whispered, standing alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER 9

Lucas was in a restaurant. He didn't know which restaurant. He didn't know what kind of food was served there. All he knew was that he was seated at a table in a dimly lit place, having a cigarette and savoring a brandy.

A spotlight shone on him, but he didn't think much about it. He didn't remember coming to this place. That bothered him slightly, but he was very hungry. It was good to be in a restaurant, having a smoke and a brandy even if a damn spotlight was shining in his face.

A waiter stepped out of the darkness toward Luke's table. The face of the waiter was swallowed by the darkness, but Luke could see the man's hands and they were holding a silver tray. And that's all that mattered to Lucas. He was hungry and in a restaurant having a smoke and brandy and a spotlight shone in his face and he couldn't see his waiter but a meal was on its way.

And this was good.

"You be ordering the special, pal?" a gruff voice issued from the darkness. Luke didn't remember.

He was in a restaurant. He didn't know which one. He didn't know what kind of food was served there. He was having a cigar and a beer. A strobe light shone on him and his waiter was holding a plain tin pot with a lid over it.

These things bothered Luke, but a meal was to come.

And this was good.

Luke heard a humming sound. He looked to his left, and a sudden light illuminated the darkness, bearing a large glass aquarium. A fully developed fetus bobbed in the rush of air bubbles surging to the top of the aquarium. The fetus was suspended in the middle of the space. It slowly opened its eyes, gazing upon Luke with green, feline orbs.

"Evil breeds evil," the fetus spoke, in a soft, clear voice. "Oblivion is the father. Corruption is the mother. He searches for the angel maker. If light is tainted by darkness, the pack shall rise again and the old hunger will lead

them. An evil shall be destroyed, but not the evil. You have been touched by him. His powers are too undeveloped to feel your rapport. But beware, close proximity will give you away. I am evil incarnate, but he rejects me.”

The fetus smiled, air bubbles escaping its tiny red mouth.

“Not very brotherly, if you ask me.”

Darkness swallowed the freak show sight, the cat eyed, pink baby disappearing, and Luke’s attention was snapped to his right, where another monstrosity awaited his attention.

A man sat next to him, his face mangled and distorted. His nose was completely bent to one side. His lower lip was torn at one corner, revealing his blackened lower jaw.

His left ear was missing, maggots pouring out of the hole and dripping onto his shoulder. The man wore a uniform, but Luke couldn’t distinguish what type of officer this zombie had been. His focus was on shaky ground.

The man leaned forward in his chair, his dead, glassy eyes fixed on Luke.

“Forty-five can be a dangerous place, fella,” he spoke, his speech pattern unhindered by the job done on his face. “Haven’t you ever heard about the Keepsake Killer? The son of a bitch makes Henry Lee Lucas look like a pussy.”

The dead man settled back in his chair.

“Beware the moon, pal,” he warned. “Beware the wolf. He wear a man.”

The man disappeared and Cottontail the topless dancer took his place. She wore her white, fluffy bunny costume and rabbit ears that held her long raven hair out of her face.

“What’s the matter, honey,” she said with a sympathetic, crooked smile. “Perplexed?”

She began to slip under the table, her eyebrows dancing flirtatiously above her blue eyes.

“Let the silly wabbit help you out.”

The waiter stepped into the blue light that bathed the corner of reality that Luke seemed to occupy.

Luke didn’t know which restaurant he was in. He didn’t know what kind of food was served there. He was smoking a pipe and Cottontail the topless dancer was under the table giving him head. The waiter’s face was suddenly visible.

The man had the head of a wolf. Luke looked more closely, his penis shriveling in Cottontail’s mouth, and her attention disappearing altogether.

The waiter’s fur was gray and matted. Its eyes were black orbs devoid of

pupils. Its snout was long, protruding so close to Luke's face that its wet nose was scant inches from him. Its black gums grew as the hideous creature opened its mouth and snarled.

The thing was clutching a silver tray with a cover on it. The creature pulled the cover away, revealing the head of Tonya Lawley. She had big, pink curlers wrapped in her hair.

"MMM, MMM good," the waiter creature cackled, licking its chops with a long pink tongue. "I is the wolf, little lamb!"

Luke woke up, drenched with sweat, and immediately felt for Tammy as a connection back to reality.

She was still there. And she was as sound a sleeper as ever. Luke settled back down and stared at the ceiling. His mind frantically reached for the images that were already slipping his memory. The only image he could hold onto was that of the wolf. The fetus in the aquarium was vaguely intact, but what had it told him?

Damn. He should remember to keep a notepad and pencil on his night stand.

The voice of the creature in his nightmare was the same as the voice in his vision earlier that day, he remembered that much.

He thought back to what Harlson told him about Bertha Hobbs when she tried to track down the Keepsake Killer. What was it she had babbled? Luke thought for a moment, then it came back to him.

...the wolf...the wolf...

Luke got up from bed, crept to the living room, and sat on the sofa, letting what he could recall of the nightmare replay in his head over and over. Some intuitive sense was trying to tell him something.

He was damned if he knew what.

CHAPTER 10

There was a knock at the door.

Maybe she'll go away, Harlson thought, seated on the sofa in the dark room. *Maybe if I don't answer she'll go away.*

He knew better, though. Babbs would camp outside his door all night, if that's what it took to see him. He was touched by her loyalty, but also annoyed by her stubbornness. Why wouldn't she leave him alone, for Christ's sake? He had made his decision, like a man. Why did she have to complicate matters?

Babbs knocked again. "I know you're in there," she called out. "I passed Miss Holland on the way up and she saw you come in tonight."

"Stupid old hag," Harlson muttered. "Why did I have to get stuck with such a busybody of a neighbor?"

He walked resignedly toward the door.

He withdrew the deadbolt and opened the door, staring at his younger sister. She was bundled up in a very unflattering overcoat, Harlson noticed, but then again she usually was. Poor old Babbs. Her light blonde hair was bunched under a floral head scarf, several strands of hair hanging on her forehead. She looked like an old spinster, though she was only forty-seven. She wore no make-up and her hard features were locked in a perpetual grimace of pain and loss.

Harlson never knew exactly what had happened to Babbs to cause her to live such a miserable, manless life. He wasn't that close to her anymore, but he suspected that it all started with a bad split from a beau when she was in her early twenties.

He suddenly wished more than ever that Babbs had a husband. Then she wouldn't have so much free time to interfere with his life.

"Are you going to invite me in?" Babbs asked, in a whiny nasal tone.

"Christ, Babbs," Harlson said. "It's summer. Why are you wearing a coat?"

"I have a cold," Babbs said, briskly stepping inside. "A *summer* cold, okay, smarty pants?"

Babbs stopped short, flicking on the overhead light and staring in horror

at Harlson's apartment.

"God, you're such a pig," she exclaimed, proceeding to whisk beer cans up and spirit them to the kitchen wastebasket. "Give me a key and at least let me come by and clean the place."

"Babbs," Harlson said, softly. "Put the stuff down and have a seat. We need to talk."

Babbs deposited a handful of beer cans into the trash. "Recycle those things, okay, William? It's good for the environment," she said, crossing the room and sitting on the sofa.

She suddenly looked pensive. Babbs rubbed her eyes. She was weary from bad circulation, though she had the energy of a woman half her age. She tapped a foot nervously, trying to spark some adrenaline into her weak system.

"So, are we going to talk bullshit for a few minutes or are we going to discuss your decision to not take the chemotherapy?" Babbs said.

Babbs usually had a nervous tremor to her voice that betrayed so much emotional turmoil. It was almost pitiful. Tonight her voice had an angry edge to it that Harlson rarely heard.

"It's too far gone for the treatments," Harlson said, perching on the arm of the sofa.

"It wasn't too far gone six months ago," Babbs said. "Why didn't you do something about it then?"

"I was busy six months ago," Harlson replied, bitterly. Did his flaky sister want an apology? Well, he had never apologized for the way he lived his life, and he damn sure wasn't going to apologize for how he was going to die.

"Stop it, William!" Babbs shrieked, standing up and shaking fiercely with anger. "You're all I have and you're going to just crawl under a rock and die. You selfish bastard. You don't care about me."

"This isn't about you," Harlson said, growing angry himself, though he usually had the patience of a saint with his sister. "You're not the one with stomach cancer. You're not the one looking at maybe another year of life, with six months of it spent agonizing in the hospital."

"But, William, the chemo would have given you more time. It may have even cured you," Babbs pleaded, though there was no point to the argument.

She had come to William full of righteous indignation, but now she wondered if she was pouring salt on a wound. This was no good for either one of them.

"Yeah, the chemo works, if you survive the chemo. My number's up,

baby. I wasn't about to spend a full year in the hospital for a treatment that might have killed me sooner. I didn't want to go like that. I didn't want people showing up at my funeral and feeling pity for a bald, shriveled up chemo victim. Fuck that noise. I'm going out like a man," Harlson said, feeling some masculine pride.

Babbs wasn't attempting to hold back the tears anymore. They ran freely down her face and onto her coat.

"Do you think people will feel any less pity for you this way, William?" she whispered, wiping her eyes and collecting herself.

"Babbs..."

"I have to go now, William," she said, rising and hiking her purse strap further up her shoulder. "This is just too much for me."

She walked swiftly to the front door.

"Babbs," Harlson said.

She paused, her back rude to him.

"Yes?" The reply was choked with sorrow.

"When it's time...well, you know...I want you to be there, okay?"

"Of course I'll be there," Babbs said, turning around and embracing her brother.

Harlson returned the hug. The surge of love he felt for his sister was only briefly spoiled by a pang of regret. His job had robbed him of the best years of his life.

A guy who had been on the force twenty years always had regrets.

Most veterans usually died alone in a hospital bed, family and friends sacrificed for the passion of righting a very wrong world.

Thank God for Babbs.

CHAPTER 11

Dreg gazed up at the full moon. His gaunt figure was bathed in silver on the shoulder of Highway 45. There were no street lights at this particular stretch, just south of Huntsville, Texas, but the lunar light revealed all to the old hunter.

He sniffed the air, tilting his head back and closing his eyes as he felt some sort of primal essence rise from the depths of his being. The hunt would be good tonight.

Yes sur.

Dreg had the nine millimeter that had belonged to Ross Carson tucked into the back of his dusty pants. He could trek for miles, twenty on average, for his prey.

It kept the authorities far from his den this way. The gun was good to have. He could not tote one of his standard shotguns with him, not that he liked to hunt that way anymore, anyhow. He carried the gun with him only in the event that more highway patrolmen spotted him on the road.

The wolf was fighting to burst free from him. He could feel it gnawing at his gut. Tonight he would taste blood. He would hunt like the wolf. He would kill, then drag his prey to his den.

The voice in his head, that voice that always told him when it was time to find another den or time to move the hunt to another state, was quiet tonight. The way he killed, spread over a hundred mile radius, constantly kept the authorities in a state of confusion.

Tonight, they would be clustered closer to Houston, where Dreg had plucked the pretty meat from her own den. Highway 45 was a hunting ground too long to be constantly monitored by the cowboy-men. The prey would continue to use this route, speeding by in their l'autos, oblivious to the previous hunts or so self-consumed that they ignore the danger being broadcast on the airwaves.

Stupid meat, Dreg observed. But easier than most critters to hunt. *Yeh heh.*

These were Dreg's favorite form of prey, humans who assumed nothing would ever happen to them. Like the big highway patrol man who had stopped him on the road. Like the woman in the apartment complex who had thought a locked door and a useless cur kept death at a reasonable distance.

As long as the prey was still determined to deliver cookies to Grandmother's house, the hunt would go on.

And on.

Somewhere in the distance, a brother howled. Dreg joined him, praising Le Louf above, who scrutinized the hunt with a wide, silver eye.

The howls eventually subsided and the night was quiet once again, with the exception of other animals that stalked with Le Louf, foraging away at their night labors in the dark woods. Dreg squatted to a sitting position, noticing the shadow of a jackrabbit skittering away from the opposite shoulder of the road and into the darkness of the brush.

Dreg smiled, thinking how easily he could squeeze off a shot from this distance, even in the dark, and tag the rabbit as easily as one would take a breath. Without the gun, he had the reflexes and speed that would make tracking down the animal swift and easy work.

Dreg had no formal concept of time; he counted the four seasons. He followed the ways; had done so for more seasons than he could count.

Though he had the appearance of a frail old man, the wolf inside of him was strong, much to the misfortune of many a big man.

Dreg toyed with the idea of hunting the rabbit, but that was scrawny prey. He fancied killing, but only for the right reasons.

Kill to survive... His father had told him that.

Dreg thought back to the swamp, those many seasons ago when he was just a cub. His father had led the pack, back then. Father's father had died a few seasons before Dreg was born, but he was the one the books had talked to first.

The books had talked to Father's father and Father's father had talked for the books to Father, who couldn't talk to books. Dreg couldn't talk to books either, but Father had passed what the books said to Dreg.

He knew the whole story and could ponder it word for word like a scholar, though some of the passages were beyond his mental grasp.

He and his kin had lived in the Pointe Au Chien, far removed from the big city, gratefully accepting whatever Le Louf in the sky saw fit to send them.

Dreg's pack lived in a corner of the territory that was so far north that even the neighboring Indians dared not enter. They knew too well of the

dangerous pack that had dwelled there and occasionally lost adventurous members of their tribe to Dreg's father.

The injuns would have warned uptown fold, but the uptown didn't care much for them Redskins, Dreg mused. So the injuns would let the stupid city meat go stepping right in to Dreg's den.

The world outside of Dreg's realm was an inaccessible place. Father had been to the cities before Dreg was born, and he kept his clan close to the den, forbidding them to venture too close to the world of the prey.

But Dreg had wanted to venture, and as he grew strong and his father's health withered, it became apparent to the pack that Le Louf had no intention of sending prey to them anymore. Their hunting ground began to spoil, and Dreg knew the reason why. This is where Dreg had to employ his interpretation of the books. Their history had also been passed down by Father's father who had been much more intellectually adept than Dreg or his father.

Father's father and Father were *Traiteurs*; *Treaters*. *Treaters* were the bearers of secret knowledge; holders of secrets that they passed down to each generation.

Though most *Traiteurs* were usually folk medicine practitioners, Dreg's line passed down a philosophy, rather than herbs that could heal spiritual ailments.

There were many *Traiteurs*, and *sage femmes*, female *Traiteurs*, but each belief and secret knowledge was different and personally tailored by either black magic bibles known as the *Petite Albert* and the *Grand Albert*, the books that had spoken to Father's father, or philosophical beliefs.

These practices thrived in Acadian Canada, despite various attempts by the Church to suppress the practice. And churches were nasty places where the hairy man was strung up on the cross like prey hoisted to bleed.

In the migration to Louisiana, these practices were enriched by the presence of African Voodoo. *Traiteurs* were left-handed, as Dreg's father had been and Dreg himself was.

Left-handedness was considered a sign of magic prowess. Though Dreg's philosophy was fairly simple, Le Louf, the lord above, hunter of hunters that guided his earthly pack with his bright, silver eyes on dark nights, some pre-Christian attitudes had managed to creep into this philosophy.

And though Dreg could never express his greatest fear because of his limited intelligence, certain Christian taboos made the hairs on the nape of his neck stand up. Most prominently, the attitude toward dead babies. Dreg's mother, known only to him as *Mother*, had conceived late in life. When she

finally birthed the cub in midsummer, Dreg was aghast to learn that the new cub had been born dead.

To Cajuns who had some sense of religion, dead, unbaptized babies were considered signs of evil to come. Dead babies were *couchemals*, or evil spirits.

To religious Cajuns, the solution was to drain the roof of the place where the baby was born of its rain gathering cistern, and any other containers of liquid on the immediate premises.

It was thought that the *couchemal* could reside in water, festering to all its malignant potential.

The second step was to sprinkle holy water around the house to keep the evil spirit from settling.

Though Dreg's philosophy had no such uses for religious artifacts or holy water, a dead baby was still something to be feared.

The hunting ground had soured during the course of Mother's pregnancy. Prey had been scarce, and after the blue, dead *couchemal* fell out of his mother on her sweaty mattress in the back of their cabin, Dreg knew his home was cursed.

Father had fallen from grace with Le Louf, that much was clear to Dreg. The *couchemal* was evidence that Father was now a thing of evil. After all, the *couchemal* had escaped from Father's loins, festering inside of Dreg's mother. There had been another factor contributing to Dreg's conclusion.

Father was adamant in keeping the pack to their cursed den, even though the signs of Le Louf's displeasure were growing. On the day the *couchemal* was to be buried, Dreg challenged his father for leadership, in accordance with the way of the wolf. Dreg had an advantage over his father. Besides youth. Dreg's kin were disciples of the wolf.

But Dreg, Dreg knew he and Le Louf were one. Father hunted with weapons. Dreg was known to kill with his bare hands. Father gave Le Louf faith and belief as thanks. Dreg would burn a whole prey to send to Le Louf. Father had grown weak and fat, allowing Dreg to fend for the pack.

Father had taught him the way of the wolf, beating it into him with knuckles distorted from the beatings his mother and siblings regularly took.

Father had taught him well. *Too well.*

Father and Dreg fought, no quarter asked or given. The wolf came upon Dreg most ferociously that day, and Dreg emerged from the battle, his father's lifeblood dripping from his mouth and gore clenched in Dreg's hands.

The rest of the family, four brothers, two sisters, two retarded nephews feeble-minded as a result of inbreeding, and Mother were horrified by the

spectacle.

Nothing in their lives matched the brutality they saw that day.

Dreg had to leave. The pack insisted upon it, driving him away with stones and warning shots over his head. The madness his father had planted in him had mutated beyond their scope, making him an outcast among outcasts. Mother watched him go, her tear filled eyes reflecting as much relief as they did sorrow.

Dreg didn't mind leaving the pack. They were limited to the level Father had beaten them to. They were worthless curs who ran him off with weapons and rocks. He knew the truth. Le Louf, hunter of hunters, lord above. Father had been a man who tried to emulate the wolf. Dreg was the wolf, trapped in the form of a man.

He moved to New Orleans and took jobs that an illiterate Cajun hick could handle. He cooked in restaurants occasionally. Other times he swept floors at the bars in the French Quarter. He lived the life of a man for several years.

He had friends.

He had women.

Of course, the women he had were the kind you had to pay. His hideous looks prohibited him from finding a mate. He had no use for the frightened pink women who looked at him with fear on their faces. The painted women with perfumed cunts he met in alleys were a little better, as long as he had money in his pocket.

He tried to live that life, but could not. Le Louf was in him, deep and permanent.

The hunt began again and he wandered, counting the seasons until winter, when he would hole up with his gains and wait for warm weather.

He managed to settle the conflict of man and beast within him by attributing his state to degrees of the moon. He was fully a man on moonless nights. He was nothing but wolf when the moon was full and rich.

His senses heightened and narrowed, depending on the night silver that lit up the darkness. Tonight, he was at peak.

CHAPTER 12

Ricky Lee Charney crossed the Texas state line, Oklahoma behind him now.

“The stars at night, are big and bright...” Ricky Lee crooned, beating a drum roll on the dashboard of the ‘76 Nova. “Deep in the heart of Texas.”

Ricky Lee glanced in the rearview mirror, a nudie girl air freshener hanging from it, and brushed his bushy blonde hair from his eyes.

“Have to look good for the ladies,” he muttered, though his Nordic good looks allowed him to look as disheveled as he wanted.

His clothes stank.

He had gotten them messy when he dumped those two bodies into the Texoma Lake.

He was going to rent a cheap hotel room in Denton, Texas, clean himself up, then put his scrapbook in order. He dug two snapshots from his denim shirt and turned on the interior light to get a good look at them.

The pictures were of seminude, dead women, their eyes plucked out.

Ricky Lee stared hard at the scarlet, empty sockets, crying gore down ashen cheeks.

He put the pictures away before he would have to pull over and masturbate. *Shit!* That stuff just turned him on too much.

Ricky Lee didn’t know why he killed women and plucked their eyes clean out of their heads. His past was so convoluted by his own embellishment of it that he thought maybe his mother was a prostitute who had beaten him.

But who the hell knew anymore?

Maybe next month it would be because his father was a crazed Vietnam veteran who had raped him continuously. Ricky Lee didn’t really give a shit. He preferred to focus on his peculiar hobby.

His insanity always seemed to interrupt whenever he stopped to think about his motives. Maybe it was intentional. He didn’t know. He wasn’t a fucking psychiatrist.

He turned on the a.m. radio, greeted by Jerry Lee Lewis singing Great Balls of Fire. “Fuckin’ a right!” Ricky Lee exclaimed, turning the volume to full capacity, the dashboard vibrating furiously. “The killer!”

Ricky Lee passed North Texas State University. Not bad pickings there. There were those bitches he had killed during an Academic Bowl in...oh...’85, he reckoned.

He had dumped those bodies in the murky waters of Lake Dallas.

He would look it up in his scrapbook later to verify the date.

Ricky Lee cruised through the sleepy little college town of Denton, which was about thirty miles from Fort Worth (*seven bitches in ’87*. He had dumped them in Lake Worth). Ricky Lee gazed at the many fast food franchises and convenience stores that surrounded the university like pissed off Indians around a chuck wagon.

He spotted a nondescript motel in the distance of the throng, and opted for a room there.

The reason he had come screaming away in his Nova from the easy pickings of Oklahoma to Texas was because of the recent newspaper articles declaring the return of the Keepsake Killer to Texas.

The Keepsake Killer was his fucking idol, and the rash of violence wrought by the killer had attracted Ricky Lee like a shark to a feeding frenzy.

He wanted to meet this Keepsake Killer and show him his own quite impressive scrapbook. He wanted in on this orgy. Yes sir, the Keepsake Killer was to psychos what the Heavyweight boxing champion was to punks pummeling each other in sweaty gyms.

It was hard to be in a profession that you could not talk shop about with the boys. He needed the comfort and company of a peer. Who better than the Keepsake Killer? He was the fucking master. The way he cut people up...*shit!*

Ricky Lee could learn a thing or two from this guy, especially about eluding the police, who were a cunt hair away from nabbing him in Florida last summer.

He had killed this bitch in a penthouse and had to shove himself down the complex garbage chute to escape the cops, who must have been summoned by a neighbor.

His victim had not gone quietly that night.

Of course, Ricky knew the basics and followed them. Never stay in one

place long enough to be caught. Never kill someone you know. But the biggest rule of thumb that he just could not adhere to was that commandment about changing your methods.

If you strangle one, shoot the next. After that, bludgeon the following one. But Ricky had to have those eyes, dammit.

So his MO never changed, earning him the nickname, "The Optometrist." Wimpy, but it could be worse.

Ricky Lee exited Highway 280, pulling into the motel parking lot.

After cleaning up and adding his two most recent victims' snapshots to his ragged and thick scrapbook, Ricky Lee drove around the quiet town.

Summer break in Denton always sucked, for the local proprietors as well as mass murderers. Ricky Lee spotted a rustic old ice house and went in for a long neck.

He perched at the bar, ordered a beer, and looked at the local, drunken barfly who had taken the seat next to his.

The fortyish redhead clumsily perched her elbow on the bar and rested her chin against her knuckles. The woman was chunky, but tall enough to carry a little extra meat on her bones. She had a chubby face that was perpetuated by the pout she wore. A deep scar in the center of her forehead broke through the beige powder she had applied in a thick coat.

Her features had a hard set to them. Ricky Lee knew her personality just by staring at that hard face. She was possessive, prone to irrational jealousy, and she was the type that would shoot you in your sleep if she suspected you were fucking around on her.

She wasn't a biker chick, but she may have been in her younger days. Ricky Lee could picture her, blowing a group of leather clad men around a roaring campfire in the desert. And he bet she never spilled a drop.

There were only so many types of women. After seeking them out as long as Ricky Lee had, he could file each one under a certain profile, with little or no deviation from the system. This gal was an aging one night stand who saw at least one evening of tenderness in the clean-cut form of Ricky Lee.

That's right, baby, Ricky Lee thought. I'll treat you right.

"What's your name?"

"Hazel," the woman slurred. Her face was no prize, but she was wearing a snug blouse and pair of jeans that gave her sagging form the appearance of

a tight, young body.

Of course, only one thing mattered to Ricky Lee.

He took a deep drink of beer and turned back to his new date for the evening.

“What pretty *eyes* you have, Hazel.”

Hazel leaned against him as he opened the motel door, partly for support and also because her beer bottle perception was gazing upon Adonis.

“You are *so* gorgeous,” she muttered, staring intensely into Ricky’s eyes.

Ricky stared back into hers, searching for something in her big brown eyes. Searching for sincerity, which was there. He also saw pain and desperation; a wilting flower clinging to the sunlight. A life of abuse from gruff, southern men who bent women to their wills and tossed them aside when they became tarnished.

She had told him about her failed relationships and other mundane tribulations of her life.

He could barely recall them now, and he wondered why so many women gave him their lives, along with their hopes and desires. They so willingly went to a room with him, ensnared by his angelic appearance.

Hazel would die tonight.

No matter how much compassion he could muster for this wretch, she would die.

Did she know that? Did all of the others?

Hazel wrapped her arms around Ricky’s neck and kissed him. Ricky derived no pleasure from the sweet taste of her mouth or the feel of her body thrust against his.

Sexual excitement this way was impossible for him.

Ricky broke away. The contact wasn’t merely uninteresting, it was an annoyance.

Hazel opened her mouth to speak when he pulled her into the room, kicking the door shut as he spun her around, wide-eyed and startled, and shoved her on the bed.

He leapt on her, kissing her full on the mouth. When he pulled back, his body numb to the action, Hazel giggled, staring up at him with relieved eyes (...*big beautiful eyes*...) “So, you like to play rough, huh?” she said, reaching under his shirt and rubbing his smooth stomach. “I didn’t figure you for that

kind, but it's okay. I think a woman should be versatile in bed. Now, what do you want Mommy to do?"

(...Mommy...)

It felt like a spring popped in Ricky's head.

He was going to toy with the woman first, but she had struck a chord within him. Something bad that he didn't want to remember.

"What's the matter?" Hazel said, looking regrettably at Ricky's contorted expression. "What did I sa—"

He had her throat in his hands before she made him remember the bad things. The bad things that caused his stay at the institution. The bad things that had caused the scars on his wrists. The bad things that the killings kept out of his head. All notions of foreplay were swept from Hazel's mind as Ricky's thumbs drove into her windpipe.

She struggled just hard enough to mock a good sexual bout and Ricky was pleased to hear a neighbor bang on the wall in complaint. What did the fucker want? For him to go to a motel?

Hazel, too drunk to do anything but graciously die, went with a meek whimper, her open eyes focused on her prince the whole time. Ricky took his hands from her throat, noticing that he had an erection.

He undid his pants.

He looked into her eyes as he masturbated on her clothing. Then the bad thing started to come into his head. He wept at her open eyes.

"Please stop staring at me," he pleaded, retrieving a pocket knife from his jeans.

"Oh, Mommy..."

CHAPTER 13

George Dimitri dug into his western wear shirt pocket and came up with an empty cellophane pack. No cigarettes, and at this ungodly stretch of Highway 45 where there were no businesses.

Shit on a shingle.

It would be at least thirty to forty-five minutes before he came upon a Texaco station. *Oh well, life's a bitch and then you marry one*, he thought grimly, staring over at his beloved Dolores who was glaring out at the darkness, fuming over some stupid bullshit that her empty head was churning around behind those contemptuous, burning green eyes.

What was her friggin' problem? Was she on the rag again? He didn't think so, he had slipped his tongue up her old gazoo the night before.

George just didn't understand his wife. Christ, he had taken her up to Weatherford, Texas to visit her loon of a mother. He had even given up ESPN for three days in the process. ESPN was his life, especially while recuperating from the back injury he had received at the Jerner Chemical Plant in Houston. Three days cold turkey of Legends of Pro Wrestling and professional bowling should have been a significant sign of his love.

Hell, he thought so.

Nag, nag, nag, he thought, as Dolores sat there, quietly raging. She even nagged him in silence.

“What crawled up your ass and died?” George finally had to ask, wishing the woman would have more respect for a nicotine and ESPN addict who was sorely in need of a fix.

Dolores turned to George, her slightly pudgy face glowering. “You treat my mother like shit!” she shrieked, and George was completely positive that he had just opened the lid on Pandora's box.

“What the hell are you talking about?” George replied incredulously, thinking that he treated her mother like a queen.

“You are without a doubt the most condescending asshole on the face of

the planet. You treat her like she should be locked up,” Dolores said, her bottom lip pushing up an angry frown.

“That’s because she’s friggin’ nuts,” George said, defensively.

“She is not crazy,” Dolores insisted, jabbing a finger in George’s flabby chest. “She’s senile.”

“Bullshit,” George said, laughing at the charade Dolores had started putting up five years ago when the old lady started a race riot by chasing a black man out of a drug store with her cane for using a white’s only drinking fountain. Christ, the woman still lived in the thirties. “Forgetting your name or where you put your bifocals when they are right on your face is senile. Claiming that you met the wandering Jew at a flea market and that Satan lives in the bug zapper on the neighbor’s porch sounds pretty fucking crazy to me, Dolores.”

“She’s just confused,” Dolores muttered, glancing away. Dolores knew, she just denied it, George was convinced.

He decided to dummy up on the subject, rather than bask in the glory of his victory. It was a sore spot for Dolores. He was sensitive, for Christ’s sake. No need in pouring salt on a wound.

He was about to purr something romantic that would redeem the whole conversation when Dolores looked back to the open road, her eyes widening and body tensing for an impact.

“Look out!” she cried, though her body language had already prompted George’s foot to the brake.

The Chevy Impala screeched to a halt, and George looked at the crumpled, dirty figure between the lanes of Highway 45.

“I’ll be,” George muttered. “Would you look at that.”

“What do you think happened to him?” Dolores asked, fearfully.

“Road kill,” George summed up the situation matter-of-factly.

He turned on the hazards, opened his car door, and wondered if maybe the poor son of a bitch had a smoke on him.

CHAPTER 14

Dreg was playing possum and evidently his ploy had attracted prey. He could feel the brightness of headlights on his shut eyelids. He could hear a car engine rumble in neutral.

Still now, he demanded of himself. *Lay still*.

Dreg heard two car doors slam.

“Stay back, babe.” A man’s voice. Deep tone. Big man.

“Be careful, George.” His mate. Soft, feminine voice.

Come closer, meat, Dreg thought resisting the urge to smile at his craftiness.

As if in response to his silent bidding, Dreg heard heavy boots fall upon the road. Big man, yes sur. But big men fall hard.

As the footsteps closed the distance to Dreg, the headlights were eclipsed by the man’s frame.

Dreg could visualize the prey squatting down on his haunches to inspect Dreg’s motionless body. When Dreg could feel the prey’s breath on the back of his neck, his eyes snapped open. He arched up, growling at the wide-eyed rotund man who started to fall back in fear, ripping the seat of his corduroy pants.

Dreg reached below the man’s fleshy jowl, his lanky fingers snaking into the man’s throat.

The man grasped Dreg’s wrist, trying to ward off the impending death grip.

Dreg’s other hand grasped the shoulder of the man’s sweaty shirt for support, and drove his fingers into the man’s throat, pulling back an instant later with the man’s adam’s apple in his hand, red streams of blood following his prize and saturating Dreg’s face.

The man fell backwards, clawing at his face like a newborn infant while his life pumped out of the hole in his throat.

The man wheezed, shuddered, then lay still, staring with uncomprehending eyes up at the moon, his last breath popping a crimson bubble on his torn

throat.

Dreg looked up at the woman, and was most pleased to see that fear had paralyzed the pretty meat. She could have easily climbed into the car and sped off, but instead she stood in front of the car, clutching her throat, her pale face a vacancy sign for sanity.

Dreg approached her slowly, patiently.

She stared at him stupidly, fear strangling her. The woman was quite attractive. She had dark, long hair. Green eyes, big with fright, but beautiful nonetheless. Full, thick lips. Her figure was full, meaty but firm.

Dreg caressed the woman's cheek. She didn't even flinch. Notions such as flight or fight were gone from her spirit.

Mr. Fear had seen to that.

Dreg stood close to the woman, appreciating her beauty. Dreg was old, but the span of several seasons had not diluted desires like the one that was now causing his loins to stir.

Dreg ripped the woman's blouse open, exposing her full breasts to the night breeze. Her left breast quivered from her hammering heart.

Dreg would have this woman. He turned her around and shoved her over the car. Dreg pulled her cotton skirt up and tore away her panties. He held her by the back of her neck, though she didn't resist.

She was empty inside.

Dreg started to expose himself to the night, only momentarily before disappearing into the woman's depths, when he caught himself.

What is you doin'? he thought.

He lived by the way of the wolf. His mating season had already passed. He could not have this woman. But he wanted her so intensely, and now she was open before him.

Dreg looked up at the stern, ever watchful eye of the wolf. This was taboo. This was the hunt. He could not go against his grain. He hadn't before, and couldn't start now. Dreg put his private away, feeling the wolf shove the man far down in him.

"Yes sur," he whispered, eyes shut, head nodding slightly and grin spreading across his blood soaked face. "By the way of the wolf."

Dreg gently pulled the woman up, embracing her and sighing at his lot. Being true to one's self called for sacrifice at times. He would remember this one fondly. He would touch himself to her image, perhaps.

But he would not taint the hunt.

Dreg held her lovingly, stroking her head gently. Her breast was shoved

DREG

against his. Dreg could feel the fear fighting to burst from her chest.

“Soon,” he promised, kissing the woman’s cheek. With the finesse of a worldly lover, Dreg craned his head to the woman’s neck, licking perfume from her pounding jugular vein.

His teeth pierced her flesh. Her body went limp.

Fear’s work was done.

CHAPTER 15

(...he stood at the threshold of the bathroom...it was his first real call...his partner, a ten year veteran of the force named Stuart Crowson, was in the living room with the girl's parents, trying to console them and waiting for the meat wagon...Harlson stared at the girl, her flesh cold and drained...an apparent suicide...had slit her wrists while sitting on the shitter...twelve-year-old Susan Landry...it was so awful and wrong...terribly wrong...she had managed to extend both of her middle fingers, as if to retort... 'Fuck you world, I'm out of here,' she muttered through blue lips...Harlson fell back in shock as her lackluster eyes fixed on him... 'And so are you, Billy' ...the dead girl smiled at him... 'so are you' ...)

The pain woke up Harlson.

He had passed out on the sofa after consuming fifteen beers. He rolled into a ball, trying to squelch the intense burning in his abdomen.

Tears streamed down his face.

His mind screamed with agony and panic...*oh God...I'm going to die...hurts, hurts...only fifty-three years old and I won't live to see fifty-four...*

Harlson screamed angrily, cursing his cowardice.

He was crying like a pussy. He squeezed his stomach, hoping that pressure would shift the pain like gas. It wasn't working. He reached for the morphine on the coffee table. The movement increased the pain. Breathing increased the pain. Cursing God and red meat increased the pain.

He knocked a crumpled beer can aside and gripped the pill bottle, snapping the child proof cap off with his teeth. He shook three into his mouth, washing the pain killers down with stale beer. He spilled tablets on the sofa when a spasm of pain flared in his gut.

He thought he might puke, but was able to resist the urge. He twisted in this torture for a full half hour before the pain slowly began to melt away.

Better make peace with your God, he thought, panting and sweating like a boar hog in heat. *Looks like the doctor was being very fucking optimistic*

when he gave you a year.

The pain finally ebbed to a more comfortable, dull ache that would permit him to drink coffee, but no breakfast.

No sir.

Nausea swam in his head at the thought of food. Harlson rose from the sofa, pausing to break wind, then slowly worked his way to the kitchen, glancing at the digital clock propped on the television set.

6:45 a.m.

Harlson washed out the automatic coffee machine pot, which was half full. He always made too much coffee, but he couldn't find that damn chart that came with the coffee machine and he wasn't going to experiment with something as important as his morning java. Making too much was wasteful, but at least he had two decent cups of starter ups before he left for the precinct.

Harlson went back to the living room, reaching inside his briefs and scratching himself absently. He made a detour to the can before having his morning cigarette and stood for a full three minutes, urinating yesterday's beer and coffee.

He emerged, feeling more spry now, and thought that for a dead man walking, he was faring pretty well.

He always felt the intruder in his abdomen. The cancer was always present, twisting him in sadistic waves of pain, especially in the wee hours of the night or early hours of the morning. But he was dealing with it.

It was that stubborn Cherokee blood he had inherited from his grandmother Pearl. She had been a tough old bird, true to heritage, telling Harlson in the final hours of her life that was taken by unchecked diabetes about her late grandfather who had climbed a high mountain when it was his time to die, writhing in spiritual ecstasy to the hallucinations brought on by paote. Pearl had died in a hospital, pain killers pumped in her circulation continuously, her feet and legs riddled by gangrene, her final, feverish breath speaking of the spirit that had come to take her away.

I'm ready, she had replied, looking at the empty space beside her children and grandchildren.

And then she crossed her arms, closed her eyes, and her tormented body was devoid of soul.

Harlson thought it was unfair. Pearl should have been allowed to climb her mountain. He should be allowed to climb his. But there weren't mountains in Houston, Texas. And the tribes no longer respected a person's right to die alone, moving on unhampered by the ones they left behind.

Harlson had thought at one time that he wanted a room full of people around him when he died. Now, he thought better of that. Babbs would be there, and he could deal with that. Babbs ultimately respected his wishes. They would be children again, laughing and joking about whether his bedpan was half full or half empty and there would be no last ditch effort to continue his existence, not that there could be.

The spirit would come for him and he would say, 'see you around Babbs', and she would reply, 'I hope being a slob isn't a sin or you might hit a roadblock at the pearly gates' and that would be it.

But, before that, he had a killer to catch. This was going to be his last hurrah. The Keepsake Killer had eluded the best in law enforcement, but now he was up against a dying, determined half-bred who was every bit a hunter as the killer.

I'm your Waterloo, mother fucker, Harlson swore, finding his cigarette pack in yesterday's shirt pocket. He took inventory and found that the pack contained only three sticks. He made a note to make sure the last one was lit as he headed out of the apartment and struck one up with a lighter that needed more fluid.

The aroma of fresh coffee lured him back into the kitchen. He poured himself a cup, after finding a mug free of algae build up, and sipped at it easily, not wanting to work his insides back up into turmoil.

He walked over to the huge window in the living room, the only outlet from the dark, brooding studio that he sometimes suspected reflected the darkness within himself, and drew open the blind, the gray morning pouring dull light into his hellhole. He gazed out at the dilapidated projects of the fifth ward, scant yards from his apartment.

Homes, long condemned and forgotten by the city, now were disease and rodent infested havens for the poverty-stricken. Street people moved at feverish and paranoid paces, their addiction either keeping them up all night or prompting them up early for a quick deal made with found, stolen, or rarely earned money.

A few miles from the projects, a huge, modern complex known as the convention center, planted in the town with the help of a Republican Texan, glared down on the down and out, mocking them with the most modern conveniences set up for visiting diplomats.

Harlson knew that eventually the fifth ward would vanish, and the people of the fifth ward would move to new territory, possibly worse than the fifth ward.

Eventually, the fifth ward would be a bustling center of expensive restaurants and tourist traps and the neighboring territory of Vietnamese that lived in the area of street signs made in their native tongue and specialty shops that brought mundane treasures, newspapers, trinkets, from their country would be made accessible to the visitors or they would have to move too.

All of a sudden, Harlson wondered if he would miss the shitty world.

Highway 59, visible beyond the convention center, was gathering traffic. Harlson glanced at his clock.

7:15.

Shit, he muttered, heading back into the can. He had to be downtown by eight o'clock, which wasn't that far a trip, but he had to put himself together, and that would take time.

In the bathroom he sniffed at his towels until he found one that didn't smell like it had too many miles on it, and opened his medicine cabinet. He looked into the mirror.

Shit, dead man walking all right, he thought, staring at the sickly pallor of his skin. He needed the full treatment, and pulled all the bottles and boxes out of the cabinet. Eye drops, nasal spray, aspirin, decongestants, cough syrup and suppressants. Preventive maintenance. Summers were cruel, especially on a dying man, and he wanted all of the bases covered.

"The patchwork man," he muttered, reaching for his toothbrush and smoker's tooth polish.

CHAPTER 16

A nasty muscle spasm woke Lucas with a jolt. He sat upright on the sofa, rubbing the back of his neck and wishing that he had brought a pillow into the living room with him. He should have known that the sofa arm was no place for his already aching head.

Lucas glanced at the digital clock on his VCR.

8:10 a.m.

“Morning, honey,” Tammy called from the kitchen.

He turned too quickly to look at her and winced in pain. Tammy stood behind the breakfast bar. She was wearing her robe, sipping a cup of coffee and staring blandly at the twelve-inch kitchen television propped on the breakfast bar.

Lucas stood up, the sudden surge sending his head into a pounding rage.

He gripped his forehead and literally tried to shake the cobwebs loose, visualizing them melt away. The action only served to increase the pain. Coffee and aspirin, he thought, walking groggily toward the kitchen.

Tammy was always amused by Lucas’ morning zombie march.

“You look cheerful this morning,” Tammy teased, smiling.

Lucas smiled above his grimace, wondering why he had married a morning person. He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

It was time for their morning kiss routine. Tammy always wanted a big kiss on the mouth, even before Lucas had a chance to gargle. Lucas turned his head and Tammy planted one on his cheek.

“Did you sleep well?” Tammy asked, filling a cup for Lucas.

“Yeah,” Lucas lied. He had slept maybe two hours total the whole night.

He had managed to barely get Tammy’s blessing to work on his present case, and she seemed to be pretty chipper about the whole thing despite the previous night’s bout, so Lucas was going to sugarcoat his insomnia and migraines until the case was over.

He was sure that Tammy knew he was lying. He had passed out on the sofa and had to look like three miles of bad road, but he wasn’t going to

whine about the pain anymore. Tammy was keeping a stiff upper lip, and he would, too.

“So, what are you doing today?” Tammy asked. She put a plate of toast, bacon, vitamins and aspirin in front of Lucas.

“Ah, the four food groups,” Lucas said. He washed the aspirin down with hot coffee. “I have to be at the downtown police station at ten. I don’t know exactly why.”

Lucas wasn’t hungry, but he forced down the toast and bacon to see the pleased look on Tammy’s face.

“It looks like your appetite is returning,” Tammy marveled, whisking the plate away. “Want seconds?”

“No, honey. I’m fine.”

The Glover family morning tradition followed its usual route, beginning with a quick scan through the *Houston Post* and ending with a hot shower. Lucas was ready to go by nine.

Tammy stood at the door with Lucas, adjusting his tie. Concern finally began to crack the mask of suburban contentment she had been wearing all morning.

“Be careful,” she muttered, staring into his chest.

He lifted her chin until their eyes mingled.

“Of course I will. You’ll kill me if anything happens to me, right?” he teased.

“Yeah,” Tammy said, laughing softly and resting her head against him.

The embrace was silent and tender.

Tammy finally broke the silence.

“I’m not happy about this,” she said, maintaining the embrace.

He squeezed her harder. “I know.”

“I saw the news this morning,” Tammy said. “I don’t normally watch it that much. It depresses me. But I watched it this morning. They had a spot about the killer. They recapped all of the murders and described what he did to them. I know why you want to catch this guy. I guess, I want you to catch this guy. Just walk away from it in one piece, okay? And catch him quick. I hear the fish are really biting up around Eagle Mountain Lake.”

“It’ll be over soon,” Lucas promised, kissing Tammy’s forehead.

“Was that wishful thinking or precognition, Mr. Glover?” Tammy said, tugging him closer by the lapels of his jacket.

“Both,” Lucas replied, glad that he had remembered to use mouthwash after his shower.

CHAPTER 17

Ricky Lee twisted the top off of a bottle of orange juice and washed down a mouthful of microwave burrito that tasted like cardboard.

He was sitting on the hood of his car, which was parked on the edge of Lake Dallas.

He had been there since dawn, making sure that his date the previous night was properly weighted down and wouldn't come bobbing up to the surface of brown water.

The summer morning was quiet and the temperature was pleasant by the lake this early in the morning.

Nice for a dip.

The bright sun shone on the water, giving a golden aura to the tranquil, beautiful surroundings. Ricky got a kick out of that.

This Eden-like spot hid the ugly climax of his handiwork. No one else was around, leaving Ricky to appreciate the summer green of drooping tree limbs, gray moss at the tips barely caressing the water like a skilled lover trying to raise goose bumps on soft flesh.

Yes sir, it was beautiful but also pretty fucking boring. His mind was in a lull, and that would only bring back memories from his past that he was determined to leave behind with the corpses he dunked.

Women, dammit, he thought, tossing the orange juice into the drink, causing a rupture of rings on the calm water. It all boiled down to women.

The memories were coming back.

(little bastard Ricky...little bastard Ricky wants to fuck his mother...little bastard Ricky puts on mother's clothes when she's out all night with one of her many boyfriends...little bastard Ricky lets mother touch him sometimes, when her boyfriends don't come around...)

Ricky screamed, stood up, and began punching himself in the side of his head.

“Get the fuck out!” he demanded of the past.

But the memories continued, parading his mother's nude image, quivering with orgasm, beneath his own body.

Ricky took a lighter from his shirt pocket and flicked it under his left hand. The pain made his nervous system override the stubborn memories, and he smiled as the pain became unbearable, blackening his flesh, and took the flame away only when he was sure that his mind had been cleansed of the images.

He wrapped his hand with a napkin from the convenience store, that sat on the hood beside the hardening remains of his burrito.

Now, he thought, I say it's time to move on to Houston and get back to work. Time to get back to the goal of ridding mothers and potentials mothers from the face of the earth before there are millions of fucked up Ricky Lee Charneys burning their hands on river fronts.

Time to pluck those oh so delicate orbs from their sockets and see how fucking sexy and alluring they look then.

All supporting this motion say aye.

Aye!

All opposed say nay.

The eyes had it.

CHAPTER 18

Harlson sat behind his desk in the police station, glancing at his wristwatch. 9:45.

He kicked back in his swivel chair. Fifteen minutes until FBI agent Thomas Lubin arrived with his entourage. He looked around the squad room, which was fairly quiet that morning. A few other plain clothes were pouring over paperwork at their desks or hurriedly completing delinquent reports.

Captain Thadius Fowler had the blinds to his office closed, which suited Harlson just fine. He couldn't stand gazing up at that porky, pale windbag, anyway.

Harlson was convinced that he could have had Fowler's job if he was as willing to kiss the commissioner's and mayor's ass as often as Fowler did. Harlson had seniority, but he also had the pride of not being a brown-noser, which was much more appealing than a cushy job like captain.

Harlson noticed Sergeant George Skinner checking the daily roster posted on a huge bulletin board. Skinner reminded Harlson of a boy scout.

He was a decent cop who followed procedure like it was religion. Skinner was a family man, and he stayed out of the department politics, adhering to a self-imposed moral code that his superiors agreed would never put him in the position of a major advancement.

He was a rare breed of blue-collar cop, an honest man who always paid for his coffee and never took advantage of being a cop no matter how tough times got.

Harlson really respected him for that.

"Hey, George," Harlson called across the room. "How's the wife? Does she still call out my name in her sleep?"

George regarded Harlson, then smiled and walked toward Harlson's desk. "Only when she's having a nightmare," George replied, perching on the desk in front of Harlson's.

George had fair hair and a youthful complexion. He wore glasses and had

the appearance of a braniac, though George himself admitted to only having a forte for mathematics. George's generously friendly face took on a shade of concern. "Geez, Will, you look terrible. Are you feeling okay?"

"Just having a bout with that stomach virus that's going around," Harlson said, reassuringly. "I'll be right as rain by tomorrow. So, I heard your friend Robert Fernly went rat. Too bad, he was a good cop."

Going "rat" referred to a cop leaving the force to pursue a career as a private investigator. Harlson had worked with Fernly on a drug bust in the Big Thicket a few years back, even Skinner was in on that party, and Harlson got the impression that Fernly was a lifer who would have to have his badge pried away when it was time for him to retire.

Evidently, from what Harlson had heard through the grapevine, Fernly had an authority problem and some procedural fuck up on Captain Fowler's part had resulted in a child's death by a satanic cult that Fernly had infiltrated. It was a big stink that soaked the headlines and drove Fernly forever away from tight-assed bureaucrats like Fowler.

"I think Robert will do fine," George said. "that is, when he stops borrowing money from me to pay his rent. I'm going to claim him as a dependent if he keeps it up."

"Well, tell him I'll throw some business his way, if I can."

"Will do," George said, rising. "I better grab my partner and hit the streets. Take care, Will."

"Same to you, sport," Harlson said, watching George leave the station.

The door to Captain Fowler's office opened, and Fowler's pudgy face protruded through the doorway.

"Harlson," he called, motioning his head in a beckoning manner. "Come in here for a minute."

Harlson groaned. *What the fuck does that guy want?* he wondered. Christ, he had to be in the conference room in five minutes.

He went to the office and stepped inside.

Fowler sat behind his desk, which was kept in fairly decent order, a few open files spread over the monthly planner in front of the captain. The walls to Fowler's office were bare, with the exception of a portrait of the captain winning a marathon, to benefit some charity, when the captain was a fairly young man. Harlson didn't know what peeved him more, the captain being an ass-kisser or an organized cop, despite the shambles of his physical state.

He was pushing three hundred pounds on a barely six foot frame. He was completely bald on top. A bandage covered a scrape right above his forehead.

The captain needed a shave desperately and someone needed to tell him that excessive use of aftershave was no substitute for a shower at least once or twice a week.

“What can I do for you?” Harlson asked, arms crossed at his chest.

“Have a seat,” Fowler offered politely, motioning to the plain, wooden chair positioned in front of his desk.

“I only have a few minutes to spare before Agent Lubin arrives,” Harlson said.

“I won’t keep you long,” Fowler promised, glancing down at the report in front of him. “So, Lucas Glover didn’t come up with anything, huh?”

“Nothing that will help at this point.”

Fowler closed the file and looked up at Harlson. “I’m going to shoot straight with you, William. The mayor is breathing down the commissioner’s neck, which means he’s breathing down mine. Now, I’ve shuffled all of your present cases between Hughes, Teague and McGuire. I want all of your attention focused on the Keepsake Killer. We have to bring this bastard in, and fast. When our lovely mayor was elected, it took a lot of cajoling on the commissioner’s part to convince her that we deserved our jobs. She has it in for us over this case. We bring him in a timely fashion or everyone involved will be wearing a uniform and directing Astroworld traffic. I want daily reports from you every day.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Harlson said, standing to leave.

“Yeah,” Fowler said, sternly. “You do that. Well, I’m off to meet the mayor for a business brunch. Let me know how the meeting goes. And, William, you’re looking pretty peaked. You should play a few holes with the commissioner and me soon. Get a little sun.”

“No, thanks,” Harlson said, opening the door. “Golf sucks.”

Lucas stepped into the police station, passing two uniformed officers on their way out. He went up to the front desk, where a thin, elderly black woman was just hanging up a phone.

“How are you doing, Sharon?” he asked, leaning against the desk.

“Well, Lucas Glover,” she said, smiling brightly. “You’re a sight for tired eyes. I’ll tell you, between working here and my night security job to put Francine through school...well, it’s been hard on an old woman.”

“Old? If I wasn’t happily married, you wouldn’t be working a night job,

my lady,” Lucas said, wiggling his eyebrows.

Sharon laughed heartily and slapped Lucas’ shoulder. “Get yourself out of here, you smooth talker, before I take you up on it anyway. You wouldn’t last ten seconds with me, sugar. I’m worse on men than hypertension.”

“But what a way to go,” Lucas replied, walking beyond the desk toward the detective’s station. He had always liked Sharon. And, for a woman in her early fifties, she wasn’t a bad looker at all. She had a buxom figure that kept officers lingering at her station longer than they needed to. And the hell of it was, Sharon thought they were just being nice to an old woman. Lucas thought that was pretty sad.

Harlson suddenly appeared in the bustling hallway. He walked up to Lucas and shook his hand.

“Let’s get over to the conference room,” Harlson suggested, leading Lucas down the corridor. “We’ve got a busy morning ahead of us.”

“What’s up?” Lucas asked.

“We’re having a meeting with the FBI. We’re going to reexamine all of the evidence, then let you have a go at some of the other victim’s personal articles. Can you handle that?”

“Sure,” Lucas said, sidestepping a convoy of cops in a hurry.

Harlson pulled open the door to the conference room and ushered Lucas inside. Five people were seated at the long, brown table in the middle of the white-walled room.

A freestanding chalkboard had been erected behind the end of the table. Lucas studied the people at the table, one black man, one white man, dressed in dark, conservative suits, their immaculate grooming indicated FBI; one white woman in a smart business outfit, bland gray in color that also indicated FBI; one Hispanic woman in a floral blouse (she was seated, so Lucas couldn’t make out her skirt) and a rotund man whose brown, western suit and white cowboy hat advertised that he was a Texas Ranger.

The group was filling coffee cups from the metal pots at either end of the table and chattering among themselves. Harlson, with Lucas in tow, approached the white FBI man; a stout, thoughtful looking character with curly brown hair.

The man’s thin lips wore a warm, reassuring smile that sparked off the determination in his green eyes.

“Agent Lubin,” Harlson interrupted the man, who was conversing with the timid-looking female agent. “I’ve got someone I want you to meet. Special Agent Thomas Lubin, this is Lucas Glover. Lucas, this is Special Agent Lubin,

the Field Case Officer for this investigation.”

Lubin gripped Lucas’ hand in a firm handshake. “I’ve heard a lot about you from the department. It’s a pleasure to have you aboard our team,” Lubin said, nodding slightly and jerking Lucas’ arm vigorously.

“It’s a pleasure to be aboard,” Lucas replied.

“Let me introduce you to the rest of the crew,” Lubin offered, patting Lucas on the back.

“Could I have everyone’s attention, please,” Lubin spoke in a booming voice that drowned out pleasantries and comments on the escalating summer heat.

“I would like for everyone to meet Lucas Glover, a psychic assistant to the department who has had a very successful rate with missing persons. From this moment on, Mr. Glover is to be considered a cleared insider to this case. Please oblige him in any request he may have of you,” Lubin announced. “I’ve read several of Mr. Glover’s books and I have every confidence that he will be an invaluable asset to our team.”

Lubin turned his attention back to Lucas. “Now I’ll introduce everyone to you. This is Special Agent Sally Lane,” Lubin said, pointing to the agent in the gray suit.

Lucas looked at her more closely. Her hair was pulled back by a headband. The woman was attractive, with soft features that radiated a natural blush and a facial structure that reminded Lucas of Greta Garbo; from the petite smudge of her nose to the mysterious dark eyes that searched Lucas’. That was the only way Lucas could describe gazing into the eyes of the woman. She had a penetrating stare that sought you out; held you spellbound until she had extracted all she could to formulate her impression of you.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Agent Lane said, lightly grasping Lucas’ hand. Her eyes still held his. “I’ve read your books, too. I think you’re a fascinating man.”

“Thank you,” Lucas said, miserably tearing himself away from those sensual eyes, remembering that he was a married man.

Lubin continued the introduction, motioning to the black agent.

“This is Rodney Stuart, one of the best workaholics in the forensics field.”

Stuart was a tall, well-built man who wore glasses and had a very short haircut. Rather than walk across the room, he held up his hand and said, “How’s it going?”

“The charming lady next to Agent Stuart is Dr. Evelyn Perez, police psychologist.”

Perez, a hefty, fortyish woman with a serious set to her features that offered no pleasantries, other than the barest curl of a smile, nodded at Lucas and muttered something barely audible, that Lucas thought was simply, "...hello."

"And at the end of the table we have Texas Ranger, James Whittley. Officer Whittley is handling the manpower on Highway 45."

Whittley was a stern-looking man with a weathered face and a jaw that looked as strong as concrete. He was somewhere in the area of fifty, and his silent presence carried an air of iron-fisted experience and impatience at sitting at a table when there was a killer to be dealt with.

Whittley was extremely husky, the sort of husky that could put a stout man in the hospital, if you caught the no-nonsense officer in a bad mood. Lucas had heard stories of Whittley; stories about violent men being brought in with tears streaking down their cheeks when they clashed with Whittley.

Tears usually accompanied broken noses.

"Hey there," Whittley said, with an emotionless expression that dared not betray whatever observation of Lucas that was running in the man's head.

"Now that the introductions are aside," Lubin said, sharply clapping his hands, "let's get down to the nitty-gritty."

Lucas and Harlson sat down. Lubin continued to stand, motioning to Harlson.

"We were all acquainted with Detective Harlson at our last briefing. I think I speak for everyone present when I say that it's good to have an officer of your caliber on this case. I read your history on the force, which could have given the Donnelley directory a run for its money in sheer width. I couldn't help but notice in the reports that you are considered somewhat of a lone wolf, detective."

Lucas spotted an ulterior motive in the lavish praise Lubin was dishing out. He had to give the guy credit, though. He was smooth.

"I hope we can stay in synch on this one, detective," Lubin said politely, staring directly into Harlson's eyes.

Harlson returned the smile, lighting a cigarette despite the fact that there wasn't an ashtray on the table.

"If you can keep up with me," Harlson replied.

Lubin regarded Harlson for a moment, his ever-present smile wavering slightly.

He nodded respectfully at the detective. "We'll certainly try. I realize that this case has been handed down to all of us this year, and I hope that everyone in this room realizes that the only way to stop this madness is to work together.

The track record of this investigation is very intimidating, but we all have a fresh perspective that might enable us to accomplish what those who were on this case before us could not.”

“Now then,” Lubin said, sitting down, “on to the first order of business. Agent Lane, if you would be so kind as to tell us what we know about the killer, thus far.”

Agent Lane opened a manila folder and sifted through paper. “We haven’t been able to come up with anything more than in previous years. We did find a strand of his hair near the Lopez murder site last month. After analyzation, we determined his age to be between sixty and seventy years old. He is Caucasian and has shoulder length, silver hair. That was all the information the strand yielded, besides the theory that our man doesn’t shower often.”

The group snickered for a moment, all except Lubin whose analytical attention prompted a scowl on his friendly face at the team’s unprofessionalism.

“By examining his stride,” Agent Lane continued, “we can put his height at between six foot three to five and his weight at approximately two hundred and forty pounds. And this is all we can determine about the killer at this stage. We actually managed to find prints at six of the murders in the past two years, four of which were committed in Arkansas. Unfortunately, according to our computers, the killer doesn’t exist. No priors.”

“Very good,” Lubin said, directing his attention to Agent Rodney Stuart. “What do you have for us at this juncture, Rodney?”

Agent Stuart sighed and rubbed his weary eyes. “I’ve been burning the midnight oil on Tonya Lawley, but I haven’t been able to come up with anything more than the usual results. This guy doesn’t leave enough for me to examine to come up with anything concrete. I mean, maybe some of the victims struggled and managed to scratch him. I can’t examine any residue under their fingernails because he takes their hands,” Agent Stuart said, exasperated.

“Anyway, I can tell you that the killer uses a blade approximately eleven inches in length, three inches in width. He carries the knife in a leather sheath. He seldom uses a gun anymore. When he did, he would shoot the victim in the head with something low caliber that didn’t leave an exit wound. A .22 maybe. He would cut off the head of any victim he shot and take it, so no one could run a ballistics test on the ammo. If he uses a weapon anymore, it’s the knife. Sometimes, he tears his victims open with his teeth. On the Lopez victim, our man got a little sloppy and bit her on her left breast, two centimeters

above the nipple. All of the killer's teeth are pointed, like canines. The marks are not the work of dentures, however. Some of the teeth are jagged on the sides. I would say they were crudely filed. You know, if this son of a bitch ever stepped outside in broad daylight, he wouldn't be that hard to spot."

"The night can conceal many mysteries," Lubin chimed in. "And when the night is gone the killer has miles of heavy forest to retreat into. The old saying of a needle in a haystack comes to mind."

Lubin looked at Ranger Whittley. "Your turn, James."

Whittley shrugged his massive shoulders. "I've got as many men as I can spare cruising from here to Huntsville. The highway department is out there too. The killer's latest victims, besides the John and Jane Doe couple found on 45, have been found in areas between Houston and Dickinson, so I've got the majority of my crew closer to Houston. This bastard snuck into our backyard when he killed Tonya Lawley, so now I'm going to pull my men closer to the city. The only problem with that is that now the killer will probably strike further up 45. I've tried to second guess him before, and I've found that's impossible. It's almost as if the guy knows where we're going to be."

Sixth sense, maybe? Lucas wondered. He wasn't going to bring up the possibility in front of Harlson and Whittley.

"We also know that he uses the victims' vehicles to get back to his hideout and/or drive the great distances between his victims," Whittley continued. "Hell, problem with that is, some paint and a new fucking license plate covers his ass there."

Whittley remembered the ladies. "Pardon my french," he said, like a proper son of the south.

"Anything else, James?" Lubin asked.

"Unfortunately, no," the big man replied.

Lubin nodded then turned to Dr. Evelyn Perez, who was dropping two antacid tablets into a glass of water. "Evelyn?"

Dr. Perez frowned. "Like I've told you before, Thomas, there are at least a thousand prognoses I could make, but that would be like spitting in the wind at this point. The only thing I can offer is my puzzlement at the killer's methods. I mean, his psychosis seems to run in a cycle. His first victims in a new month are killed in traditional ways. But, as the month progresses, he seems to grow in savagery and he tears his victims up like a wild beast. That transition; methodical, neat and orderly. Slash-slash, cut them up and work on them patiently. Then, suddenly, he attacks his victims claw and tooth,

leaving a chaotic path to contradict his earlier precision.

“Now, if he constantly changed his MO, I could chalk that up to psychotic genius. But his sickness has only two stages. Two manifestations. Cycles. I kept thinking cycles. Then, it hit me. The moon. He kills at night. I had discounted a moon cycle before, then I realized he didn’t follow the traditional cycle. A killer on a moon cycle will only kill during a full moon. Full moons definitely affect sociopaths, that’s elementary stuff. But his savagery grows by the measure of the moon.”

Dr. Perez paused for effect.

“So what are you implying, Evelyn?” Lubin finally asked. He had known Perez a long time and always indulged her melodramatics.

“I think our killer believes himself to be a werewolf,” Perez replied, pausing to down her medicine. “I mean, it all fits. Elementary stuff, like I said. Pointed teeth. Killing without weapons when the moon is full.”

Lucas suddenly thought of his nightmare the night before. The waiter with a wolf’s head. He thought of the late Bertha Hobbs, shouting about a wolf before being committed. What he believed had been a fruitless first stab at the case may have given him something after all. He didn’t understand it, though. His power had always been a straight forward tool. He had never had surrealistic glimpses or metaphoric dreams before. It worried him just enough to keep the dream to himself for the time being.

Lubin had to call Lucas’ name twice before tearing him away from his thoughts.

“Excuse me?” Lucas replied.

“I was wondering if you would tell us about your experience, yesterday,” Lubin said.

“It was a very vague image. I only glimpsed the killer’s pant leg and boot,” Lucas confessed.

“Did you see any type of labels on the clothing or boots?” Agent Lane inquired.

“No,” Lucas said.

“Did you hear his voice?” Lubin asked next.

Everyone’s attention was focused on Lucas.

“Well, “ Lucas began, deciding that he didn’t feel up to explaining a murder he had witnessed through a dog’s eyes. “The killer kicked Tonya’s dog, and said, ‘keep back, cow dog.’”

“Cow dog?” Dr. Perez asked. “You mean, a dog that herds cattle?”

“No,” Harlson interjected. “I think the killer was using the expression to

indicate subservience. You know, ‘cowering’ dog.”

“I think he’s right,” Lucas added.

“Could you describe his voice?” Lubin asked.

“Deep. Huh...just...deep.”

“Any accent?” Lane asked.

Lucas felt a stronger wave of pain surge through his temple. He felt on the spot, and was beginning to understand the exasperation that radiated from the assembled specialists. It was damn frustrating.

“The killer only uttered four words, I really couldn’t...”

Lucas paused, recalling something else about the previous night.

“What’s the matter, sport?” Harlson asked.

“There was a full moon last night,” Lucas muttered, dread welling within him. When the conference room door burst open, Lucas knew what the frantic officer at the threshold was going to say before he opened his mouth.

“Detective Harlson! The highway patrol just contacted us. They’ve found two more bodies.”

CHAPTER 19

“Donnez-nouse autres une ‘tite poule grasse pour gu’ on se fait un gumbo gras,” Dreg sang cheerily, stepping out of his weathered, two-story den into the bright, warm summer day. He clutched a metal, rusted pail filled with undesirable leftovers from his prey. He had hunted beyond his needs, which was not the way of the wolf. But the hunt consumed his life, so he spared his conscience by leaving mounds of wet tidbits for the wildlife in the thick woods that camouflaged his den from the prying eyes of authority.

Dreg has discovered this place several seasons ago, on his second trip to Texas.

It was a modest, wooden home with a small shed outside that contained a small generator that Dreg maintained on every return to this particular den.

He had found the place on a hike through the forest. An old woman, who had evidently lived as a hermit there, took the reason for her isolation to the grave Dreg had dug for her. He had not killed her, however. Dreg had a deep respect for elderly folks. He had found her dead of what appeared to be natural causes, propped on a rocker on the spacious front porch, morsels taken out of her flesh by small scavengers.

The den was scarce of any type of furniture or modern conveniences. The few items the old woman had possessed were either confiscated by raccoons that had broken into the house, or ruined by the rain which poured through the leaky roof. Dreg maintained the place the best he could, but wasn't around long enough to safeguard the place from the elements and varmints.

The den provided only one modern convenience, which was the reason Dreg kept the generator running to maintain energy to the house. It had a huge, flat freezer in the kitchen, which the old woman had stocked with venison.

Now, however, Dreg kept his own meat preserved in the ice box.

Dreg walked out into the unruly weeds that he would soon have to take a sickle to.

To the right of the den, dozens of cars were parked under the sun. The cars parked on the fringe of the open field, before the forest became a thick wall, were weather-beaten, rusty, covered with weeds that had grown grips around fenders, bumpers, and some of the vehicles had plant life sprouting out of open windows.

The cars parked closer to his den were still new, not yet devoured by the foliage or dulled by the elements.

Dreg walked past the empty shells, wondering what he was going to do once the field was full of l'autos. He would either stop bringing them back altogether or hunt closer to his den so he would not have such a great distance to haul his meat.

There was also the possibility of felling a few trees to widen the space, but Dreg was rather fond of the old pines that surrounded his den.

He put the problem aside, deciding to mull it over when the problem could be ignored no longer.

Dreg heard a noise. The crack of a brittle branch. The shifting of tall grass. He looked into the forest and saw the head of a German Shepherd. He smiled at the company, which was most likely waiting for the moist prize Dreg was toting. A pack of wild dogs had a den nearby Dreg's. He counted maybe eight different members of the pack at different times. He was unclear as to who ran the pack, but had narrowed down the possibilities to the shepherd he was facing now and a dog that looked to have Rottweiler blood he had encountered on other mornings.

The dogs were fierce, untamed animals that had most likely been shoved out of cars on Highway 45 as puppies. The animals did not take to Dreg, but he was a reliable source of food, so one or two of them would come at a time every day or so to see what he had to offer and spirit back the scraps to their den.

Dreg approached the dog, which was rooted to its spot beneath the shade. "So, are you le chien de garde?" Dreg asked.

The dog bared its teeth as if it understood the man.

"Ah," Dreg corrected himself, "le chien de 'chasse', eh?" *Sporting dog. Proud hunter.*

Dreg growled back at the dog, which promptly inched its way further back into the cool shade, its hunger keeping it from fleeing altogether.

"Here," Dreg said, unloading the bucket in the direction of the dog. "Fill yo' belly, cur."

The dog cautiously approached the contents of the bucket, sniffing uneasily

in Dreg's direction. Dreg lost interest in the dog, turning back in the direction of his den.

Something was troubling him. It stemmed from his actions with the female prey the night before. He had thought himself past the point of taking a mate, but the void was bothering him even more than it did when he was young wolf.

Sure, when the mating season came, he would release his urging on random prostitutes in New Orleans, but the loneliness on the road was really getting to him. He needed a sage femme, an *'angel maker'* to bear his cubs.

He wanted a pack to lead. His duty as *Traiteur* demanded that he pass the secret knowledge to his offspring, if they had left-handedness, and a big liter would surely yield at least one special cub.

But where to find his louve? His former pack was either dead or living the life of men. Never mind the fact that they had cast him out.

He was surely the loneliest wolf; too human to join his four legged kin, too animalistic to join the world of men, which he considered the easiest prey. Humans had exchanged primal common sense for rationale during their evolution, making them ripe for the picking.

Besides, the meat was tastier than any other domestic or wild game he could think of. Humans made the best roux, gumbo and jambalaya he had ever tasted.

His mouth began to water and stomach grumbled.

Dreg sighed at his lot, then trudged toward his den and breakfast.

Perhaps he would find his louve one day. If not, he would bay his sorrow out to Le Louf until the hunter of hunters looked upon his faithful, earthly cub and divine intervention, perhaps, would deliver him an angel maker.

CHAPTER 20

Lorrie floated away from a pleasant dream and woke up in Shaw's bed. She stretched her arms above her head, her bare, pert breasts shifting upwards, and she gazed to Shaw's side of the bed.

Empty.

She wearily wiped sleep from the corners of her eyes and tried to recall the dream she was having when consciousness, without the usual warning of an alarm clock or firm hand shaking her shoulder, had abruptly tore her away from her fantasy land. She could not recall the dream. She never could. But she felt in a reasonably mellow mood, meaning she had realized some desire in the safe confines of her skull the night before.

Lorrie tossed the comforter off her small frame and was immediately struck by the aroma of her and Shaw's sex. It was a pleasant scent, and she savored it, arching her back in a lazy cat stretch and running her fingers through her hair, grimacing when she hit a huge tangle at the back of her neck.

She spotted her pink, cotton panties on the night stand and retrieved them with an index finger. She slipped them on, raising her legs until she faced her feet, sliding the panties over the stubble on her legs, then raising her haunches to pull them over her hips.

She slumped back down, arms behind her head, staring at the ceiling. She noticed the stench of pot. It wasn't the usual scent; residue with a smack of air freshener spray to cover it. It was fresh.

That guy was already hitting the bong!

Lorrie sighed. What was she going to do with Shaw? He was such a head. Shaw was great for kicks, but Lorrie knew he would never make a good husband or father. She supposed that was why she loved him so much now and clung to him so dearly.

One day she would grow up, and leave Shaw behind with the other mistakes of youth. She was in the process of selecting a university and she

had not yet confronted Shaw with the possibility of attending a school in another state.

The way she saw things, this might be her last summer with Shaw. That's why she had decided to go along with this pilgrimage thing Shaw had his heart set on. Maybe he himself knew that this summer would be their last hurrah.

Lorrie's mother, Eileen, worked double shifts at an electronics plant, soldering components on an assembly line, so she wouldn't have the energy to check Lorrie's alibi during the trip, which was forecasted to last about two weeks. Lorrie would tell her mother that she was going camping with several girlfriends up at Possum Kingdom, a park near Tyler.

Lorrie suspected that if she had told her mother the truth, she still may have only offered an indifferent reply to the situation. It was the possibility of Lorrie's mother not really caring where she went or with whom that caused her to lie. A reprimand was something she would crave, not fear.

Lorrie's father had run out on his wife and daughter two years ago, sucking their savings account clean. He had left no explanation for his departure. Just up and went. Took the money and ran. No good-byes or even a fuck you.

Lorrie's mother changed after that, became so numb that she was oblivious to the needs of her daughter. She put food on the table and paid the bills, but Mommy left with Daddy and Lorrie was pretty fucking sick of living with a robot that acknowledged her existence only when there was a slight chore to be done or when a desired possession was missing.

Mother worked, came home, cooked, stared at the television for a few hours, then either headed back to work or slept. There were no more mother and daughter conversations. Mother had withdrawn into herself so completely that Lorrie wondered if she would even be missed during the pilgrimage.

Her thoughts were interrupted when Shaw bound back into the room, clad in underwear. He held a bag of potato chips and was shoving the shavings from the bottom of the flat bag into his mouth.

"Up and at 'em, sleepyhead. It's almost ten," Shaw said, perching on the end of the bed.

"Is your father around?" Lorrie asked, modestly shrugging the comforter back on at the sight of the open bedroom door.

"Nah. He's got some moving and shaking to do today. Some high school is thinking about buying some of his clunkers for driver's education. He's probably wining and dining some principal downtown," Shaw replied, crumpling the bag into a ball and tossing it toward an already full wastebasket

near the door.

“What about your mother?” Lorrie asked.

“Stress management class,” Shaw said with a salty grin. “We’ve got the place to ourselves. And you want to know what I heard?”

“What’s that?” Lorrie said, tossing the covers from her body once more.

Shaw’s house had central air, but the extreme heat was still making his room uncomfortable because of the bright sun shining through huge, bedroom window.

“Some city official just announced on the news that people can only water their lawns on Monday and Wednesday mornings, between the hours of eight and ten.” Shaw crawled toward Lorrie. “I was wondering if you would like to take this conservation step one further and shower with me.”

The mere thought was giving Shaw an erection. Lorrie felt it press against her knee.

She had never showered with anyone before, but was rather turned on by the idea herself. Besides, this was her special summer with Shaw.

“Okay,” Lorrie replied, running her fingers through Shaw’s unruly hair. “But only if you’re sure your parents won’t come back anytime soon.”

CHAPTER 21

Harlson led the convoy of FBI Ford LTDs and police cruisers down Highway 45. Lucas rode with Harlson in a white, unmarked Chevy Impala. Harlson had his brights on and a blue light mounted to his dashboard.

The police radio was ablaze with reports from the murder site and traffic patrols trying to clear the usually clogged highway. Curious motorists stared stupidly at the procession as they clumsily pulled over to the right.

“We’re only doing forty, now,” Harlson said to Lucas. “When we get outside the city limit, we’ll be able to make up for lost time.”

Luke nodded, then decided to try to talk to Harlson. “Could you turn the band down?” Luke asked, motioning to the radio.

Harlson complied. “What’s on your mind, sport?”

Luke took a deep breath. He wondered if he was doing the right thing. “I had a dream last night. I know you’re somewhat of a skeptic, but I really want to tell you about it. I criticized you yesterday for not being straight with me. It wouldn’t be right if this dream I had could help the case.” “W h y didn’t you mention this as the conference?” Harlson asked.

“You’re my partner. Besides, I’ve never worked with the Bureau before. Lubin seems like a nice enough guy, but my first loyalty is to you.”

Harlson smiled. “Well, thanks, sport. I appreciate that.” Harlson lit a cigarette. “Tell me all about it.”

“I can only tell you what I remember. I was in a restaurant. I talked with a dead policeman who was sitting at my table. He warned me to stay off of Highway 45. He was in gruesome shape. Mutilated beyond belief. Now, here’s the really weird part of the dream. The part I can’t fathom at all. I saw a baby in an aquarium. It spoke to me. I forgot what the baby said as soon as I woke up, but I know it was something important. After that, a waiter brought me a silver tray. Tonya Lawley’s head was on it. And the weirdest part of it was that the waiter had the head of a wolf. He even said, ‘I’m the wolf’, and something else, something I couldn’t make out, in the same voice I heard in

my vision at the apartment.”

Harlson digested all of the information, then pitched his cigarette out of the window. “You want to know what I think, sport?”

“What?”

“Now, don’t get offended. Just consider what I’m going to say to you. All of those images were bits and pieces I fed to your subconscious yesterday. The missing patrolman. Bertha Hobbs’ vision. Tonya’s head on a silver platter in a restaurant could be symbolic of cannibalism. Do you see where I’m taking this?”

Luke started to fume, but caught himself, recognizing an element Harlson hadn’t mentioned. “What about the baby in the aquarium?”

“You must have thrown some of your own garbage in there, Luke. It was your dream.”

Luke thought a moment. He and Tammy were unsuccessfully trying to have a baby. And what about Cottontail the topless dancer? Luke had been thinking about her right before he fell asleep. He groaned inwardly.

Harlson was looking at this as a detective, not a skeptic. Luke suddenly felt very inferior to the man. Jesus, Luke thought, it makes so much sense.

“You know,” Luke said, trying to salve his dignity somewhat, “you’re absolutely right. I’ve never had precognitive dreams on that scale before. I mean, I’ve caught myself doing something mundane, like eating an ice cream cone, and I realize that I dreamt about eating an ice cream cone the night before.”

“That brings up an interesting point,” Harlson said, suddenly feeling cerebral. What the hell, they had a good half hour to kill. “Now, did you predict you were going to eat an ice cream cone, or did you have the ice cream cone because you dreamt it?”

“Good point,” Luke admitted.

“Yeah,” Harlson said. “There’s one thing that’s always bugged me. Prophecies.”

“What about them?”

“A prophecy doesn’t fulfill itself. A person fulfills it. You know? Like, if a psychic predicts that someone is going to climb into a bell tower and start whacking people with a machine gun, and some nut reads it and says, ‘you know, I think that’s my destiny’, and proceeds to climb up a bell tower, is that a phenomenon? You see what I’m saying?”

“Yes, I do,” Luke replied, and he thought he was beginning to get a better understanding of the detective. “But Nostrodamus predicted Hitler. As a matter

of fact, he predicted one man would be responsible for one of the worst genocides ever. Now, I don't know if Hitler had ever read Nostrodamus, but I doubt the guy purposely set about realizing that prophecy."

"Yeah," Harlson said, not feeling very sociable anymore. He turned up the band and had another cigarette.

Luke had another strange feeling about Harlson again. Perhaps it was the proximity of the man in the car. He looked at Harlson and knew he didn't have to be psychic to see that the man wasn't in the best of health.

But there was something more – something serious. In a flash it came to Luke that Harlson wasn't going to get better. He wasn't about to ask Harlson about it, but Luke could feel Harlson's pain, his turmoil. *Shit*, he thought. It sickened him sometimes, his power.

Detective William Harlson was dying. The whole scene was sadly hilarious to Luke. Two men with one foot already in the grave rushing after a killer. *What a pair we must make*. Luke wanted to say something to Harlson. Say he was sorry, at least. Ask if he could help in any way.

Nothing came from him.

There was one thing Luke knew for sure. He didn't know exactly where and when, but Detective William Harlson would die soon. Luke glanced out of his window, suddenly wanting to take an icepick to brain via his eyes.

"You okay, sport?" Harlson asked.

"I'm fine," Luke lied, wondering what the normal human beings were doing for fun this summer.

Thomas Lubin followed Harlson's car in the convoy. He turned to Sally Lane, who sat in the passenger's seat.

"Let's hear your plan, Sally," Thomas said.

"Excuse me?" Sally asked, pulled from deep concentration.

"I know that look. You've got an angle on this and I want to hear it, please," Thomas replied.

"I was reading previous reports on this case. We've had some nasty blow backs over our undercover procedure on this. We've set out decoys before with manpower spread all over forty-five. I think we need to reduce a tactical squad to no more than two cars, a decoy and back-up maintaining a safe distance. If we deploy everybody with jurisdiction on this our boy will never come out. He probably has some vantage point over the highway, and an

army of vehicles, marked or unmarked, will scare him away.”

“Good point,” Thomas said, obviously impressed with his principal agent, who was more and more proving herself a great addition to behavioral sciences. “And who would you suggest as our decoy?”

“Well, me, of course. It’s my specialty.”

“I’ll consider it,” Thomas said, uneasily.

“Now wait just a minute, Thomas Lubin,” Sally snapped. “You’re not keeping me under your thumb on this. We have an agreement, remember?”

“I know full well about our...arrangement, Sally. I’m your handler on this, and we do things on my say so, okay?”

“You’re my handler in more than one way,” Sally said, growing angrier. “If I find out you brought me aboard this case to keep an eye on me, you’re going to spend some very lonely nights, mister.”

“Sally,” Thomas said, resignedly. “I brought you on this case because you’re one of the best agents under my supervision. But don’t think our relationship means you can buck my authority. If our peers ever found out about this, it would undermine my ability as a Field Officer. I’m just saying let me call the shots and live with them, okay?”

“Okay,” Sally gave in. “So, who is our decoy going to be? Are you going to bring Goriot in? Or how about Sanders?”

“Our decoy will be Special Agent Sally Lane,” Thomas replied, staring straight ahead. “Because I feel she’s the best person for the job.”

“You’re all heart, Thomas,” Sally said, beaming. “I should know.”

“Goddamn rubberneckers,” Harlson grumbled, steering his car onto the shoulder of 45 to bypass the line of motorists inching past the murder site. “Should ticket the whole bunch of them.”

“It’s human nature,” Luke offered, spotting a highway patrolman several feet ahead directing the spectators around the scene. Three highway department cars were lined on the shoulder. Harlson pulled behind the cars, and the throng of vehicles behind him followed his example.

Harlson briskly stepped out of the car, frowning at the motorists. “Go on,” he shouted at them. “There’s nothing to see here, you sick mothers.”

Harlson and Luke were greeted by a highway patrol man.

“Detective William Harlson,” Harlson said, producing his shield for the officer to see. “Homicide division. This here’s Lucas Glover, an associate.

What's up?"

"Right this way," the young officer replied, looking beyond the pair. "I see the feds are right behind you."

Luke turned around. Lubin and Lane were precariously making their way up the soft shoulder of the highway.

"Yep," Harlson responded to the young officer. "Just like sharks following a blood trail."

The highwayman led Luke and Harlson to a spot twenty feet beyond the squad cars. Two figures were covered with sheets underneath a large maple tree. Luke noticed that Agent Stuart was now also present, and the highwayman waited until the FBI agents were on the spot before giving the details.

"We have a Caucasian couple, mid-thirties. Their licenses were lifted, but we found credit cards on them. George and Dolores Dimitri. We found their bodies here in this clearing, but there's blood on the highway. We figure they were killed on the pavement, then dragged here. See that branch?" the officer asked, pointing up into the maple tree.

Luke gazed upward. A heavy branch was cracked in half.

"Now look on the ground below it," the officer advised.

A large puddle of blood soaked the ground below the branch.

"He hung them up to bleed," Agent Stuart realized, a mixture of fascination and disgust on his face. "He bled them like they were animals."

"I'm going to climb up there and see if there are any fibers lodged in the bark," Agent Lane announced, taking a pair of latex gloves out of her handbag and slipping them on. "If he did hang them up there, he must have used rope of some kind."

"Good move," Agent Lubin replied. He knelt down to the bodies, Agent Stuart having already pulled away the sheets.

Luke observed Agent Lane quickly ascend the tree. She wedged her small frame between a thick, v-shaped maple branch just below the broken limb and carefully searched the sagging wood for information. Luke's eyes trailed down to the corpses, and the sight was like a slap in the face.

Shells. That was the only way he could think of to describe the remains. Armless, legless, gutless shells that were infested with ants and covered with flies. Luke immediately turned away and began to retch.

"Jesus, sport. You okay?" Harlson called.

Luke raised his arm, but could not answer Harlson at the moment.

"Look at this," Lubin said to Stuart, oblivious to Luke. "He ripped her

clothing. He never rips clothing. He cuts the clothing away. I want her checked for traces of semen.”

“Will do. Hey! Check that out,” Agent Stuart said, motioning with a pencil to both victims’ necks. “It looks like he bit open her neck, and ripped this dude’s adam’s apple out. But the entry wounds on the man weren’t made with the knife.”

Agent Stuart looked closer. “Or his teeth. Christ, Thomas. I think the killer did it with his bare hands.”

“Sick motherfucker,” Harlson added, observing the scene over Agent Stuart’s shoulder.

“I found a few strands,” Agent Lane said, approaching the scene and regarding the corpses with vague interest. She clutched a baggy containing three small splinters of twine. “I’ll have the lab run an analysis on these to see if they were treated with anything special. It’s not much but it’s worth a shot.”

“Good work, Sally,” Agent Lubin said, standing.

Agent Stuart covered the corpses just as Luke, green around the gills, joined the group.

“Would you like a breath mint, Lucas?” Agent Lubin offered, producing a package from his jacket pocket.

“Three should do it, please,” Luke replied.

“Are you okay?” Lane asked Luke, lightly touching his shoulder.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything that horrible in my entire life,” Luke admitted, his bravado lying in a puddle on the road. “You people must have ice water running in your veins.”

“I guess you get sort of desensitized to it after a while,” Lane offered.

Uniformed officers were all over the scene. The medical examiner’s wagon pulled through the throng. Luke watched as the remains were scooped into the vehicle and taken away.

“I’m out of here,” Stuart said to Lubin. “I’m going to oversee the autopsies.”

“We’ll check in with you later this afternoon,” Lubin replied. He turned to Luke. “Are you ready to try your hand at this?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Luke said, the stress of the day already registering in his aching head.

“Sally?” Agent Lubin called out.

Agent Lane approached the two men with a bloody, white blouse.

“Will this suffice?” Agent Lubin asked. “We have other garments

available.”

“This should do it,” Luke said, taking the blouse from the agent.

Harlson watched the scene from a distance, leaning against the maple tree and smoking a cigarette.

Luke kneaded the material with his fingers. He shut his eyes and tried to close out the procession going on around him.

He was in a car. It was night. Darkness shrouded the highway. He was angry. Angry at George for treating mother like shit. Like a crazy old bird. He glanced over at George, who was steering the car down the lonely highway, grinning at himself for the shots he had just taken at Mother. It was bad enough that George had been out of work for so long, back injury or no back injury, but they were so behind on their bills and George was just steering the car, grinning like a fat jester, after saying the most insulting things about Mother.

He could have killed George for the way he had been acting lately. Sitting around the house like a piece of furniture. Monopolizing the daily soap hours with old western movies. Devouring everything in the house, though the budget they had worked out didn't compensate for his many snacks and beer consumption.

He was useless, now. A fat mound of useless flesh and he couldn't even be nice anymore.

Luke stared back out at the highway and noticed a form between the lanes that George was quickly approaching. Luke tensed himself for the impact. George stomped on the brakes, the car stopping shy a few feet from the body.

“I'll be,” George muttered, gazing at the fallen man. “Would you look at that.”

“What do you think happened to him?” Luke asked, in Dolores Dimitri's voice.

“Road kill,” George replied, opening his door and shifting his weight out of the car.

Luke inched the car door open and cautiously stepped out of the car, a ball of fear burning in his stomach.

“Stay back, babe,” George called, approaching the body.

“Be careful, George,” Luke replied.

George knelt down close to the body. Luke watched from the car, peering apprehensively at the body. Suddenly, he heard an inhuman scream and saw George's body tense.

An instant later, George fell back across the pavement, his throat ripped out and bulging eyes fixed to the sky.

Luke's heart began to hammer. The form on the road rose. It was a tall, lanky figure. And on its shoulders was the head of the wolf.

It approached him, its black eyes glinting from the car headlights. It walked to him upright, dressed in dirty gray clothes. Luke was frozen, his mind blank at the image. The wolf was inches from him, blocking the sight of George's body, its filthy gray fur stank and its breath made him want to gag.

Its hand probed him, and Luke leapt away from the image as the wolf turned him around and shoved him over the hood of the car.

Suddenly, another image burst into his head. The image was of a giant wolf. White fangs lashed out, tearing, rending. Luke could feel the fangs ripping at his flesh. The wolf consumed Luke on the astral plane, seeming to devour him, body and soul. It had him cornered in a gray area of reality. He was imprisoned in a limbo and the wolf's tremendous stature afforded him nowhere to flee. Luke staggered, unable to establish control over this vision. He felt himself being sucked in. Eaten.

"What's wrong, Luke?" Harlson called out, pitching his cigarette aside and quickly approaching the psychic, who was staring straight ahead into empty space, his arms up and trying to fend off fangs only he could see.

Luke fell to the ground with a bone-shattering thud, and Harlson watched in horror as Luke's eyes rolled up into his head. Luke began to wheeze sharply, his head pounding the pavement of the road. His head came down hard and fast, his blank expression devoid of pain. His gnarled hands clutched at his invisible enemy and his legs spasmed, his heels digging into the earthy shoulder of the road.

"Christ Almighty!" Harlson shouted, squatting down and pulling Luke's head onto his lap. Lubin and Lane rushed to his side. Luke was having a grand mal seizure.

Spittle flew from his mouth and his arms flailed madly.

Just like Bertha Hobbs, Harlson thought, shoving a pen into Luke's mouth to prevent him from swallowing his tongue. Harlson, Lane and Lubin struggled to hold the psychic down.

"Call for a goddamn ambulance!" Harlson ordered a uniformed officer.

CHAPTER 22

Mission accomplished, Tammy thought, perching on the sofa with a glass of iced tea and a worn paperback mystery. Her chores were done. The house was immaculate and pine scented furniture spray hung heavy in the air.

Spic and span, Tammy mused proudly, setting her tall glass on a cork coaster. She had the rest of the day to herself, and was going to indulge in fiction until it was time for her afternoon talk show.

She opened the paperback to a folded page and began to immerse herself into the plight of a hard-boiled private eye. Something had a hold of her, though, hauling her back into reality.

She refolded the page and put the book on the coffee table. Tammy stretched out on the sofa, staring at the ceiling. There's got to be more to life than this, she thought. Her periods of depression were thickening, and she was finally beginning to understand why.

She had to go way back to get to the root of the problem. Her mind drifted to her rearing in Lake Worth.

Her father had taught her to be strong, self-sufficient.

"I seen girls can't even balance a checkbook," he had told her once on a fishing trip. "If a man really loved his girl and wanted to do right by her, he would teach her to take care of herself. A girl's got no right sitting on a throne, without a notion of life or a lick of sense, waitin' for a prince to whisk her off. It don't happen, Sassy. Daddy's goin' to teach you to fend for yourself."

And with that, Nathan Larson picked his pride and joy up in his arms. Tammy flailed and screamed. She wore a gray, one-piece bathing suit, though at eight years old she barely knew how to wade.

"No, Daddy, no!" Tammy pleaded.

Nathan pitched the girl into the warm, Eagle Mountain Lake water. Tammy bobbed back out of the murky water, trying not to succumb to its depth, which she had never tested.

Nathan calmly lit a cigarette and watched his daughter strike at the water, her panic-stricken face reddening as she wailed for help. Nathan watched with a gleam in his gray eyes, smiling softly.

“Who’s goin’ to save poor Sassy?” he called, shoving his free hand into his trouser pocket and leaning against a post. “Looks like poor Sassy might drown, lest someone save her. Oh, now who’s goin’ to save my poor Sassy?”

Tammy eventually tired, and her legs sagged toward the seeming abyss below her. To her shock, her feet almost immediately felt muck below them. The water rose only to her chest.

Nathan pulled his cap over his eyes, tilted back his head and laughed heartily. He extended a hand to his daughter, pulling her up on the pier.

“Bet you think your Pa is a mean cuss, huh?” he said, as Tammy stared at him with stupid eyes, her small frame still shuddering from the fright. “You’ll thank me one day, girl,” Nathan promised, shrugging a towel over her shoulders.

They went home, where Tammy’s mother immediately laced into Nathan for his foolhardiness. She insisted Nathan did such things to Tammy because Tammy was an only child and Nathan had no son to torture with chauvinistic rituals.

As the years rolled on, Tammy understood what her father had done to her. He had prepared her for a world where women are looked at like objects, ripe for victimizing. He had made her strong, hard, ready for a world that perched like a vulture on a cactus, waiting for her to falter, stumble, show any frailty or vulnerability that would allow it to feast upon her.

She had been somewhat radical during college. A feminist to be reckoned with. A person who believed in peace, but would go blow for blow over any belief or right anyone dared to take away from her.

The jocks at North Texas State University had branded her a lesbian when she wouldn’t go “just a little further” in the backseat of their cars.

Some of these cases were borderline date rape, but Daddy had taught her how to deal with those guys. The really persistent ones usually limped back to Kerr Hall, too blue balled to show up for practice the next day.

She had been a woman with aspirations that many of her peers would never have considered. *And what am I now, for God’s sake?* Some years ago when she had given up her career in the realty business to be Luke’s manager and agent, it had seemed like the right thing to do.

She submitted his novels for him. She booked him on talk shows. She set up appearances for him at book stores. But it was years since Luke’s last

novel hit the stands, and his next venture wasn't even in the works yet.

He had a drawer full of notes, but his police work took too much out of him to sit behind his computer and produce something for Tammy to work on.

Her favorite part of handling Luke's work was editing his material for him. How a holder of an English degree made so many atrocious mistakes was beyond her.

Now, that stuff made her life meaningful and interesting. How the manager of a successful author had deteriorated to a common housewife was a question she couldn't even begin to answer.

And the hell of it was, she seemed to enjoy the idle time. Tammy thought back to her younger self, who would have rebelled against such complacency. *I've gone soft*, she thought, sighing.

She resented Luke sometimes. She resented him for leading such an interesting life while she kept the home fires burning. Her work with the local literacy campaign and the meals on wheels program salvaged that deep, *save the world* part of her, still lingering there from college.

But she needed to change her programming. After Luke's retirement, maybe she would start her own business.

Luke would support it, she couldn't fault him there. Her inactivity was her own fault, not Luke's. He would stand behind any decision she made. Which was a healthy thing for him to do, unless he wanted a bout with blue balls.

Tammy snickered, deciding to chart her career course with the rest of her time and discuss her options with Luke when he arrived.

The phone rang.

Tammy rose from the sofa and briskly walked to the breakfast bar, gingerly picking up the receiver.

"Hello?" she said, pleasantly.

"Mrs. Glover?" A man's voice.

"Yes."

"This is Detective Harlson. Listen, your husband had some kind of seizure. He's here at Herman Hospital. You better..."

"I'll be right there," Tammy said hurriedly, hanging up the phone as she glanced around wildly for her car keys. Her heart raced.

Dammit, Luke, she thought. *Don't give up on me now.*

CHAPTER 23

Darkness. Light. Darkness. Light.

Luke's eyes fluttered open and his mind emerged from the shroud that had fallen over it after the wolf attacked. His eyes squinted, adjusting to the brightness of the hospital room. He was immediately drawn to Dr. Spencer's worried face, hovering over him.

"Luke?" Dr. Spencer spoke, shining a penlight in Luke's eyes. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Luke replied in a cracked voice. He cleared his throat. God, he was parched. "I hear you...water, please? Thirsty..."

"Of course," Dr. Spencer replied, filling a plastic cup with water from a pitcher. He extended the cup to Luke. "Can you manage?"

Luke nodded, grasping the cup with both hands and sipping the water.

Spencer took away the cup when Luke was finished and pulled a chair next to Luke's bed. "What day is it, Luke?"

"Wednesday," Luke replied, feeling his faculties return to him.

"Who was the father of our country?"

"Washington. I'm fine, Dr. Spencer," Luke said, shifting upward and feeling a burst of pain on the back of his head.

"You have a very nasty bump," Dr. Spencer said, his kind, old face grimacing at Luke's discomfort. "Don't move around too much. You don't have a concussion, but I'm keeping you here for overnight observation."

Luke settled back down, his normal pain coupled with the goose egg at the base of his skull.

"I remember the routine," Luke replied, shuddering from the agony.

"We gave you a catscan while you were out of it. As you remember, you are allergic to the dye, so you have a few welts on your chest. I gave you a preventative shot, though. But until it takes affect you might itch a while."

"Thanks, doc," Luke said, noticing the bandage on the inside of his right arm. They had fed him the dye intravenously. They weren't pumping anything

into him now, so he felt somewhat at ease.

“I want to run a few more tests on you tomorrow,” Dr. Spencer said, staring at a chart. “This was a most unfortunate incident, but I hope it will stress what I’ve been preaching to you like a brimstone and fire evangelist. Seizures happen, sometimes. We’ll probably never know what the exact cause of this one was. But I’m afraid they may become more frequent, maybe more intense, if you don’t give your noggin a break.”

“Don’t worry, doc,” Luke said, reassuringly. “I’m bowing out. I haven’t been that much of a help to this investigation, anyway.”

“I’m damned glad to hear you say that, Luke,” Dr. Spencer said, patting Luke’s knee and rising. “Now, Tammy should be here at any time. Detective Harlson is lingering in the waiting room. He was very concerned about you. I’ll send him in for a moment, but I don’t want you exerting yourself, physically or mentally. Understood?”

“Perfectly,” Luke replied. “Uh, doc, how about a pain killer?”

“I hate to break this to you, Luke, but it will be two more hours before I can give you anything. Just relax. That’ll help more than you can know.”

Dr. Spencer left the room, leaving Luke with the pain. A mere minute passed before he heard a light knock at the door. The knob turned and Harlson peeked into the room.

“Hey, sport,” Harlson said, stepping into the room. “How are you faring?”

“I’ll survive,” Luke replied.

“Well, that’s good to know,” Harlson said, shutting the door and approaching Luke’s bed. “This seat taken?” he asked, motioning to the chair.

“Help yourself,” Luke offered.

“Thomas and Sally wanted to be here, but I told them there was no sense in all three of us waiting for you to come around. Now, you want to tell me what the hell happened out there?”

“I saw the wolf,” Luke said, staring at his feet as he related the story. “I understand what happened to Bertha Hobbs, now. It was horrible. It was a vision of a giant wolf and it felt like it was ripping me apart.”

“What do you make of it?” Harlson inquired.

“Two things,” Luke said, damning the pain that he thought would surely drive him mad until a nurse came with his medication. “I think the killer believes himself to be a wolf, like Dr. Perez implied. His astral projection would take on the form he believed was his spiritual essence. I saw him as such because, according to his psyche, that’s what he is.”

“Interesting,” Harlson said, resisting the urge for a smoke. “What’s the

other thing?”

“The psychic residue was negatively charged. It was like a defense mechanism, you know?”

“No, I don’t know.”

Luke searched for a comparison. “Okay, let’s say a house represents the face of the killer. Now, to see the killer, I have to step inside the house. Now, let’s say a pit bull is chained to the front porch, so I can’t get inside.”

“Oh, I think I follow you. To see the killer, you have to get past this wolf.”

“Exactly. I know you don’t put much faith in what I’m telling you, but if you get another psychic, that person will have to talk to me to get a better understanding of what that person will be facing. I saw what he did to George Dimitri. I couldn’t give you the exact details, because it was from Dolores’ perspective and George’s back was to her. But I’ll tell you this much...the guy’s a fucking animal. I wished I could have gotten something more tangible on him. I can confirm what the pathology boys will be telling you soon, but I can’t give you anything on him.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harlson said, his features turning serious. “The commissioner wants you off of the case. He wanted me to thank you for your efforts.”

“So I’m canned?”

Harlson nodded. “Bottom line. No one wants your blood on their hands. Especially me.”

“I understand. So, now that we’re not partners, you can answer a question for me. What do you have against psychics?”

“My wife ran off with one,” Harlson kidded. “I’m sure there’s something to it all. Hell, that business on the highway today would convince anyone of that. I guess I have a hard time dealing with things I can’t touch or see. I guess I’m like a caveman stomping on a fire, you know?”

“Yeah. Well,” Luke said, extending his hand. “It’s been real.”

“I don’t care what anyone else says about Lucas Glover,” Harlson joked. “You’re okay in my book.”

Luke felt the doom around Harlson again, but maintained his smile, forcing the dread down deep. Remorse welled within him at not being able to tell Harlson of the vibes he felt. He had a feeling Harlson knew of his fate. It wasn’t much comfort, but it kept his guilt at bay.

“See you in the funny papers,” Harlson said, turning and leaving the room.

Luke had no time to digest the visit as Tammy stepped into the room, the concern on her face slowly melting as Luke smiled at her weakly.

“Are you okay?” Tammy asked, perching in the chair and grasping Luke’s hand.

“I’m fine,” Luke insisted.

“What am I going to do with you?” Tammy said, squeezing his hand.

“You’re going to have to put up with me being around more,” Luke said, drawing her close. “Because I’ve got all the time in the world on my hands now.”

CHAPTER 24

Harlson entered the precinct, bypassing his area and heading straight for the conference room. A message had been relayed to him over the band that Lubin was waiting for him. *Probably wants a status report on Glover*, Harlson realized, wondering if Stuart had come up with any new evidence.

He entered the conference room, spotting Thomas and Sally standing near the chalkboard.

“William,” Lubin said, the etch of concern on his face as strong as it had been on the highway. “How is Mr. Glover?”

“He’ll be okay,” Harlson replied. “The worst that happened to him was a knot on the head.”

“Does he recall anything?” Lane asked, visibly relieved.

“Did you guys ever read the report on Bertha Hobbs?”

Both agents nodded solemnly.

“Luke fared better than she did, but he didn’t come up with anything except an image of a wolf that took ten years off of his life. He said the psychic residue was negatively charged. He called it a defense mechanism.”

“Interesting,” Lane said. “I wonder if this means the killer is a clairvoyant.”

“Luke didn’t mention anything about that,” Harlson replied sternly, his patience with mysticism exhausted. “He did say that the killer must envision himself as a wolf. He said he was receptive to the image the killer projected.”

“That would corroborate with Evelyn’s theory,” Lubin said, thoughtfully.

“Did Agent Stuart come up with anything?” Harlson asked hopefully.

“He’s still working on it,” Lubin replied. “We should hear from him by morning.”

“So, what do we do in the meantime?”

“Are you up for a little night jaunt, detective?” Lubin asked.

“What do you mean?” Harlson said.

“Have a seat,” Lubin replied, motioning toward a map on the table. It showed Highway 45 with murder sites flagged in patterns.

“We have a lot of ground to cover by dusk.”

Dreg stood on the porch of his den. The woods were gathering darkness sooner than the highway would. The sun was barely visible over the peak of trees and Dreg snarled, squatting to his haunches and arching his back. There would be a substantial portion of the moon this night. *Yes sur*. Le Louf would be out. But that annoying voice was telling Dreg to stay in his den this night.

“Get out!” Dreg shouted at the man voice in his head that was trying to reach him through the animal furor that was building up inside of him. *Yes sur*. The night would be fruitful. Le Louf would keep a bright watch. He would hunt like Le Louf this night. He would open prey and delight in the red. He would...

“Leave me!” Dreg screamed, shaking his head.

The voice would not stop. The warning continued....*Stay in this night, yeh heh?...comboy men be on the trail soon...be brave wolf, but be wise old wolf...no hunt tonight...*

“No man hunt, okay,” Dreg gave in. He heard the nocturnal animals in the nearby woods begin to applaud nightfall. “But Dreg still hunt, yeh heh?”

Dreg arched back his head, a howl escaping from him. He ripped at the sweaty tank top he wore and his pale face contorted to an animalistic expression. His shoulders tensed and he drew the cooling air deep in his lungs. He leaped from the porch in one fluid motion, landing squarely on his heels several feet from his den. He quickly glanced to his right, his long hair sweeping across his shoulders. He sniffed at the air, leaning his head in the direction of the scent. His lips curled back and a deep rumbling echoed from the pit of his stomach beyond his razor sharp teeth. He quieted down, his attention drawn to something moving about in the growth.

He froze, hunched over the earth, all senses directed at his quarry. A raccoon moved a few feet away and Dreg ate up the distance between him and his prey in five bounds. He plunged into the brush, snarling madly and biting the animal’s life away before the startled creature had a chance to flee or defend itself. The raccoon shrieked as Dreg drove his teeth into the nape of its neck. It struggled for a pitiful second until Dreg lifted it off of the ground and jerked his head, breaking the raccoon’s neck.

Dreg gazed up and saw the eye of Le Louf already above in the gray sky. He howled triumphantly, dragging the prey into the open. The lifeblood of

the animal on his tongue drove Dreg into a frenzy.

He feasted.

Ricky Lee stretched out across the front seat of his car. He was parked at a rest area on Highway 45. The night was beginning to blanket the highway, and Ricky Lee glowed inside, his excitement growing stronger as the light faded from the sky.

He was a good two hours from Houston. The rest area lights sparked on, illuminating the dingy, mason buildings that were set up as restrooms. It made no sense to Ricky Lee. He was in the middle of no man's land, and the state had a little shithouse erected every fifty miles or so.

Go in the fucking woods, for Christ's sake. Conserve a little aqua. Jesus, he thought. The environment is going to hell in a handbasket. The deteriorating state of the earth really troubled him. And nobody seemed to give a shit. What kind of world would he be living in one day? Man, it was a crime. His pondering stopped when a red Corvette pulled behind him. A buxom woman in shorts and a halter top bound from the car and made her way to the restroom. The big-boned blond wore sunglasses, though it was becoming quite dark now, so Ricky expended no serious inspection on this one.

Got the shades on the windows to the soul pulled down, he realized. Besides, the only thing he was killing at the moment was time.

He had heard about the Keepsake Killer's recent party on the car radio earlier in the day. He wanted to make sure the smoke was cleared before he made his move. He would cruise in, see how heavy the heat was, and gradually pull back far enough to put his own mark on this macabre masterpiece.

Oh, yeah, he thought, downing the lukewarm beer that had been resting on his dashboard. *It's going to be one crazy summer.*

CHAPTER 25

Lorrie shook awake.

“Easy now,” Shaw said softly, stroking her sweaty brow. “You were having a bad dream.”

They were in Shaw’s darkened living room. Lorrie was stretched out on the sofa, her head on Shaw’s lap. His parents were out and the world was pitch black beyond the living room windows. “What time is it?” Lorrie asked groggily.

“Nine-thirty,” Shaw replied. “Jeez, I hope you got your nap out. You’ve been asleep for two hours. You’ll be up all night now and we start our pilgrimage tomorrow.”

“I couldn’t help it,” Lorrie said meekly, sitting up. “I was just so tired.”

“So, what were you tossing and turning over?” Shaw asked, picking up the remote and tuning the volume to the television set down.

“I had a dream about the kids in elementary school teasing me again,” Lorrie said, snuggling close to Shaw. “Then, I dreamt that I was in a forest and some wild animal was chasing me. I could feel it behind me, breathing down my neck, but every time I looked around, it was gone.”

“It was me,” Shaw said, clutching at Lorrie’s breasts. “The horny monster of Bellaire, stalking another victim.”

“Stop it,” Lorrie complained, frowning and pushing Shaw away. “It was a really scary dream. And you weren’t even around to protect me.”

“Oh, come on,” Shaw said, flabbergasted. “Are you mad at me because I didn’t show up in your dream and save you from the monster?”

“Yes,” Lorrie said, with a mock pout. “You don’t love me.”

“Sure I do,” Shaw said, tickling Lorrie’s ribs. “I’m just scared shitless of monsters.”

“If we were attacked by a monster, you would run away, wouldn’t you?” Lorrie asked, grasping Shaw’s wrists and sitting on his hands. “You would probably run me over to save yourself. Or, better yet, toss me at the creature

as a distraction.”

“Hey, babe, every man for himself.”

“You scumbag,” Lorrie said, scooting to the other side of the couch.

“I’m only joking,” Shaw said, defensively. “I’d die for you, Lorrie Macroon. And if you don’t believe me, I’ll blow my brains out right here with one of Dad’s rifles to prove it.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Lorrie scolded him, slapping his shoulder. “I don’t like to hear you say stuff like that.”

“Then don’t say I’d leave you behind as a tasty monster morsel,” Shaw said, his masculinity bruised. “I’m not a pussy. I’d kick that monster’s ass.”

“I know you would,” Lorrie said, arching up and rubbing Shaw’s leg. “I was only joking. So tell me, my big brave man, why are we moving the schedule up on our pilgrimage? I thought we weren’t going until next week.”

“My old man was ragging me today about helping him out at the dealership this summer. Fuck that noise. I’m not spending my vacation that way. So, we’ll slip away tomorrow morning before he tries to drag me downtown.”

“He’ll freak, Shaw. Maybe we should just cancel out. Your dad will probably call the cops on us or something.”

“He won’t do shit. I’m going to leave him a note and he’ll sit here and fume for a couple of weeks until we get back. Then he’ll threaten to throw me out. Mom will talk to him and he’ll give me the thin line lecture, and everything will be back to normal. No sweat. I know my parents. All talk and no action. And, if Dad does throws me out, he knows I’ll just sleep in the alley next to his dealership where all of his friends and employees will see me.”

“That would really get him,” Lorrie agreed.

“Yep,” Shaw said, grinning triumphantly. He had all of the bases covered. “My dad is too proud to deal with that.”

“I told my mother this afternoon,” Lorrie said, gazing at the television.

“Did she give you a hassle?”

“No,” Lorrie said, feeling a pang of sorrow that she instantly bit away. “She said that was fine.”

“When are you going to introduce me to your mother?” Shaw asked suspiciously. “We’ve been going together for nearly a year and I’ve never met her.”

“She’s really busy,” Lorrie insisted. “She works double shifts. I’ve told you that before. Besides, who I see is none of her business.”

“Are you sure you’re not ashamed of me or something?”

“Don’t be silly,” Lorrie said, rising and heading to the bathroom. “I just don’t think you would get along with her.”

“Yeah,” Shaw called after her. “The way you describe her, nobody’s perfect for her little girl.”

Lorrie stepped into the bathroom. She closed the door and rested against it. She closed her eyes and envisioned her mother, sitting in the squalor of their apartment, her dispassionate eyes fixed upon the gray picture of the television.

Lorrie cried.

CHAPTER 26

Harlson and Lubin drove down the dark expanse of Highway 45. Harlson drove his unmarked squad car. He glanced over at Lubin, who was brooding quietly. Harlson wondered what was up. Sally was five miles ahead of them on the highway. Lubin had checked in with her over the wire every ten minutes. He looked as if he was about to pick up the mike and call her again.

“Hey, what are you fretting over?” Harlson remarked. “Christ, Thomas, you can practically hear her breath over the tap. Why the mother hen routine?”

Lubin nodded and sighed. “You’re absolutely right, William. Sally has been in the field for over a year now. I shouldn’t be so concerned. I just wish we could keep her in sight. It would alleviate my concern somewhat.”

“Thomas, old pal,” Harlson said, patting the dashboard. “I’ve got a monster under this hood. I can catch up to her in minutes, if I have to. You know, the way you’re wringing your hands there, a person would almost swear that you were sweet on Agent Lane.”

“I give Agent Lane the same concern I would give any agent who was trying to attract the attention of a redoubtable psycho like the Keepsake Killer,” Lubin said, harshly.

“Whoa, take it easy,” Harlson replied. “I didn’t mean to raise your hackles. I was just goofing.”

“I’m sorry,” Lubin said. “In retrospect, I wish we had brought back-up. Then maybe...”

“Then maybe we would be tripping over an entourage under Captain Fowler’s command,” Harlson interjected. “Like Sally explained, the three of us stand a better chance at catching this guy because of our low profile, if nothing else. If we had started requisitioning back-up, trust me, Fowler would have tried to make a media circus out of this. He lives for that shit. He’s screwed up covert operations before. We’re doing the right thing.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Lubin replied. “Catching this killer would definitely be a feather in the cap for the person who makes the collar, but we don’t need

publicity hounds trying to muscle in. And, no doubt, if this operation were bootless, Captain Fowler would graciously leave us with the credit for any blowback.”

“So, you’ve met the guy, huh?”

“Oh, yes,” Lubin replied. “I couldn’t stand him.”

“I bet we have a lot in common,” Harlson said, checking his speed to maintain the darkness between him and Sally Lane.

Sally Lane lived for sub rosa operations. She had always been a fan of intrigue long before her decision to join the Bureau. Behavioral science was a long and laborious function, relying on deduction and mental prowess. She was a bibliognost and there wasn’t much that was terra incognita for her. But to be out in the field, relying on her instinct and physical training to subdue a killer, this was the reason she had gone into law enforcement.

Of course, at Thomas’ behest, she was little more than a scout. She wasn’t allowed to actively engage the killer without confirmation from Thomas. This angered her, not being able to act of her own volition. Thomas knew she would not act without his blessing, as she was Argus-eyed for proper procedure and regulations. She was a canonical agent who would never flagrantly deviate from the system.

She drove a blue Ford mustang and she had worn a floral dress to give the appearance, perhaps, of a young woman on a night errand. Her revolver was safely tucked in a loud, purple handbag.

In the distance, Sally spotted the hazards of vehicle pulled to the side of the road. “I see a car pulled over on the shoulder,” she spoke, the microphone taped to her chest relaying the message to Thomas and Harlson. “Looks like car trouble.”

“Do you see anyone around the car?” Thomas asked, the message coming in through her earphone.

Sally drew closer, and spotted a light-haired young man lingering by the open hood of the car. “Yeah,” she replied. “A young guy. He doesn’t fit our speculation of the killer. Listen, I don’t want to leave him out here.”

“Roger,” Thomas replied. “But proceed with caution.”

“Like always,” Sally muttered, agitated.

Ricky Lee leaned against the front fender of his car as the Mustang pulled up. The fake breakdown worked every time.

Here we go, he thought with a grin. The first customer of the night.

CHAPTER 27

“Boy, am I glad to see you,” the man said to Sally.

Sally was instantly attracted to the man, though he wasn't very well-groomed. His golden locks were unruly and he wore a plain attire of a wrinkled untucked shirt and faded denims. He had crisp, blue eyes and a devilish grin. Though she would guess his age at mid to late twenties, he had a worldly air about him. He seemed extremely comfortable with himself and he had a penetrating stare. His eyes absorbed hers, never wavering, seeking her soul out...

“What's the problem?” Sally asked, snapping away the admiration. She felt slightly flushed and chastised herself for feeling like a schoolgirl. She had a job to do.

The man shrugged. “Beats me. I'm not mechanically inclined. So, what's your name?”

“Excuse me?”

“I was just wondering what the name of my rescuer was,” the man said, presenting his hand. “Mine's Ricky, and I really appreciate you pulling over. You should be careful, though, in this day and age.”

“Yes, I know,” Sally said, shifting her handbag from her left hand to her right to meet his grip. “I'm Sally. And, believe it or not, I know a few things about cars. May I?”

“Certainly,” Ricky said, escorting her to the hood. “If you make this dinosaur run, well, I'll just have to show you my appreciation in any way you want me to.”

Sally stared at the man in her headlights. Something about him suddenly put her off, and it wasn't his come-on line. She shrugged the feeling away and glanced under the hood.

“Here,” Ricky said, offering a penlight.

She looked into the engine and noticed that the distributor cap was separated from the motor. It registered in her head an instant later; the cap

was a classic ploy. If he tries to start it in front of someone, it won't start. This is for effect. Something's going on. Apprehension filled her as she looked naively up at the man.

"Everything looks okay to me," she replied, backing away from him and heading to the road. "I passed a police car a few miles back. I'll flag him down when he comes by and have him call a tow truck."

"Hang on, Sally," Thomas spoke over the wire. "We're on our way."

"Then, we'll have to make this quick, I suppose," Ricky said. "My charm is obviously wearing thin."

Sally diverted her attention away from the vague illumination of Harlson's headlights and looked back as Ricky charged at her, brandishing a pocket knife. He slashed her under her left eye, the tip of the blade snapping off, embedded in her cheekbone, before Sally could defend herself.

She gasped and stumbled backward, tripping and landing on the road, her handbag pitching out of her hand across the pavement. Blood blocked her left field of vision.

"Sally! Sally! What's happening..." Thomas shouted over the wire, his voice fading as the earphone came loose and flung over her shoulder. She felt the man's weight as he pounced on her. Through the pain, she instinctively brought up her hand, clasping Ricky's descending wrist and delaying the killing blow.

"Be still, sweet Sally!" Ricky exclaimed, his face glowering. "All the young girls love Ricky! You love me, don't you, bitch? Mommy loves her daddy, doesn't she? What wicked games do you play, Sally? What ugly secrets do those eyes hide? You can't hide it from me! I can see it in your eyes, Sally! Those beautiful fucking eyes! What do they see, Sally? What do they see, bitch!"

"A maniac!" Sally screamed, reaching up with her free hand and clawing at Ricky's face. He screamed as her nails left wet, red trails in his cheeks and tried to swat her hand away. Sally arched up, shoving back the psychotic picaro and scrambling for the handbag.

She had it within an inch of her reach when she felt Ricky grab her ankle. Harlson's lights were growing brighter, but Ricky was too consumed with his hatred and psychosis to notice.

"You see nothing, Sally!" Ricky screamed, trying to pull Sally back across the gravel on the road. Her blouse bunched up to her bra, and she could feel the abrasive road bite into the flesh of her stomach. She tried to flail away from him, but he maintained the hold and continued ranting.

“None of you see anything! You’re all blind! You’re all fucking blind! You’re a fuck and suck machine and I’ll have no more of it! No more pain! No more treachery! No more memories! You’ll only have eyes for me, now!”

Sally kicked away his grasp, pulling her bag close and retrieving her revolver. She flipped over on her back, in time to see Ricky over her, his face bleeding profusely and knife clutched over his head in both hands.

“Open your eyes and free me!” Ricky shouted, as he thrust the knife toward her.

Sally extended the .38 upward and fired. The shot caught Ricky’s shoulder, throwing him back.

She heard Ricky crumble to the ground. She slowly lowered her arms, gazing to her right as Harlson’s car pulled alongside the shoulder. Sally heard the car doors open and wiped the blood out of her eyes and tried to focus. Lubin’s worried face appeared in front of her. She felt his hands clutch her shoulders.

“Sally? Are you alright? Sally?” Lubin said, applying a handkerchief to the wound on her cheek.

“I’m okay,” she said. She was barely standing as Lubin pulled her to her feet.

Through a thin film of blood, she saw Ricky, backed up against his car. His face was bloody and his shoulder was torn open. Harlson trained his gun on the killer.

“Now, you just sit there until we get an ambulance, you hear?” Harlson warned.

Ricky stared beyond Harlson at Sally, grinning like an idiot, suddenly oblivious to his wounds.

“What pretty eyes you have, Sally,” he said, dreamily. “The prettiest I’ve ever seen.”

“We radioed in for an ambulance when we heard your gun,” Lubin said, boldly embracing Sally. “I’ll radio for another one. I don’t want you to ride with that scum.”

“I’d like the company,” Ricky sneered.

“Shut up, you bastard!” Lubin yelled. He advanced on Ricky.

Harlson wrapped his arms around Lubin and was amazed at the difficulty he had in holding the slender man back.

“You just sit there and keep your goddamn mouth shut until the paramedics arrive! Open your mouth again and I swear I’ll shove my gun in it!”

“Touchy, touchy,” Ricky chastised him.

“Stop it, Thomas, stop it!” Sally screamed in Lubin’s face. “I told you I’m okay! Just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean I can’t get knocked on my ass, and I resent not being able to stand on my own and dust it off without you carrying on like my father or something! I knew the risk involved, so just leave it alone.” Sally shook with anger. The handkerchief she held over her wound dripped with blood. “Leave everything alone. I don’t need to ride in the ambulance. The bleeding is slowing down. So knock off your macho bullshit and treat me like you would anyone else.”

Harlson released Lubin. Lubin approached Sally, shaking his head dumbly. He attempted to say something. Sally’s bloody glare stifled whatever it was he had been intent on uttering. He slumped away, examining his prisoner.

“Who are you?” Lubin asked, his voice still quivering with an angry edge.

“Why, I’m the Keepsake Killer, of course,” Ricky said matter-of-factly. He winced and gazed at his shoulder wound. Blood drenched most of his shirt. “Oh, god,” Ricky muttered, surveying the damage with a weak expression. “Is all of...that coming...out of...me...”

Ricky fainted away, his head slumping against the front bumper.

Harlson felt for a pulse. “Still alive,” he reported to the agents. “And I may not be psychic, but I’ll tell you one thing. This isn’t the Keepsake Killer.”

The ambulance arrived moments later, paramedics administering first aid to the prisoner. Sally sat on the curb as a paramedic tended to her cheek. Lubin watched from a distance, glad the wound, albeit messy, had been a fairly superficial one.

Harlson approached Lubin. “Life Flight is sending a helicopter for the guy. He’s lost a lot of blood, so they want to fly him in. They’ll probably take him to Ben Taub Hospital,” Harlson betted. “The trauma center there is the best in the medical complex. We’ll question him after his condition stabilizes.”

“Very good,” Lubin replied, his attention still on Sally. “We can try to find out who he is and what possible connection he might have to our killer.”

“We won’t have to work too hard,” Harlson responded, handing Lubin a dog-eared scrapbook. “He’s got everything we need in here. I found it in his car. And Thomas, you’ll never guess who this character really is.”

CHAPTER 28

“Seventy-two women slain within a three-year period,” Lubin announced to the assembled investigative team in the conference room. He tossed Ricky Lee Charney’s scrapbook onto the conference table. “The first entry in this journal was his mother.”

Harlson sat closest to Lubin, damn proud of their collar. Fowler sat across the table, along with Whittle, Perez and Stuart. Sally Lane was at her home, recuperating from her injury, and Harlson was relieved that she and Lubin weren’t in the same room. He had seen more than he had wished to between them.

Lubin picked up a manila envelope and pulled out a white, thick document. “Ricky Lee Charney,” he read, relaying the prisoner’s statistics. “Twenty-eight years old. He hails from Jupiter, Florida. At age sixteen, he tried to kill himself. He was diagnosed as a manic depressive and institutionalized until he was eighteen. He lived with his mother until three years ago, when she disappeared. An APB was issued for Ricky, but he was never picked up on it.” Lubin pitched the file onto the table. “Until now.”

“And this guy claimed to be the Keepsake Killer?” Fowler asked. “What are the chances of that?”

“Null and void,” Harlson interjected. “Charney kept photographs of his victims, as well as areas and dates of the crimes. He was in Oklahoma two days ago. He couldn’t have committed these murders. Every entry in his journal puts him far away from our sites.”

“Not to mention that his blood type clashes with our killer’s,” Agent Stuart added, his face weary.

It was three a.m. Everyone assembled in the conference room had been roused from sleep with the exception of Harlson and Lubin. Dr. Perez raised her hand.

“Yes, Evelyn?” Lubin said.

“There is a possibility that Charney is associated with our killer. I have

read cases where serials kept in touch with one another. Maybe these guys were pen pals or something.”

“I didn’t find anything that would indicate that in his car,” Harlson spoke up. “And it could be several hours before we can interrogate Charney. He’s still in critical condition.”

“So, now we come to the big question,” Lubin announced. “Where do we go from here? According to past reports, the Keepsake Killer will be moving on soon. As much as I hate to admit it, we may have missed our chance to catch him. We have a body count of nine, possibly ten victims, from our boy. He seldom ever surpasses that mark. Unless Charney knows something, I sincerely doubt we will be able to come up with enough to corner him. He will migrate soon. The reams of previous reports point to that. In another week or two, he’ll move on. Unless he pulls something really sloppy, which I doubt he would do at this point, I would say he’ll move to a new hunting ground.”

“My department has a more optimistic view of events,” Fowler chimed in. “Now, before I get to that, I have to tell you that I was a little taken aback by your performance tonight. I thought you were going to keep me updated on this case.”

“Keeping you posted would have been a courtesy, but it most certainly wasn’t a necessity, Captain Fowler,” Lubin said with a superior air. “The Bureau is free to act of its own. Please don’t take your exclusion personally. It was a spur of the moment decision and we had reasonable belief that the less outside influence over our mission tonight, the better.”

“Still in all,” Captain Fowler said, evidently disgruntled, “I’ve spoken to the commissioner and I have the department’s stance on this turn of events. We are to tell the media that we have apprehended a man claiming to be the Keepsake Killer. We will neither deny nor support that claim. When we have more information from Charney, we’ll release our findings. If Charney knows something, maybe we’ll catch the killer. If he doesn’t, then we caught the Optometrist, a pretty impressive catch in itself, and the public will forget about the Keepsake Killer for now, taking the heat off of all of us until next time.”

“I see,” Lubin replied, nodding thoughtfully. “The public wants lobster, so we’ll feed them London Broil instead. I’m not too fond of meddling in public relations, but that sounds fine to me. As I said before, the killer will most likely be moving on soon, and we have a lot of work ahead of us with Charney’s bloody trail to unravel. A lot of rivers to be dragged and relatives

to notify.”

Lubin stared at his watch, then turned his eyes back to the room. “Anyone else?”

The sleepy-eyed group was silent.

Officer Whittley glanced around the room, looking ready to waylay the next person that rose a hand.

“Then, that concludes this meeting. Let’s get some rest. We all have a very busy schedule tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 29

Tammy escorted Luke out of the hospital, elated by his clean bill of health. “Now, you’re going to have to take it easy,” she reminded him, echoing Dr. Spencer. She put sunglasses on him and stopped at the curb. “Stay here,” she said. “I’ll go get the car.”

“Really, Tammy,” Luke said, “I think I can make it to the parking lot.”

“Stay,” Tammy said, defiantly.

“Okay,” Luke said, holding up his hands resignedly. “Bring the car around, Jarvis.”

Tammy smiled and bound toward the parking lot.

Boy, is she geared up, Luke thought. The pain he suffered had subsided, but was still much stronger than the discomfort he was accustomed to. *Could be worse though,* he reminded himself. *I could have ended up a drooling vegetable like Bertha Hobbs.*

Tammy’s beige Mercury pulled in front of him. He extended his hand to the door handle. “Uh-uh,” Tammy said, suddenly appearing in front of him. She opened the door and ushered him into the car. She jumped back behind the wheel and coasted off of the hospital grounds, driving slowly through the medical complex. “I have a big surprise for you,” Tammy said, beaming. “I heard it on the radio this morning. They caught the Keepsake Killer.”

“You’re joking?” Luke said, his spirit rising above the pain.

“Come on, I wouldn’t joke about something like that.”

“Well, who is he? Where did they catch him? Tell me everything,” Luke prompted her.

“It was real sketchy,” Tammy replied. “The newsman said that a man attacked an undercover officer last night and was taken into custody. They said the man claimed to be the Keepsake Killer. Of course, no one has come forward to confirm it, but you know how the force is.”

“Yeah,” Luke said, familiar with the procedure. “They want to make sure this guy isn’t bogus. But, usually, they feed hooks to the media to discount

the loonies. You know, slightly vary the actual account. They say a murder victim was shot six times when he was actually shot twelve times. Weeds them out real fast, which must mean if they haven't come forward with anything yet, they might have the killer."

Luke turned on the radio, tuning in the news station. "I should call Harlson and..."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Tammy said sternly, turning off the radio. "You're retired, remember? I talked to Dr. Spencer while you were getting dressed and he said I could drive you to Dallas. So, as soon as we get home, we're going to get ready for a nice trip. You'll rest while I make arrangements and pack. We'll head up there tonight, so the heat won't aggravate your condition."

"But Tammy I..."

"No buts," Tammy interjected. "I don't want you to even think about this anymore. You can find out all about it in two weeks when we come back home."

"Yes, Mrs. Glover," Luke sighed, resignedly. "You're the boss."

"And don't you forget it, sweetheart," Tammy said, pulling out of the vast medical complex and into the throng of lunch traffic.

CHAPTER 30

“So, how are you feeling, Ricky Lee?” Lubin asked, standing at the foot of the killer’s bed.

“I’ve been better, I’ve been worse,” Ricky Lee replied nonchalantly. He grinned stupidly from the drugs that were constantly being pumped into him. They cut the pain, of course, but they also kept him in a mentally arrested state to prevent any notion of escape. His left arm was in a sling and his shoulder was bundled thick with bandaging.

“We’re not going to get anywhere with him like this,” replied Harlson, who was standing next to Lubin.

“I’m not to sure about that,” Lubin whispered. “As doped up as he is, he might slip and give us something.”

“What are you whispering to your boyfriend?” Ricky Lee sneered. “Sweet nothings?”

“Ricky,” Lubin continued, “you claim to be the Keepsake Killer. We know now that’s untrue. You are the Optometrist. You’ve killed seventy-two women all over the country. You can tell us why you committed these acts at a later date. At the present, though, I would like to know about your connection to the Keepsake Killer, if there is one.”

“How’s Sally?” Ricky Lee asked, ignoring the question and staring at Lubin knowingly.

Lubin paused for a moment.

“Now listen, you little bastard...” Harlson spoke up.

“It’s okay,” Lubin said, reassuringly. “Despite your attempt on her life, Sally is doing just fine.”

“Tell me something,” Ricky Lee said, with a curious look. “Is she a screamer? I mean, does she rake at your back and bite your shoulder? Or does she just stare at the wall while you hump her, wishing for a real man and waiting for you to drift off before she reaches for her little mechanical friend?”

Lubin stared in stunned silence. Harlson saw his back muscles tense underneath his jacket. Lubin was just barely hanging on, Harlson noted. He realized this was hitting too close to home, so he steered the agent away from Ricky and toward the door.

“Go check on Sally,” Harlson said.

Lubin shook his head, rubbing his brow. “How utterly unprofessional. I’m sorry, William. Just give me a second. I’ll pull it together.”

Harlson gripped Lubin’s shoulder. “Go check on Sally,” he repeated. “I’ll quiz the comedian here.”

Lubin nodded and quietly left the room.

Harlson turned his attention back to Ricky Lee, who had a smug expression on his drowsy face. “Let’s get one thing straight, laughing-boy. Pull your head games on me, and I’ll wrap your I.V. around your neck and strangle you. Comprene?”

Ricky Lee stared at Harlson intently. “You’ll never catch him, you know. You can’t.”

“Do you know him? Who is he?”

“He’s Jesus Christ and I’m his lowly disciple.”

“You’re a class B nut and he’s a class A. Give me a name. Put up or shut up.”

“His name is death.”

“Is that a first or last name?”

Ricky Lee laughed. “You’re funny, for a porker.”

“You don’t know this guy, do you? You’re just dicking me around, right? Like you just dicked around Agent Lubin?”

“Could be. Or, I could have a photographic memory and his address could be flashing in my brain as we speak.”

“Care to share it with me?”

“No. And don’t even try to smooth talk me with plea bargaining or any of that horse shit. I know they’ll never let me loose.”

“So, why am I wasting my time on you?”

Ricky Lee grinned. “That’s what I was just wondering.”

CHAPTER 31

Dreg stepped outside and met the afternoon. He had stayed up until dawn, praising Le Louf until the silver fell from the sky. He sat on the porch, wearing trousers, a dingy nightshirt and suspenders. He hung his feet above the ground and surveyed his surroundings, which were bright and pleasant. He yawned and stretched, his back popping. There would be a large part of Le Louf in him this night as well. This would probably be the last night for a man hunt in this area.

The voice in his head was already cautioning him on the hunt that night, but he had a clever plan that would compensate for the risk. He had suppressed the wolf the night before, settling for scrawny prey. He would not be able to do so this night, especially since it was his last kill for the season in Texas.

Yes sur. He was a wise old wolf because he had a plan that would allow him the hunt and camouflage him from the cowboy-men. He turned the plan over in his head for a few moments, and then nodded and smiled at his craftiness. He was covered.

Dreg rose and stepped off of the porch, wadding into the field for an appropriate place to piss. He found one in a low clearing, weary of attracting chiggers to his private, and relieved himself. He felt especially good this particular day, and he had no real clue why. He was still an old, lonely wolf without a louve or pack to lead, but something inside of him felt a change coming soon.

Yes sur, he thought, tucking himself back in his pants and opting for a stroll through the woods. Le Louf would see to his favored cub. This loyal Traiteur was leaving it all in the hands of Le Louf.

Le Louf willing, the pack would rise again.

“You didn’t say anything about walking,” Lorrie complained, as she and

Shaw walked down the shoulder of the 610 highway.

“That’s the whole point of a pilgrimage, baby,” Shaw said, wrapping his arm around Lorrie’s shoulders. “It’s a trek. An odyssey. We’re on a path of spiritual enlightenment.”

Lorrie wilted in the heat, shrugging Shaw’s sweaty arm off of her. The traffic on 610 was bumper to bumper, and the fumes from the vehicles made her head swim.

“I don’t see why we couldn’t drive down the path,” Lorrie said, hiking her back pack up. Her armpits were already chafed by the straps.

“Look, you’re missing the whole point,” Shaw argued.

“Forget this,” Lorrie said, turning around. “Look, your parents are gone. Let’s go back to your place and take your car. I’m real hot and real tired, so we’ll hang out at my place until we’re rested, okay? Like, maybe wait for dark before we head out, since your air conditioner isn’t working? My mother won’t be in until midnight, so we have plenty of time.”

“But that’s not a pilgrimage,” Shaw said, exasperated.

“Neither is exhaustion and dehydration. Either we take the car, or all bets are off.”

“Okay,” Shaw gave in. “But you’re ruining the whole experience.”

“No,” Lorrie corrected him. “I’m saving our lives. It’s burning up out here. Look, let’s head to my mom’s after we get your car, throw back some ice tea, and fool around until it gets a little cooler.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Shaw replied, suddenly agreeable to the detour.

Luke sat in his easy chair as Tammy went about packing their belongings in the bedroom. He already felt bored and had made several attempts at the phone.

Tammy seemed to appear whenever he tried to sneak a call to Harlson, so Luke was watching the afternoon news, which availed nothing but the same sketchy details that Tammy had heard earlier.

The police commissioner had promised a press conference for the evening or early the next day, so Luke turned off the television and settled back in his chair, gazing out of the window at two boys throwing a football in the quiet street.

He a bad feeling. He couldn’t reason the dread away, and he couldn’t pinpoint the source of his anxiety. Perhaps it was the future that loomed

ahead of him. He had no reason to be apprehensive of his situation, though. Spending a quiet life with Tammy had before been a far away fancy. Now he was realizing that desire.

So why was he feeling anxious? Why was there a nervous tingle in his stomach? Why was his head drunk with apprehension? His affiliation with the case was over, and his sleep the night before had been one uninterrupted by strange dreams. His only concern now was himself and his wife.

So why did he fear that the world would soon come crashing down around his ears? That oblivion was rushing headfirst at him?

“Penny for your thoughts?” Tammy said, pulling him away from the dread.

“I’d be overcharging you,” Luke replied, trying to be pleasant.

“What’s the matter?” Tammy asked, cocking her head in sympathy. “Do you need a pain killer?”

“No, I’m fine. Just trying to assimilate. I’m so used to my old routine. I guess I sort of miss it.”

“I know you do. That’s why we’re getting out of here tonight. When we come back, we’ll both figure out what to do with ourselves. I suppose you’ll want to write another book.”

“Oh, yes. I feel at least three more books stirring around in my head. After that, I thought maybe I would go on a lecture circuit or something. Non-strenuous stuff. I really feel I have a lot to offer people, especially budding psychics.”

“That’s wonderful. I have a few ideas for a business myself, but our first priority from now on is pleasure. We’ll discuss the business stuff later. I’m going to get back to it now. Do you need anything?”

“Just you.”

“Then you’re set for life,” Tammy replied with a smile, stepping back into the bedroom.

Luke gazed back out of the window, his perception a little sunnier now. The feeling in him was a resistance to change, he figured. And though the feeling was still strong, still a persistent aggravation to his nerves, he would not consider any other possibility. He was in pain and his life had been torn from his grasp recently. Whether it was for the better or worse, it was still an experience he needed time to adapt to.

CHAPTER 32

“We should never have let things come this far,” Sally said to Thomas. He was at her small apartment located near the Galleria, the largest and most prominent shopping mall in Houston, famous for its indoor ice-skating rink and neighboring Westin Oaks hotel, a haven for visiting politicians and celebrities. Sally stood on the terrace with her back to him, preferring to stare out at the bustling mall crowd on Westheimer Street as she spoke rather than him. “Things are getting out of control between us.”

Sally wore a robe and clutched a cup of tea in her small hand. Her face was bandaged and the wound had been stitched. There would be a scar, her badge of honor. She had mused that having scars on your face was preferable to having them on your haunches, but she still was considering plastic surgery. Even so, the wound was easier for her to deal with than Thomas.

Thomas stammered for a second, a trait unusual for the confident man, then his shoulders sagged despondently. “So it’s over?”

“Yes,” Sally replied, growing misty. “We can’t let our feelings cloud our judgment, or our duty any longer. When we started this, we agreed that we could maintain our work decorum. That scene on the road last night has proven to me that this isn’t going to work.”

“I was concerned, Sally,” Lubin protested. “You had blood smeared all over your face and that psycho bastard was snickering about the whole incident. I lost it. Granted. But don’t you think you’re making a bigger deal out of this than it’s worth?”

“What about the next time, Tom?” Sally replied. “What if I get my brains splattered all over the pavement?”

“Don’t say things like that,” Lubin groaned.

“It could happen, Tom,” Sally snapped. “It could happen right in front of you. I accept the danger. You don’t. That’s why I want that part of our relationship ended. You care. You care so much for me. And that’s going to make you sloppy sometime and it could be you, me or someone else who

pays the price for it. I can't deal with that."

Thomas shook his head silently. He suddenly looked lost and afraid. He no longer resembled the vital and confident mentor or caring and attentive lover. He looked like a man who had lost the thing he treasured the most in the world and Sally had to turn her back to him once again. She would lose her resolve to that sad face, as she had before. She meant it this time and would not allow him the opportunity to work his emotional manipulation.

"It's not your fault, you know," Sally said softly, her gaze going back over the terrace. "I dated a few professors when I was in college. I guess it's some authority fixation I have."

"Can we please sit down inside and talk?" he asked, his tone patient.

"No," she replied flatly. "I have a habit of getting into relationships like this. It's a repetitive cycle. Negative reinforcement. You know, like the bum who hits the lottery and is poor again within a year?"

"I thought we were more than a fling," Lubin said, sounding offended. "I certainly felt more."

"So did I. But it's over."

"So you've learned all you can and it's time to move on, is that it?" he said, harshly. "Time to find the next professor?"

Sally gritted her teeth but refused to turn around. "That's the most insulting thing I've ever heard anyone say. I would never have expected that from you. Please leave," she said, resisting the urge to assail him with every shortcoming her mind could compile on him.

"I'm sorry, Sally," he said, sighing. "That's not like me. I'm just so upset."

"I am too," she replied, wishing he would just leave and quit torturing the both of them.

She felt him advance on her. "Don't, Thomas," she urged, her mind made up. She gripped the small iron wrought fence that circled her terrace. "It's better this way."

Thomas' hands hovered above her shoulders. He slowly pulled them back and walked toward the door. "I'll always love you," he vowed, choked with emotion. "I'll always be there for you." "I know," Sally whispered, the emptiness finally hitting her as she heard Thomas leave.

Harlson sat behind his desk. His station was empty and he was thankful. His stomach twisted with agony. He sweated profusely and exceeded his

medication to override the torture. He felt sick, but kept his meager breakfast forced down.

His time was growing shorter, and he was running out of options. He had to apprehend the Keepsake Killer. It was his destiny. His mark. His mind raced with gambits that would help him procure his spot in the history books, but his pain demanded his attention. He got up and staggered to the restroom, retching into the dingy bowl. His vomit was crimson, and Harlson knew that his end was near.

No, he thought, bending over to the floor. *I won't let it end like this. It can't end like this. There has to be something I can do.* Harlson cradled his burning abdomen until the pain settled down.

There was knock at his stall.

"William?" Sergeant Skinner's voice. "Is that you in there? Are you okay?"

"Yes," Harlson spoke in an agony riddled voice. "I'm fine. Just a hang over. Don't worry."

"Okay, but maybe you should head home. You sound like shit. Oh, congrats on the collar. But don't celebrate so hard next time."

"I'll remember that," Harlson muttered, grasping the toilet paper and tearing off a long trail to wipe his face. He composed himself enough to sit on the bowl. And there he sat, until he collected enough strength to leave the restroom.

All for nothing, he thought, leaving the station. The pain was tolerable, but the spasms were growing in intensity. He was at the peak of the ridge.

And it was all downhill from there.

Dreg napped on a cot, reserving his energy for the hunt that night. His legs quivered and he moaned in his sleep. In his head, he was the wolf, stalking prey in the woods. He was about to fell a doe when the hackles on his neck stood at attention and his senses were drawn away from his quarry.

Above the peak of dark trees, a light grew, and the evil couchemal rose into the sky. It was a tremendous apparition, the disembodied spirit of an infant with hideous feline eyes filled the night above him, blocking off even Le Louf. The light that hung about the spirit was blinding, and Dreg scurried toward the dissipating shadow, tail between his legs, as the couchemal's essence began to descend toward him.

"Little pup," it spoke in a demonic voice. "Your hunt be ended. I come to

deal wi' you good and proper, yeh heh? The pack end wi' you, Traiteur. You be the last one."

A surge of courage swept through Dreg and he stood his ground, snarling at the demon. *Le Louf, give me strength*, he prayed, his paternoster falling on deaf ears as the couchemal laughed insidiously, its deceptively innocent face forming into a mask of evil as it scooped the wolf into the air with its giant infant hands and tore him apart.

Dreg was awakened by a scream.

His own.

His terror echoed through the forest, sending flocks of birds into the air. He was drenched with sweat and his limbs shook.

"Jes' a bad dream," he realized, placing a gnarled hand over his trip hammering heart. He occasionally had nightmares about the couchemal. They had never been as intense as this one, however.

Dreg lay on the cot, quaking with fear. *It not be real*, he thought, trying to soothe himself. *Couchemal can't hurt me. It be in the swamp, cursing the den. Can't never hurt me. Le Louf watch over me. Jes' a bad dream. Never eat again 'afore you sleep.*

Dreg sat up, clutching himself for security.

CHAPTER 33

“Everything’s in the car and ready to go,” Tammy announced, perching in Luke’s lap.

It was nine p.m. Luke had slept most of the afternoon and was feeling much better. Something still nagged at him, but he thought the trip would remedy that bout.

“Then, we’re all set?”

“Yep,” Tammy replied, yawning. She looked exhausted. She hadn’t slept much the night before and most of the day had been spent on her fretting over Luke and getting everything in order for their impromptu trip.

“I’m driving,” Luke offered, hugging her.

“No,” Tammy insisted. “You should just relax and enjoy the ride.”

“I’ve been relaxing all day. I’m driving. You look ready to pass out. Besides, if it’s a strain, then I’ll wake you up after a hundred miles or so and let you take over.”

“Promise?”

“*Promise.*”

Tammy kissed his forehead and stood up. “Let me just check the alarm one more time and make sure the timer on the lights is working.”

“I’ll start the car,” Luke said, pulling himself out of the chair.

“Shaw? Shaw, wake up,” Lorrie said, nudging his shoulder. “It’s twenty after nine. We better get going.”

Shaw, in a deep slumber after marathon sex with Lorrie, lumbered awake. “Wha...huh?” he muttered, bolting up.

“We fell asleep,” Lorrie informed him. “It’s twenty after nine. We better get out of bed and hit the road before my mother comes home to one hell of a surprise.”

The possibility sobered Shaw up. “Yeah, okay,” he said, sitting up on Lorrie’s bed. Her tiny room was darkened. Moonlight lit a portion of the floor, where Shaw had exiled the array of stuffed animals that Lorrie slept with at night.

“I packed a few munchies in the kitchen before I woke you up,” Lorrie said, caressing Shaw’s bare back. “I’m going to use the restroom, and then we can leave.”

“Word,” Shaw replied, taking a deep breath and standing to stretch his scrawny frame.

Dreg ran the plan through his head one more time. It was infallible, so he scoffed at the voice in his head. It had taken him quite a while to pull himself together after his nightmare. But now, a lesser but still great portion of Le Louf beckoned him in the sky. A little less than half a moon. But enough to still deny the man and free the wolf.

He stood at the threshold of his den, poised with a set of car keys in his hand. It had taken him three hours to fish the proper set from the filled coffee can and match them to the vehicle he needed for the hunt. But the aggravation had been worth it. Dreg closed his eyes and raised his arms in the air toward Le Louf.

“Hunter of hunters,” he said. “Lord above. Guide yo’ earthly cub this night. I take prey this night. I make yo’ feast soon, ’fore the season end. I do you proud, Le Louf.”

Dreg howled, then bounded toward the lot of cars near his den.

CHAPTER 34

“Watch your speed,” Lorrie said to Shaw, who drove his weather beaten Camaro down 45. “You know how bad the cops are around here.”

“You don’t have to remind me,” Shaw said. “And I’m only doing sixty. So don’t worry about it.”

Lorrie settled back in her seat and stared out at the thick darkness that had blanketed the road. There was nothing but untamed forest out there. Dark, foreboding woods hiding God knew what. Lorrie’s shoulders shuddered.

She would never drive this stretch alone, especially at night. She brought her gaze back into the car, afraid of glimpsing some monstrosity on the fringe of the wilderness. She was glad she was with Shaw.

“Where are we heading?” Lorrie asked, going through Shaw’s glove compartment for a decent tape to play. Music would take her mind off of the road.

Shaw shrugged. “I thought we would head toward Oklahoma, maybe. I’m real anxious to drive through another state. I thought about us going to Mexico.”

“I don’t know if I’m feeling ambitious enough to hit another country, straight out of the gate. Why don’t we take it slow?”

“Another country?” Shaw laughed. “I’m talking Mexico, Lorrie. It’s practically Texas, as it is. Except the tequila is cheaper.”

“Baby steps. I’m a newbie. Never left the nest before, remember?” Lorrie reminded him.

Shaw sighed, then thought for a moment. “Maybe we’ll grab a motel room in Dallas,” Shaw suggested. “Nothing fancy. But it will still be kinda cool, right?”

“Very romantic,” Lorrie agreed. She shoved a mix tape into Shaw’s player and turned the stereo up. She glanced out at the dark woods and tapped on the dashboard. Suddenly, the music stopped and she heard Shaw mutter, “Shit.”

Lorrie quickly glanced at Shaw, who stared into his rearview mirror. She turned around, cringing at the bright headlights in the back window. A red and blue light sparked on the top of the car.

“Don’t stare at him,” Shaw chastised her.

Lorrie turned around. “Oh, shit, Shaw. Do you have your proof of insurance and everything?”

“I’m not worried about that,” Shaw said, pulling over to the shoulder. “I’m worried about the half ounce in my trunk.”

“Shaw!” Lorrie exclaimed. “I told you not to bring any of that stuff.”

“I forgot about it,” Shaw replied, putting the car into park.

“Great,” Lorrie said, panic-stricken. “We’re going to jail.”

“Just be cool,” Shaw advised, as the shadow of the officer loomed outside of Shaw’s window.

The back of a hand rapped softly on the glass.

“Oh, Christ,” Shaw muttered, rolling down the window. “What’s the problem, officer?”

A hideous face emerged in the car. The man was old, with long silver hair that fell over the door. His eyes were dark and his mouth was absurdly large.

“You got the problem, meat!” Dreg exclaimed, grabbing Shaw by the throat and pulling his head out of the window.

“Shaw!” Lorrie shrieked, clutching his shoulder and trying to pull him back away from the grotesque man.

“Run, Lorrie!” Shaw shouted, his arms snaking out of the window to fend off the attack. “Get out of here! Go! Now—” Shaw’s body went limp. With tremendous effort, Lorrie attempted to pull him back inside. Her tug of war opponent let go, and Lorrie fell back across her door, Shaw’s weight driving the small of her back painfully into the door handle. Shaw’s head rested against her bosom.

“Shaw?” Lorrie said fearfully, pushing him up. His throat had been torn open. His face was drained and the red flooded over her. She could feel it now, on her blouse, her face, all over her. Sticky and warm. Shaw’s life drenched her.

She screamed and kicked away from his corpse, opening her door and falling to the pavement. Her eyes fixed on a pair of dusty boots. She gazed up slowly at the blood soaked face of Shaw’s killer. The tall, pale specter of death grinned at her. By the light of the car, he resembled a deranged circus clown. That wide smile. The vulture nose. He extended a hand to her.

“Maybe Dreg have other plans for you, yeh heh?” he said softly, a spark

of understanding giving a light hue to his button eyes. “Maybe Le Louf send you to Dreg? You be sage femme, lil’ one?”

Lorrie had no idea what the maniac was talking about, but she somehow understood what he meant. She shook her head vehemently, her sanity barely intact. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she continued to shake her head, at the killer, at fate, at God.

“No,” she pleaded with the killer, and as his hands pulled her up and drew her into his arms, death was suddenly the second worst thing she feared.

“You be Dreg’s louve,” he said tenderly, his mouth closing over the bottom half of her face. She tasted the blood on his face. Shaw’s blood. His tongue snaked into her mouth and her body went limp. She almost fainted, her spirit caving into the madness.

Dreg’s hands roughly probed her body.

Dreg broke away, his foul breath out of her mouth and now on her face. “You bear Dreg’s cubs,” he said, pulling her toward the darkness of the woods.

“No!” Lorrie shouted, a resurgence of resistance allowing her to buck out of his arms.

Dreg scrambled for the girl. In her panic to flee the monster, Lorrie inadvertently struck him in the groin with her knee, causing the killer to yelp, suck in air and crumble to the ground.

Lorrie ran toward the squad car, praying the keys were still in the ignition. She could still taste the blood on her mouth. Feel the monster’s rough hands on her body. Her rationale had abandoned her. She moved now on pure self-preservation. Some mechanical reflex had taken her over. Inside her head her world had crashed.

“You be meat now, whore!” Dreg swore behind her.

He started to intercept the girl when his voice warned him an instant before he saw the headlights in the distance. He would let this girl go, though he longed to see her hot entrails poured out on the pavement. He glanced at the prey’s car. *Do not take it*, the voice told him. *The cowboy-men will catch you*.

Instead, Dreg reached into Shaw’s car, hoisted the body over his shoulder, and rushed into the darkness of the woods.

“What the Sam Hell is going on?” Officer James Whitley wondered out loud as the squad car in the distance swerved between the lanes and headed

at him.

Whittley hit his lights as the car closed the distance between them. Suddenly, the car swerved into Whittley's lane. He jerked the steering wheel, but not in time to keep the car from crashing into his.

The front end of the car impacted his side and both vehicles slid into the shoulder. Whittley, suffering nothing but a momentary shock, leapt from his car and ran to the offending vehicle.

The pale, crimson soaked, screaming girl behind the wheel clutched at his uniform.

"Easy, now," Whittley said, examining the girl with his flashlight.

"Killed...Shaw...man...facehorriblefacekilledShawohgodohgodohgod!" the girl carried on irrationally.

Whittley looked up the road and saw a pair of taillights. He sat the flashlight aside and grasped the girl's shoulders. She looked like hell. Pure hell.

"Calm down, sugar," Whittley said, relieved that the blood covering her wasn't her own. He saw no obvious wounds on her, besides a few minor abrasions. "Get a hold of yourself. Tell me what happened."

The girl laughed like a loon, her eyes rolled up into her head and Whittley knew that she had lost it. "The monster," she giggled. "The monster came out and killed Shaw. Killed him. Killed him. Dead, dead, dead..." She paused, her eyes suddenly looking far away. "I want my mommy," she said, meekly.

The girl passed out cold.

Whittley immediately felt for her pulse. After that, he reached for the police band.

Luke pulled over at a rest area. Tammy was sound asleep on the passenger's side, so Luke left the motor running and quietly inched out of the car. He shut the door easily behind him, glad the interior light had not roused Tammy from her sleep. She needed her rest. Luke stepped lively to the restroom, having had to piss for a good forty-five minutes.

He wondered if he should have stopped for that accident a few miles back. Hell of a note, he thought. Two highway department cars involved in a collision. He had spotted an officer lingering inside one of the cars though, and assumed the man had radioed for assistance, so he supposed there would have been nothing he could have offered in the way of help.

It had looked like little more than a fender bender, anyway.

Dreg emerged from the brush, a good two miles from the murder site. He had moved quickly through the woods, using routes that only he knew to put him far away from the scene, after setting a quick trap for the cowboy-men.

He glanced around, the voice in his head warning him that the cowboy-men would soon be behind him. Dreg looked up the road, spotting a ride home, and quickly made his way to it.

Tammy felt the car door open and cringed at the sudden light. The door shut and she felt Luke's weight settle into the driver's seat. She was vaguely awake, and drifted off without opening her eyes as the car began to move again.

"Tammy?" Luke said, standing at the empty curb of the rest area. The car was gone. He stepped onto the highway, searching frantically for the car.

"Tammy!" Luke shouted, seeing nothing on the road but darkness.

His head swam with dread. He turned and began to walk quickly back in the direction of the squad cars.

After a few seconds, he ran.

Whittley moved through the thick forest, following a trail of blood with his flashlight.

"Fan out!" he called to the back up that had arrived moments after his accident. He had ordered a canine unit, which was still on route.

The girl in the car, Lorrie Macroon, had managed to rip a slither of cloth off of the killer's shirt. He had hoped that the fabric would put the hounds right on the bastard, but hell. There was a trail of gore leading him on without canine assistance.

He had his revolver out and trained in front of him. The blood trail ended at a maple tree. Whittley fixed his light on the tree trunk, slowly tilting the

light up the bark. A large bundle of clothing, perhaps a wadded shirt, hung limply on a branch.

Whittley reached for the piece of evidence, pulling it away from the tree. He saw a pair of suspenders attached to the shirt and heard a heavy sound over his head.

He quickly shined the light upward, following the suspender to its anchor.

A nude corpse lurched forward over a heavy limb. As the body plummeted at Whittley, the stomach of the corpse, which had been sliced open, expelled its contents on the startled officer.

Whittley, first drowned by the slick inner workings of the corpse, was then driven painfully to the ground by its weight.

Whittley cried out to his men, a cry that was nearly muffled by the gore that had slipped into his open mouth.

Tammy woke as the car rumbled over a huge bump. She glanced to her left, her sleepy gaze fixing on the ghastly figure steering the car.

“Go night-night, louve,” Dreg said, grasping her hair and rapping her head against the dash before she could react, sending her back into darkness.

CHAPTER 35

Harlson was still digesting the murder of Shaw Austen, along with a cup of coffee, when Lucas Glover appeared at his desk. His clothes were wrinkled and his eyes were bloodshot. He clenched and unclenched his fists at his sides as he stared at Harlson. “We have to talk,” Luke said, grimly.

“I know,” Harlson said, standing up. “I talked to Whittle’s men this morning. I’ve been expecting you. Let’s go somewhere private.”

They walked into a dark, empty conference room. Harlson switched on the fluorescent lights and closed the door on the clamor in the hallway.

“He has her,” Luke said. “That guy you caught wasn’t the Keepsake Killer. I’ve been in the lobby of this place all fucking night waiting for answers and none of you assholes has come up with anything. But I know the answer. The Keepsake Killer has my wife.”

“Now, before you fly off the handle, let’s consider a few things,” Harlson said.

“What the fuck is there to consider?” Luke demanded. “My wife disappeared two miles from the Austen murder site. The son of a bitch that you assholes had the public believing was in custody got into my car while I was taking a fucking piss of all things and now he has my wife!” Luke shouted in rage, rage at himself as well as the force.

“Calm down,” Harlson pleaded. “You’re still weak from your spell the other day. You’ll end up right back in the hospital again. Now, are you sure your wife didn’t just leave you there? Did you have an argument with her?”

“No, god dammit, we were fine!” Luke shouted in Harlson’s face so vehemently that the detective pulled back. “I’ve already told you what happened. What are you going to do?”

Harlson didn’t blame Luke for the outburst. He very easily put himself in the same situation, and he wouldn’t wager on any less a spectacle. But he had to reach Luke through the anger. If there was a course of action to take, neither one of them would figure it out with him carrying on the way he was.

Harlson gripped Luke's shoulders. "Now be quiet for a second and listen to me. We've got men combing forty-five for her. We're checking every motel between here and Huntsville. If she's out there, we'll find her."

"No you won't," Luke said, tearing himself away from Harlson. "I told you. The killer has her. We have to do something before it's too late."

Harlson considered his next sentence carefully. He knew he would just be fanning the fire, but it had to be said. "If the killer abducted her, Lucas, then it's already too late."

"No," Luke said, shaking his head and pacing the conference room, his eyes fixed on the floor. "I feel her, Harlson. I feel that she's alive. I've spent close to twenty years with that woman and I know she's alive. She broke her arm two years ago while I was on the road. I felt it. Her car broke down near Conroe once, miles from a pay phone. Before she called me, I felt it. When her father died and she was in pain and I was in Tyler working on a case, I felt it. She's alive. And she's in danger." "What do you propose we do about it, then?" Harlson asked. *I have to humor Luke until he's willing to reason*, Harlson thought.

"I want back on the case," Luke said, staring straight into Harlson's eyes.

"Luke, I can't do that. You could have died the other day. The commissioner will roast my nuts if I let you have another go," Harlson protested.

"Fuck the commissioner," Luke said. "Look, detective, we're both working on tight schedules. You catch my drift, right? You want this killer and I want my wife. And this game just went into overtime, time that we're pissing away and neither one of us can afford to waste. Do you know what I mean, Harlson?"

"Yes," Harlson replied, his voice thickening a bit. Luke was throwing his illness in his face. He had figured Luke knew, the first time he met the psychic. And, he resented it, even though he knew Luke was a desperate man who would say anything to save his wife.

"I know exactly what you mean. But I still don't see how we are going to manage anything this time."

"I think I have a way around the wolf," Luke said. "I sat up all night thinking about it. But I need to get at some of the evidence again. And I heard there was a survivor last night."

"Lorrie Macroon," Harlson informed him. "She had to be heavily sedated and her doctor thinks it could be weeks before we can question her. She was severely traumatized."

"I don't need to question her," Luke said, holding up an open palm for

Harlson to see. "I only need to touch her."

Dreg crouched on the wood plank floor of the shed, watching the woman as she slumbered. He had scraped frost out of the freezer and wrapped it in a towel, using it as a cold compress for the bump on her forehead. He hoped he had not seriously injured her. He didn't think so. She had moaned and her eyelids fluttered when he brought her into the shed adjacent to his den. He had set a dingy mattress on the floor next to the generator for her. He could not keep her in the house. Not until she was ready for the truth. He had keepsakes inside that she wasn't prepared to see.

Dreg watched her as she slept, with wide, fascinated eyes. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever laid his eyes on. She had a golden mane of hair, the shade of sunshine on a tranquil pond. She had a full figure; her chest and hips gave her the shape of the women he had seen in old movies on the bar televisions in the French Quarter.

Dreg preferred those type of women; buxom, meaty. Mother had been that shape. Most of the women he came across were thin, fragile things that looked like they needed to be sat down and spoon fed. Hideous scrawny things on the verge of starvation. Unhealthy, sickly runts.

Not his louve, though. She was perfection, sprawled on the mattress before him. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to do more than that. He wanted to strip her clothes away, then take the under things off and survey his prize. He wanted to touch every inch of her. Smell every inch of her. Taste every inch of her. He wanted to open her legs and crawl between them and plant his offspring.

But no, Dreg thought, recoiling the hand that was reaching out toward her of its own accord. The lil' girl that had hurt his private had made him realize something. He was ugly; a bete noir. The only way to make this woman love him was to win her trust and appeal to her on a higher level. To take her now would taint the process. She had to love him, if she was to be his sage femme. She had to be learned of the ways, and she had to accept those ways.

He could take her now. It would be a very easy thing to do. He had to call upon every ounce of willpower he had to stop himself. But then he pictured her face under his siege. She would look upon him with fear and loathing. He couldn't stand the thought of that image. He wanted her to want his touch.

If I learn her of Le Louf, he thought, and do good by her and take care of

her and feed her every day, she might come around.

With time and patience, anything was possible.

The woman stirred, and Dreg inched forward, ready to serve her in any way he could. She immediately gripped her head, groaning and slowly opening her eyes. She focused on Dreg, and for a second, he lost himself in her face. Her eyes, blue as the sky on a clear day, fixed on him, and Dreg's heart raced as their gazes mingled.

And then the world was the same place it had always been for Dreg as the woman's face contorted in fear and she screamed, scrambling away from him. She edged herself to the generator, her back plastered to the greasy machinery.

"Please don't hurt me," she begged him, drawing her knees to her chin. "My husband has money. If you let me go he'll give you as much as you want. Please. I don't want to die." Her eyes clouded, and seeing her like that made Dreg want to weep himself.

"Is okay," Dreg said, wishing he knew more English other than a casual pleasantry. He knew some, enough to get by, but he knew the small words and how would he ever appeal to this woman, make her understand, on small words?

"Don't be afeared. I's won't hurt you. Dreg be mon vieux, eh? Ol' man."

She didn't seem convinced. Her fear was still strong, but she held back her tears.

"What do you want?" she asked, apprehensively.

"Is okay," Dreg repeated, nodding and smiling at her. "Jes'gonna be in here for a spell. You be okay."

"Are you going to let me go? I won't tell anyone if you do. I promise. You seem like a nice person," she said, forcing a smile and Dreg sensed her insincerity. "We'll just pretend this never happened."

"Is okay!" Dreg suddenly shouted, irritated by the woman. What did he have to do to calm her down? And did she think he was a stupid mon vieux? He couldn't let her go. She would be his sage femme, or she would ultimately be meat, this one. He instantly regretted his outburst as the woman flinched and covered her face. He was going about this all wrong. He shook his head apologetically.

"Is okay," he said, softly. "You stay here and I learn you. I learn you good and proper. You be okay. Yeh heh?"

Wide-eyed, the woman nodded, her expression subdued and still distrustful.

Time and patience, Dreg reminded himself. “I be Dreg,” he said, jabbing his thumb into his chest. “Who you be?”

“Tammy,” the woman said, smiling slightly, but still balled up fearfully.

“Tammy,” Dreg said thoughtfully, rolling the name around in his head. It was a name he would be using often from now on, and it suited his louve. Her name could have been shit, for all he cared, and it still would have issued from her lips like a sweet song.

“Tammy,” he repeated, nodding with approval. “Tammy is good.”

Dreg suddenly cursed himself for his inconsideration. “You be hungry, eh? Dreg go get you some fixins,” he said, standing and adjusting the Coleman lantern on the work bench.

The shed had no windows and was a vault of darkness, day or night. It was bare of tools; Dreg had cleaned them out while Tammy slept, so he was sure she could not get away. He left the shed, her frightened eyes transfixed on him as he closed the door.

He drew a bolt across the door, having set the shed up previously for trapped prey. He had never locked anyone in the shed before, but was confident his louve would not escape.

She was only a girl, after all.

Dreg inhaled the morning, his senses drunk from his spirits, and headed for the den to make Tammy breakfast.

CHAPTER 36

“The poor kid,” Harlson muttered, as he and Luke stood at the side of Lorrie Macroon’s hospital bed.

She slept, her thin form writhing under the hospital sheets. Her brow was furrowed and Luke imagined she was reliving the horror she had experienced. He imagined she would relive it, over and over. Her boyfriend had been slaughtered right in front of her. He was killed for no rational reason. His death had only been an amusement for a maniac.

Shaw Austen, a seventeen-year-old kid with the future stretched in front of him as wide and long as the highway he had been traveling. And from what Luke had heard, the kid’s’s parents would have to close the lid on Shaw’s coffin at his service.

Luke clenched his fists and gritted his teeth.

He’ll pay for this, he swore to himself. I’ll make him suffer for this and even more for Tammy.

But deep down he felt helpless. So fucking helpless.

“You better do your thing before her doctor gets back,” Harlson reminded him. “I don’t know if he would appreciate us being in here with her.”

“It won’t take long,” Luke said, pulling a chair next to the girl. She still moved fretfully in her bed, the sedation trapping her in whatever nightmare she was having.

Luke touched her cheek. She flinched, and then her body relaxed slightly. Luke leaned close to her ear.

“Lorrie,” he whispered. “I don’t know if you can hear me. If you can, then know that I’m a friend. I can catch the man responsible for Shaw’s death. To do that, I have to touch you. You can help me by remembering it. I know how horrible it is to remember, but someone else, someone close to me, will die if you don’t help me. Please help me. I’m going to touch you, now. I won’t hurt you.”

The girl didn't respond, but she settled down. Luke gripped her small hand. He felt her hand tighten in his and he smiled. He closed his eyes, clearing his mind to receive the data that would come to him from Lorrie. It wasn't normally an easy thing for him to do, and now, with Tammy on his mind, it was even harder.

Steeling himself, he pictured a tranquil pond. He focused on the smooth surface of water, barely disturbed by bugs skimming on it. Their patterns ran like tiny veins through the water. Lucas lost himself in his pond, leaving the world outside. He pictured himself sitting on a moss patch under the shade of an aged cypress tree. He leaned back against the trunk, feeling the rough bark against his back. He inhaled the scent of marigolds. He pulled a wild onion from the ground and nibbled on it. Here was only peace and sunshine and...

"Magoo! Magoo! Magoo!"

A schoolyard.

Winter.

Little bodies bundled up to keep warm.

Lorrie standing on a sidewalk, downcast eyes fixed on a hopscotch board, as a circle of children chanted at her teasingly.

"Magoo! Magoo!" they shouted, and though the taunt was a harmless one, an abstract insult, he felt rancid emotions well within her. Anger, frustration, alienation. He felt them boil in her small frame until he thought she would burst. She ran from the schoolyard, tears clouding her vision and the cold air biting at her face.

Her life continued before Luke's inner eye. Birthdays. Christmas. Halloween. He felt her pain, recent pain over her mother's inattention, her father's absence, Shaw's inability to face the world. But she had admired Shaw's innocence. She even envied it. He could shrug the worst the world threw at him away and wasn't hardened by it, like Lorrie.

'You were born an old woman,' her mother was fond of saying before she quit saying anything.

Luke saw the mother before she turned grey and quiet. She had been a pleasant woman. A beautiful woman with dark hair and tender eyes. A woman who existed only for her daughter.

'Why does a child have to fret and worry so much as you? Relax. Enjoy your youth. It won't be long before...'

'You got the problem, meat!'

Lorrie shook, her hand clamping to Luke's as tight as a vise.

He heard the voice through Lorrie and recognized it from his first vision. He was being sucked toward Shaw's death, and Lorrie was resisting it.

'I'm here, Lorrie,' Luke thought, maintaining the rapport. He didn't know why, but he was sure she could hear him. *'I know it hurts, but you have to show me.'*

Luke saw Shaw's death. He witnessed Lorrie stumbling from the car and confronting the killer. He saw from her eyes as she gazed up at the killer. He looked into the face of a wolf. The grey, matted fur. The large snout. The beady eyes. He saw the wolf pull Lorrie up and lustfully maul her.

'Maybe Dreg have other plans for you. Yeh heh?'

And then the image broke.

Lorrie began to move again.

Luke gripped her head and whispered, "It's over. Rest."

She settled down once more, her slumber finally unhindered by the experience.

"Thank you, Lorrie," Luke said, kissing the girl's forehead. "Thank you."

Luke stood. "Let's go," he said to Harlson. "I want to touch that piece of his shirt you were telling me about."

"What did you get?" Harlson asked, following Luke into the hallway.

"Not much again," Luke replied. "I can still only see him as a wolf. I do know his name, though. It's Dreg."

"Dreg?" Harlson said, curiously. "What the hell kind of name is that?"

"I don't know," Luke admitted. "But I'm positive now that he hasn't hurt Tammy. He's looking for a mate."

The revelation chilled him to the bone, but the other alternative was too horrible to consider. Dreg might...*Christ*. He couldn't think about it. His wife in the hands of a lustful man beast.

Sage femme.

The words suddenly rose unbidden into his mind.

Sage femme?

Luke stopped in the middle of the hallway. Harlson nearly ran into him.

"What do you mean by mate?" Harlson asked cautiously. "You mean he's..."

"Sage femme," Luke muttered, lost in thought.

"A sage what?" Harlson asked. "Luke, fill me in. What's going on?"

"That dream I had. I suddenly remember something from it," Luke said, closing his eyes and trying to grasp the memory with both hands. *"If light is tainted by darkness, the pack shall rise again, and the old hunger shall lead*

them’,” Luke recited.

“*He searches for the sage femme. The angel maker to bear his cubs’.*”

“What does it all mean?”

“He wants to make little maniacs,” Luke said through gritted teeth. “With my wife. God dammit! Why didn’t I see this coming? My dream told me everything I needed to know. I can’t believe I blew it off.”

“Take it easy on yourself,” Harlson said, gripping Luke’s shoulder.

Luke shook his head and walked into the hospital wing waiting room. He recognized Lorrie’s mother from his rapport with the young woman. She sat on a vinyl sofa, staring vacantly at the television mounted over her head. She wore no make up and her hair was covered by a bandana. She shook her head remorsefully, and Luke could almost read her mind.

Poor me. First my husband, now my daughter. Why me, God? Why does this always happen to me?

“Eileen Macroon?” Luke called out, approaching the teary woman.

“Yes?” the woman replied, clutching her purse to her chest.

Luke looked at her and thought of the gray woman in Lorrie’s mind. She was writing off her daughter as she had written off her husband. Giving in. Throwing in the towel. More misery for her to wallow in.

“Why are you out here?” he asked, harshly. “Why aren’t you in there with her?”

“Please,” the woman said, confused. “My daughter...she’s...”

“Take it easy, Luke,” Harlson reprimanded him. “She’s going through hell.”

“Who isn’t?” Luke growled. He turned his attention back to the woman. He realized he was going overboard. He calmed himself down and knelt to the woman, grasping her hand.

“Lorrie needs you in there holding her and speaking to her and pulling her back from this madness. Don’t lose anymore than you’ve lost already.”

Luke stood up and left the waiting room.

“I’m sorry,” Harlson said to the woman. “His wife is missing. We think it might be the same man who killed Shaw.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Eileen said softly, standing up and drying her face. “I’ve made so many mistakes. But I’m not going to do the same now. I’m going to be with my daughter.” Eileen left the waiting room, heading toward Lorrie.

Tammy pounded on the thick wooden door that barred her from the outside and freedom. Panic rose from the pit of her stomach. Her shoulder ached from her assault against the door, and she stepped away from it, rubbing her bruised limb, she immediately scoped out the gray, decaying wooden planks that formed four walls for a weak point.

Her head pounded from the goose egg on her brow. Her heart trip hammered and she felt on the verge of hyperventilation. She pulled her hands away from the rough wood and wrapped her trembling arms around herself. Stay calm, she told herself, fighting back hot tears that blurred her dim surroundings.

You're not the kind of woman that gets hysterical. You're strong. There has to be a way out.

She continued her search for a loose board.

Concentrate, Tammy, concentrate. Don't think about what could happen.

Her eyes scanned the dingy walls. Though aged, the pieces of the shed were strong. Sunshine poured in through the cracks of the shed and Tammy pressed her face against the wall, peering through the crack.

She saw forest, a thick wall of green spotted with parched yellow and dying brown. She moved to the wall on her right, looking through the space between the boards. More forest, an observation that heightened her apprehension.

In the middle of nowhere, abducted by an evident maniac whose intentions had not yet been revealed. What were his intentions? Just because he said he wouldn't hurt her didn't mean she was safe. What if he was toying with her? What if he was sharpening an ax at that very moment, leering at her tiny prison with a sadistic grin stretched across that horrible mouth of his? Tammy shook the thought away, moving to the wall on her left. She had to know her options. She had to stay rational and figure a way out of this mess. She looked through the left wall and her heart sank at the mass of cars parked in the field, hers among them. She slumped to the floor, her spirit suddenly unfaithful.

I'm going to die, she thought, and for a moment, she seemed calm, numb, accepting of the fate. She had never imagined herself in a situation like this. She quite honestly had no idea how to react. Shock, she figured.

Must be shock. I should be climbing the walls or praying or looking for an option. Anything but sitting here like this. Anything but staring at the floor like a helpless vegetable.

She considered the possibility of death. The prelude of torture. Would it be quick? Or would her captor delight in it, savoring her screams for as long as life sustained them?

She finally let the tears come. *Oh god*, she thought, her head suddenly heavy. *I don't want to die. Please let me live. I'll do anything to stay alive.*

Anything.

A thought interrupted her grief. She wiped her face dry with the cuffs of her blouse.

He's a man, after all. What if I...horrible, just the thought of it...but what if I...

"No!" she shrieked, lashing out at the wall with her hand. She pulled back a bloodied fist, riddled with splinters, but hardly felt the pain.

I won't allow myself to even consider that. I won't lay down with a monster. He's an old man. I have to fight him. Look around for a weapon or something.

She scoured the shed, a new determination keeping the apprehension at a reasonable distance.

I can't give into it, she thought, crouching at the base of the generator. Fear was her enemy, right now. She couldn't fall into its clutches again. She had to rebel against her situation before it consumed her.

Tammy felt between a cinder block that supported some type of pump and the generator. In the patch of shadow she felt something cold, and pulled a rusted screwdriver into the dim light of the lantern.

She clutched the prize to her chest, resisting the urge to scream in triumph. She had a tool, now. A weapon. Something she might have been tempted to throw away at any other time. An ignored, precious little screwdriver that she would mount on a plaque if it got her away from there.

She considered plunging the tool into the maniac's heart. She didn't think she had the stomach for such a drastic action. Not unless she knew the maniac was intent on killing her. She liked the idea of loosening some boards to escape better. She placed her rusted ally back in the shadow, deciding to wait for nightfall before attempting her escape.

Lucas, she suddenly thought. She had been so self-consumed that she had not yet considered what had happened to her husband. She had no idea how she ended up in this god forsaken place. Her last memory was of falling asleep in the car. What about Lucas? *He would never have given in without...*

"Oh, God," Tammy whispered, clutching at the fabric of her blouse.

Tammy heard a noise at the door. She moved back further into the shadow, stepping over the mattress on the floor.

Dreg opened the door with one hand, his other supporting a silver tray crowded with a bowl, plate of bread and eating utensils.

A mason mug of what looked to be sun tea dribbled onto the tray as the old man stepped into the shed and closed the oaken door on the sunny day. The old man approached Tammy, offering the tray of food before him.

Tammy shifted to her earlier position, against the generator, and realized that she would definitely not attack this monster.

He stood well over six feet, his shadow falling over her. He wasn't heavy set, but he looked strong. His hair was white, and flowed over his shoulders. And that ghastly face of his; those black eyes, devoid of life or emotion. His pallid face seemed to glow in the darkness as his back blocked the light of the lantern. His gray lips were drawn up tightly in a maniacal grin. Tammy couldn't read his expression; he was either being pleasant or he was about to open that mouth and bite her head off, she couldn't decide which.

As Dreg bent down and placed the tray on the mattress, Tammy tried to believe his earlier vow not to hurt her, but she couldn't. *I'm staring at death*, she thought fearfully. She thanked God, an abstract concept she had always shied away from, for the screwdriver and hoped that any supreme being in the vicinity would help out a nondenominational skeptic.

Dreg backed away from Tammy and sat down on the floor underneath the lantern. He drew his long legs up and wrapped his arms around them. Tammy stared at him for a few seconds. His brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"You eat," he said, motioning to the food.

"I'm not very hungry," Tammy tried to say pleasantly, the edge of fear still quivering in her voice.

Like a mad dog, she thought of her kidnapper. *Don't give him any fear. Don't feed his power*. She tried to steel herself, but his very presence, even casual and relaxed, perpetuated her anxiety.

"Wha 'is?'" Dreg said sternly, looking hard at the tray and back at Tammy. "You eat," he insisted.

Do what he says, Tammy thought. *Don't aggravate him*. She inched forward, peering at the meal Dreg had prepared.

A foul-smelling stew filled a deep ceramic bowl.

Suddenly, she chastised herself. *Lucas*. She had selfishly forgotten about him again the moment Dreg had returned. Her plan had been to comply with the old man, but her concern for her husband prompted a strained query from her lips.

"What did you do to my husband?"

“Heh?” Dreg muttered. “Husban’?”

“The man that was driving my car,” Tammy said, preparing herself for Dreg’s reply.

If Luke was dead, she decided, she would follow him in the matter of minutes. If this maniac had killed her husband, she was going to make a gambit at the screwdriver.

“Ah,” Dreg said, realization dawning on him. “He was makin’ pee, yeh heh? Kept l’auto goin’, so Dreg brung you here. Brung you here for good and proper...” Dreg stammered for the next word. “*Thing*. Got you here to learn you.”

“So you didn’t hurt him?” Tammy asked, relief and rage simultaneously vying for her attention.

How could Luke have been so careless? But, then again, if he hadn’t made it easy for this maniac, he probably would have been killed and the old man probably would have still abducted her, maybe even killed her sooner.

“No,” Dreg said, flipping his hand at her incredulously. “Jes’ brung you for a spell of learnin’. Tha’s all. You’ll unnerstan’ soon.”

“What do you want to teach me?” Tammy asked, hoping to draw the focus away from the terrible stew on the platter in front of her.

She barely kept her racing emotions inside. She couldn’t help herself. She was furious with Luke. He may as well of gift-wrapped her, for Christ’s sake! Leaving her in an idling car. Alone. In the middle of the night. This was his fault.

Dreg scowled at her. “We start learnin’ after you be full,” he said, pointing at the tray for what Tammy regarded as the last time before he began spoon-feeding her.

Tammy reached for the yeast bread on the plate. She tore a meager piece off of the loaf and stuffed it in her mouth.

Dreg smiled approvingly. “You try Dreg’s jambalaya. It be goooood! Bes’ meat in a state.”

Tammy stared at the bowl, her mind digging up excuses. “I’m a vegetarian,” she lied. “I don’t eat meat.”

“Wha’ is?” Dreg said in disbelief. “You try. You like it. It be good. Dreg make it good for Tammy, yeh heh?”

“Please understand,” Tammy said, stepping on imaginary eggshells. “I don’t eat meat. It’s bad for me, okay? I have intestinal problems.”

“Itent’ problems?” Dreg said curiously. “Wha’ is?”

“I don’t digest meat very well,” Tammy continued, hoping a medical

condition would excuse her from the horrid meal. "I'm sure it's great, but it will make me sick."

"Oh," Dreg replied, scratching his head.

"You understand?" Tammy asked. "I hope you don't think I'm being rude."

"No," Dreg said, shaking his head. "Don't want you sick. What you eat?"

"Vegetables, mostly. This bread is fine. Homemade, huh? It's the best I've ever had."

Dreg beamed. "It good you like. Dreg make it for Tammy. And got can greens in yonder. Go make you proper food for yo' belly." Dreg stood up and grasped the door handle. "Spinach?"

"That would be fine," Tammy said, amazed at how well she was keeping him docile. Keep the bullshit coming, she prodded herself.

"It no trouble," Dreg said, his features softening and an expression that chilled Tammy worse than his earlier ones radiated at her. "Dreg do anythin' for Tammy."

Dreg left.

Tammy sagged over the tray, relief applauding her courage. *Keep it together*, she told herself. *Luke is alive and well*. She had to take her kidnaper's word for it, but she didn't think this Dreg crafty enough to fabricate the story. Her husband's safety lightened her emotional load.

Only Tammy to think of now.

And despite the fear, despite her mortality staring her in the face, she now felt she had the resolve and determination to claw her way out of this particular pit.

Keep it together, she thought again, wondering if the screwdriver would be strong enough to pry the boards of the shed open.

CHAPTER 37

Harlson shut the door to the conference room then walked purposefully to Luke.

“Here it is,” Harlson said, holding up a small plastic bag that contained the piece of fabric recovered on the Austen murder site. “The lab boys ran it through the wringer. All they got out of it was wasted time.”

“I’ll see if I can do any better,” Luke said, taking the bag.

He stared at the cloth for a moment, wondering what would happen to him if he saw the wolf again. He was going to touch an actual possession of Dreg’s. The contact would be with Dreg rather than one of his victims.

Lorrie had survived and cooperated with him, so the wolf didn’t attack like it had with Dolores Dimitri. But to come in direct contact with the killer, the ramifications of such an act raced through his mind. There was a way, he thought, to come through this. But if his ploy failed, his brain would be as useful as a lump of Jell-O.

And Tammy would be at Dreg’s mercy.

“Are you sure about this, sport?” Harlson asked, his expression echoing Luke’s concern.

“I have to be sure,” Luke said. He was still hesitant to open the bag. “I’m just...” Luke paused, trying to put his fear into words. It wasn’t easy. Fatigue claimed every fiber of him.

His head pounded and he knew he probably couldn’t do this. *But Tammy, dammit.* Every moment mattered. He weighed his options. *If I go under in this state and can never come back, then I’ll do neither one of us good. But if I don’t act now, I might never get her back.*

“Shit, man. I’m scared,” Luke admitted, his eyes misting. He didn’t care that Harlson, that fucking emotionless dinosaur, was standing next to him.

He was terrified, for Tammy as well as himself. He wanted to curl up in a ball and just allow himself to be devoured by the monster fate. So much

falling down around him. His life torn apart in just hours. It was too much for him to take in. The fatigue, the dread. It had him rooted in indecision.

“We’re all scared, Luke,” Harlson said softly. “Every morning of every day that we wake up and leave our safe little homes and step out into this shitty world. We wait for the safe to drop on our heads. Don’t be ashamed of the fear. But if your theory is right, then you have to see this through. I’ll be here for you, but you have to face this alone and I know how God awful scared you must be of it. Think of your wife. You’ll find the courage you need.”

Luke nodded. “You’re right,” he said, damning the fear.

What he was about to face would be nothing compared to what Tammy was going through. His rage surfaced once more at the thought of Dreg’s intention. It wasn’t masculine pride that gnawed at Luke. He knew his wife. This was a fate worse than death for her.

If that son of a bitch had touched her, Luke was going to kill him. Sick fantasies of shattering the maniac’s kneecaps with a hammer and castrating the bastard with a rusty razor danced through his head, but he immediately dispelled them. They were as unproductive as the fear.

“I’m going to need total concentration,” Luke said, suppressing the rancid emotions. He had to be pure before he tried to call upon an image.

“Are you sure I should leave you alone?” Harlson said.

“If the worst happens, it won’t matter if you’re right next to me or a million miles away. I don’t need any distractions.”

Harlson nodded. “I’ll check in with you in half an hour or so.”

“Thanks,” Luke said, studying Harlson for a moment.

Luke had been so preoccupied that he hadn’t noticed the permanent grimace of pain on Harlson’s face. He was sweating, though the room was cool, and his face looked sunken and pale. The sickness was eating him up at a startling rate.

“Are you going to make it?” Luke asked.

“I’ll see this through,” Harlson swore, determination palling his state. “It’s all I have left.”

“I’m sorry,” Luke muttered.

“Ain’t we all,” Harlson said with a tight grin. “But I have this chance to take something with me. You do your part, then I’ll do mine.”

“If I don’t come out of this, promise me you’ll keep looking for her,” Luke said. “I need to know that someone will keep trying.”

“I’ll never give up. I’ve never lost a collar, remember? Besides, you’ll

pull through. I've got faith in you."

Harlson walked to the door. He paused and turned back. "Be careful, partner."

He left.

Luke settled into his chair and gingerly released the gray sliver of cloth from the bag. It felt coarse and gritty with dirt between his fingers. He shut his eyes and rolled the material with his fingertips. His mind cast aside its burdens after a great surge of willpower and his focus turned to his haven. He thought of his pond and went in much easier than he had expected to.

He pictured himself alone and nude on a barren landscape. The plane was dark and cold. Eternity loomed everywhere and was indistinguishable from oblivion.

I'm standing at the porch, he surmised, noticing a faint light over his head. He felt vulnerable and weak. He had access to the place; this place where all overpowering physic residue ran helter skelter paths like streaking comets in the night sky. This was a place that he knew but could never share with any other human being.

This was the place where beings with latent psychic abilities exiled their memories. Projected their crimes or triumphs, pains, or joy. This was a ghost town of impressions, some tangible and others incomprehensible. They ran through him in a bitter wind, attracted to him like moths to a flame.

He did not illicit their attention, but they spun around him like funnel clouds. He ignored their pleas for redemption or vindication. These were psychic ghosts, and though Luke had no power here, they could not force themselves on him. They vied for his attention, lonely stories wishing to play on interested ears. Luke often entered this place and listened for hours to the memories. Sometimes he went in looking for a specific event or person and had returned with useful information.

At the moment, he had no time for these phantoms and he simply ignored them. The item in his physical hand was like a beacon. He waited for the wolf, certain the beast would heed his call and rise up to answer it.

Suddenly, the phantoms quieted down, and the tumultuous plane became deathly still. The darkness was suddenly torn asunder as the head of the wolf, mammoth and shaking this realm with its howl, broke into the fabric of the plane.

It towered over Luke, its fangs as large as skyscrapers and its eyes blazing like twin suns. Luke recoiled from the image, thrown to the smooth ground of the plane by the wolf's intrusion.

The phantoms that had kept him company were gone now, leaving the plane to the wolf. Luke stood up, undaunted by the monstrous image.

Nothing can hold so much power here, he thought. This is a smoke screen. A Halloween mask. A vision of the wizard manipulated by the man behind the curtain. I don't know how this Dreg managed such a psychic barrier, but it can be broken. I know it can.

The wolf began to descend on Luke, its hungry mouth opening and flaming spittle showering down all around him.

I know what happens if I resist you, Luke thought, praying his hunch was right. Let's see what happens if I go with the flow.

As the wolf came down over him, Lucas leapt into its fiery mouth and was immediately sucked into a vortex.

Images spun around him. Once again, phantoms raced to him, eager to spin their yarns. Suddenly, Luke realized what the wolf was. It was a prison for the memories. A tomb for the impressions. But once inside, the memories were as anxious as the liberated ones to share themselves.

'Le Louf, lord above.'

'The books that speak.'

'You be Traiteur, good and proper.'

'Grand Albert say be like wolf, not man.'

Dreg was revealed to Luke, from his conception in the Pointe Au Chien to his wanderings and the hunt. Luke still could not see the man behind the wolf. He could not really see Dreg's life; he felt it.

It became a part of him and Luke was as enthralled by the knowledge as he was repulsed. Dreg's fears, desires and secrets were given up as Luke rode the harsh wind, absorbing all he could.

When the phantoms exhausted themselves, Luke plummeted downward, free falling into a dark abyss. Another fail safe, he assumed.

He began concentrating on leaving this plane. The wind began to chaff him as his downward spiral increased in speed. His eyes, dry from rushing wind, focused on the endless expanse of darkness below him. He concentrated harder on escaping this dark place. A force above him, which felt like a huge hand, rammed his back, increasing his descent into the limbo.

His concentration was broken as his head snapped up and the oppression on his back took his breath from him. He reminded himself of the importance of escaping the place as the force crushing him downward increased. He concentrated again, panic gripping him.

He closed his eyes and thought home, over and over again. When he

opened his eyes, the abyss still below and unseen force still guiding his downfall, he screamed.

“Holy shit!” Harlson exclaimed, leaving his desk and racing down the packed corridor to the conference room.

He shoved uniformed officers out of his way and entered the room. Luke lay on the floor, his body curled into a fetal position. A young officer hunched over Luke’s still body beckoned for breathing room and an ambulance.

“I can’t feel a pulse,” the officer said grimly, clasping Luke’s wrist.

“No, god dammit, no!” Harlson shouted, rushing to Luke and turning him over on his back. Harlson tore the physic’s shirt open, made a fist, and began to pound the fallen man’s chest.

CHAPTER 38

Dreg felt dizzy.

“Wha’ is?” he muttered, slumping against the peeling wooden post on the front porch of his den. He almost dropped the bowl of spinach he had prepared for Tammy. Something was wrong. Something was touching him, in his head. He didn’t understand what was going on and left his weight against the post until he could clear his mind. He had spells like this before, mostly when it was time for him to move to a new territory.

The voice in his head warned him to move soon. *Gotta be on*, it said.

The old wolf shook his head defiantly. He had to learn Tammy. This would take a long spell for him to accomplish. He had to reach the louve beneath her human flesh, bring out the animal essence. He had herbs and powders and knew incantations from the books that speak that he thought would help him turn her into sage femme, but like any seed, they had to be planted. And he needed time for his magic to take root and flourish.

No time left, the voice continued. *Be gone. Gotta kill the lamb and be gone.*

No, he couldn’t bear the thought of that. This one was different. He could reach her. His magic as a Traiteur could force her to release any hold she had on her previous life. He just needed time.

No time, the voice chastised him. *Time to kill the meat and be off.*

No. He gritted his teeth and butted the post with his forehead in an attempt to silence the voice. He was Traiteur. He was wolf. He had a mate now and would die for her, if need be. He would not abandon her to the elements or kill her outright or move her until Le Louf was in her, deep and permanent.

It’s not a lache, he thought. *Not afraid. I is the wolf. If cowboy-men hunt Dreg, Dreg fight. Not run. Not be by lonesome no more.*

The voice seemed to forsake its cause, and Dreg collected himself, stepping off of the porch and walking slowly toward the shed. Dreg had never so whole heartedly defied the voice before. And though he knew the reasoning

behind his choice, he still felt a ball of dread deep in his belly.

For louve, he thought, searching for strength.

The door opened once again, the brief reprieve from the darkness making Tammy squint as Dreg stepped into the shed and closed the door behind him.

"I brung you some spinach," Dreg said, placing the bowl on the tray at Tammy's feet. "You eat up."

Dreg went back to the door and squatted in front of it, picking at the dirt floor of the shed.

Tammy didn't like the way he was acting. Apprehensive. Solemn. His mood swing could mean her life or death. She reached for the bowl and studied its contents. Canned spinach, alright. It didn't look too noxious so she reached for the tarnished spoon on the tray.

"Wha' is?" Dreg said, staring at her hand that clasped the spoon.

Her left hand.

Dreg jumped up and howled at the shed ceiling. Tammy fell back, the spinach spilling all over her and the dirt. Dreg approached her, his face beaming. He pointed at her hand.

"You got it," he said, overjoyed. "Sign o' magic. You be sage femme, good and proper. Dreg can learn Tammy. You be louve."

When Tammy realized that Dreg's outburst had been a joyous one, she put a shaking hand over her racing heart. She had to understand this Dreg, despite her fear and frustration. It was time she learned of her captor's intentions.

"What are you talking about? What do you mean by teaching me? Teach me what?" The words almost came out as a demand, but she quickly bit back the fearful harshness and the proclamation came out as a polite inquiry.

She had no psychological training, but it was evident to Tammy that the best approach with Dreg was a reserved one. She had read about accounts where kidnappers were almost empathetic to their victims' emotions. If she remained calm and civil, she prayed Dreg would too.

Dreg went to her, an eager grin stretched across his face. He sat Indian style in front of her. "Long time ago," he started, searching for the proper words to explain himself. "The books that speak. Gran' and Petit Albert. They speak to Mon Vieux, yeh-heh? Dreg's Father-father. Father, he no speak wi' books, but Father-father speak fo' 'em. Father speak fo' 'em wi' Dreg."

Dreg paused, motioning to himself. “Dreg be Traiteur,” he said, holding up his left hand. “Dreg worship Le Louf,” he continued, motioning upward. “Le Louf...wolf...be up in sky, lookin’ down on Dreg. He tell Dreg to hunt. To be wolf. To not be man. To hunt and live like wolf, yeh-heh?”

Tammy nodded slightly, having recalled several stories her morbid curiosity had prompted her to absorb from occult books that she had ordered from a television ad. She had received one a month, and she distinctly remembered one whole book on the subject of werewolves. She recalled reading about a psychological affliction in the late eighteen hundreds that made men think they were carnivorous beasts. Dreg’s story reminded her of the story about a man who ran around on all fours during full moons, snatching helpless babies from their cribs and devouring them. She got a chill. Her shoulders shuddered involuntarily.

Suddenly, Dreg clasped her hand. She gasped, almost screamed.

Dreg held her left hand up, studying it with sheer delight. “You got the sign, Tammy. You be louve.”

“What do you mean?” Tammy asked, her voice marred with fear.

Dreg released his grip, staring dreamily into her eyes. “Louve,” he said softly. “She-wolf.”

The words lingered in her mind. *She-wolf*. She stared at Dreg, who simply sat there and smiled at her like a lecherous old man. *She-wolf*. He wanted her.

Oh God, she thought, suddenly self-conscious of her body. She crossed her arms at her chest to shield the shape of her bosom beneath the thin summer blouse she wore.

“I’m married,” she said softly. It was the only thing she could think of to say. God in heaven, this maniac was in love with her.

Dreg frowned and shook his head. “Worl’ of man no good here, Tammy,” he said, with a serious set to his features. “You be in Dreg’s worl’.”

Dreg smiled again, the desire and affection evident in his dark eyes which traveled her body in a sudden longing. Tammy averted her gaze to the ground. Death had been the most horrible thing she could imagine.

But now the idea of spending her existence as Dreg’s she-wolf seemed a more hideous option.

Suddenly, Dreg tore her hands away from her chest and grasped her left breast. Tammy screamed and tried to pull away from him. Dreg grasped her flailing hands in a fluid motion and brought them down under the weight of his leg, where they would remain obedient and still.

He leaned toward her. "Dreg gonna put Le Louf in here," he said, grasping her breast and grinning with determination. "Gonna put him deep in yo' soul. Then you'll unnerstan' Dreg."

"You're hurting me," Tammy whimpered, her mind filling with images of Dreg ripping her clothes off and having her and her not being able to do a single thing to prevent it. Tears welled in her eyes at the thought.

Dreg released her and backed off, only slightly. Tammy brought her hands to her aching chest.

Dreg regarded her with a deep look of regret. "Dreg not hurt you, Tammy. Why you cry?"

"Because you've locked me up like a fucking animal and you talk like a crazy man and I thought you were going to rape me!" Tammy shouted, no longer able to hold up a front. When the manhandling started, she didn't care anymore.

Dreg retreated even further, nodding sympathetically. "Dreg unnerstan'. He brung you here and talk like crazy mon vieux but is okay, Tammy. Dreg won' hurt you. You see soon. You unnerstan'. Gonna leave you be for a spell."

Dreg headed for the shed door. Before he opened it, he turned back and noticed the spinach on the dirt floor. "You hungry?"

Tammy shook her head fiercely.

"Is okay," Dreg said once more before taking his leave.

Tammy sat in the silence, rubbing her sore breast.

"It's not okay, you son of a bitch," she muttered through clenched teeth.

She never be learned, the voice spoke as Dreg entered his den and sat in a ripped easy chair.

"She be learned," Dreg said, smiling softly. "Dreg know sage femme when he see it. Tammy may not feel Le Louf, but Dreg feel it in her. She got spirit. She be louve."

Dreg looked around at the squalor of his den. The animal excrement and rubble that had once been possessions of the old woman who had died in the chair Dreg sat in. He noticed that the vinyl on his chair had cracked in several spots and was bleeding foam. He would need to clean his den soon for his louve.

"Is okay," he whispered, beginning to believe it would be.

CHAPTER 39

Harlson waited, perched in a seat outside of the Herman Hospital ICU. He had managed to get Luke's heart going, but his vital signs had been so weak. Harlson shook his head and wished like hell that he could have a smoke in the smoke-free complex. He felt responsible. Couldn't help himself. Luke had been so persistent and passionate about hopping back on the wagon that Harlson had mistaken that desperation for some sort of inner strength that Luke evidently was lacking in his present state.

It was like letting a hemophiliac sharpen blades, Harlson thought, grimly. *Should never have let the guy take the chance. Bertha Hobbs lost it and she wasn't in half the distress Luke has been in. What the fuck is wrong with me? Who won't I sacrifice to stop the Keepsake Killer?*

He had protested when Lucas wanted back on the case, but he had let him back on, nonetheless. Dammit, he should have nipped it in the bud. He should have just put his foot down. Now he had Glover's blood on his hands.

Dr. Spencer appeared in the waiting room. Harlson rose anxiously to his feet.

"How is he?" he asked cautiously.

"His condition has stabilized, but I'm afraid he's in a deep coma," Spencer said, shaking his head somberly. "I've known Lucas Glover for many years. Consider him one of my best friends. First Tammy disappearing, and now this."

"What are his chances of coming out of this?" Harlson inquired.

"Can't say. Never can, in most cases. But, with Luke's history, I'm not too optimistic about it being anytime soon," Spencer said, glancing back toward ICU. "He'll come back when he's darn good and ready, if he comes back at all."

"What are you talking about?" Harlson asked.

"It's a theory regarding comas," Spencer replied. "I think their purpose is to either escape something in the outside world or find something submerged

deep in the psyche. What I mean, Detective Harlson, is that Lucas found his way inside, and he'll have to find his way out. We'll just have to wait in the meantime."

Luke hit bottom, his scream cut off as his breath was knocked out of him by the impact. Darkness shrouded him. The ground that had broken his plummet felt cold against his palms and cheek.

Suddenly, light began to dawn on him, and with it came sound. Birds singing, bugs chirping. The ground beneath him softened and became moist. His surroundings mutated from the darkness to forest. Swamp forest. He lay in a marsh, tall grass tickling his face. Luke stood up slowly, fighting the quiver in his arms and legs. He looked around curiously, glad at least that his fall into the abyss had stopped.

I should have been able to leave this place, he thought. Dreg can't have the power to hold me here. I can sense that he doesn't realize the full scope of his abilities. If Dreg isn't responsible for this, then what is?

Luke pressed on through the forest, moving east. He definitely felt out of control. Something was guiding him this way. Some unseen force was prodding him. At first, he didn't even realize he was moving. When it came to him that he was walking in a deliberate path, curiosity called for a pause, but his body still moved, ignoring him. This only heightened his apprehension, but he was at the mercy of this force...whatever it was.

He moved through the growth for several minutes, until he brought his arm up and swept moss from a bowing tree limb aside and came upon a dilapidated cabin. A woman sat in a straight back chair on the porch. She was covered with blankets and several motley dressed children clutched to her. The woman looked weak and sad. Her face was pale and sunken. Her expression was pitiful and empty at the same time.

The children around her, ranging in age from a toddling baby to a gangly adolescent, sensed her pain and loss and clamored around her, frightened and lost without her attention.

Luke followed the woman's gaze to the front area of the cabin. A man, his back to Luke, was cutting down tall grass with a scythe. He wore dirty gray pants and suspenders. His back was glazed with perspiration and tiny green fragments of grass speckled his skin.

After clearing a small area, the man picked up a rusted spade and plunged

into the moist earth, digging a small hole. He deposited the dirt next to the hole, producing a mound of mud that would be swept easily back in. The man dropped his spade, wiped his brow, then bent over to pick up a small form wrapped in a white sheet.

Luke looked back to the woman on the porch. Her expression was the same, but now tears swept down her cheeks. The children noticed this, and a chorus of wails came from them. Luke gazed back to the father, who held the small body up to the afternoon sky.

“Le Louf,” the man spoke, his gruff voice strained. “Take yo’ pup up wi’ yo’. Let him be by yo’. Let him know of the ways.”

The man struggled for more words, but none came. He silently lay the body in the hole and used his hands to bury it.

“This be no good!” a husky voice rang out.

Luke turned toward the direction of the voice. A tall, slim young man approached the older one, seemingly unsympathetic to the grief. It was Dreg. Luke knew it, though he was used to seeing only Dreg’s astral representation. Apparently, whatever force was at work here had stripped Dreg’s facade away.

And Luke almost which it hadn’t.

Dreg was hideous, more so than his family. He looked like a wild beast, with those beady dark eyes and huge mouth.

“What you be doin’, boy?” the father demanded, outraged at Dreg’s announcement.

“Grand Albert say dead pup be evil. You put evil in the ground. You should burn couchemal. You curse our den,” Dreg said, contemptuously.

“You hesh up, boy!” Father shouted, his body tensing with malice intent. “I lead dis pack. I be Traiteur and I know wha’ Grand Albert say and mean. This pup be part of us. It be buried here and we stay here, yeh-heh?”

“No,” Dreg said, defiantly.

The family on the porch gasped and clutched closer together. “Wha’ you be sayin’, boy?” Father said, approaching Dreg slowly.

“I say you be stupid mon vieux who curse us all. The pup was dead ‘afore it was borne. It be couchemal now.”

“Wha’ you know of the trut’, boy? I brung yo’ up. I learned you of da magic. Couchemal not a real thing.”

“Yeh-heh,” Dreg disagreed. “Couchemal the wors’ evil and you curse us now, old wolf.” Dreg grinned boldly. “Maybe this pack need a new leader.”

The father, now scant feet from Dreg, lashed out with the back of his

hand, striking Dreg's face. Dreg flinched away, cradling his mouth.

"I be leader, Dreg. You be wild pup who kno' nothin' of the trut' or bein' a Traiteur. You pay respect and tell yo' mama yo' sorry or I'll bea' yo' like a cur, yeh heh?"

Dreg slowly glanced back at his father, his lips curled back and a bestial howl escaping from his throat. He leapt at the startled man, biting into his neck before his father could deliver another blow.

Father struck at Dreg's back, landing blows powerful enough to fell men half his age, but they didn't phase Dreg, who took his father down and opened his neck for the world to view. Dreg rose, leaving Father's twitching form on the ground. Dreg stared at his family, balled up fearfully on the porch.

"I be wolf!" Dreg shouted through a bloody mouth.

Darkness suddenly fell back over the scene. Luke stood completely still, shocked over what he had just witnessed. Dreg had killed his own father. Luke could fit the pieces together now. It was all still rather vague, as far as exact details went, but he could almost trace Dreg from the Point Au Chien to the present. All that madness, incorporated from two books that were written decades ago. What did those books say?

Luke had knowledge of the books, Grand and Petit Albert, from his infiltration of Dreg's impressions. He had never encountered the books, however, and vowed to himself to research the phenomena, should he and Tammy walk away from this mess.

Slowly, another light began to cut through the darkness. House lights. Luke was on a stage. Before him, hundreds of people sat in assembly, staring at him.

He focused at the audience, a ball of fear working its way from his stomach to his head. The faces were ashen, bloodless. Dead. They stared at him like zombies, and though none of them spoke, he could hear their voices in the air. Chanting, over and over.

Slowly, softly.

'We are the fallen. We are the lost...'

Luke scoured the audience. He couldn't see Tammy among them, and he let out an audible sigh of relief. He knew what this was. These were Dreg's victims, and they filled the arena.

One stood up among them. An aged woman, her stare vacant and her face creased. Her expression was stone. She spoke to him without opening her mouth, and Luke knew her name before she told him.

'I am Bertha Hobbs. I was a victim of the wolf. You are the only one to

physically or mentally touch him without exile to this place. I tell you this now for the dead you see among you. Look for the red lantern. You will find him when you find the red lantern. I can aid you no more.'

Bertha sat down, her image swallowed by the ocean of dead faces.

"What do you mean?" Luke called out. "The red lantern? Do you know where he is? Why can't you just tell me?"

"Because that wouldn't be very sporting," a voice said behind him.

Luke turned around. The infant in the aquarium from his earlier dream was on the stage. Now, however, Luke understood what the malicious infant represented.

"You are the couchemal," Luke said, stepping back slightly.

"Very good, Mr. Glover," the couchemal said, smiling evilly. Its feline eyes glowed as its form swayed in the rush of air bubbles. "Then you must finally be starting to realize the whole purpose of recent events."

Luke thought for a moment, then gritted his teeth when the realization finally hit him. "This is all a game to you, isn't it? A fucking game."

"That's one way of putting it, I suppose. You see, my brother, Dreg, is a very primal force. He has so much untapped energy that I just hate to see him squander. Unfortunately, I can't really do more to him than give him nightmares, because he left the swamp. I need for him to die. Now, he will eventually, and all of that power will be transmitted to me. However, patience was never my strongest...*virtue*, shall we say. I crave that power now. And you can help me achieve it."

"Everything that's been going on," Luke said in astonished, sudden realization. "You've been behind it all."

"Let's just say I can influence events, sometimes," the couchemal said, proudly. "A rather handy attribute, wouldn't you say?"

"You were responsible for my wife's abduction, weren't you, you little shit," Luke said approaching the aquarium.

"Hold," the couchemal said, and Luke froze, unable to move.

"I rule here, Mr. Glover. And I would recommend that you take care. I'm very sensitive, you know. And let me assure you that your wife is safe and will remain so, as long as you take the knowledge I've given you access to and go back to your body." Luke thought for a moment, seeing how it all made sense now.

"The wolf on the plane, that was you, wasn't it? I mean, Dreg has some power, but a latent wouldn't know how to fabricate such a thing. If you want him dead, why did you erect such a barrier for me?"

“When you face my brother, I will not be able to help you,” the couchemal replied. “I had to know that you were strong enough to accept this challenge, which I believe you are. Your physical form is recuperating, which it will be for several hours. Now you must go.”

“Before I go, I have to know something,” Luke demanded.

“If you insist, Mr. Glover,” the couchemal replied.

“You talk about untapped energy. Powers that Dreg possesses that you want to make your own. For what purpose?”

“There are realms your feeble mind cannot possibly grasp. There are unlimited planes ripe for an ambitious entity such as myself. Dreg’s energy will be mine upon his passing. I will use it for conquest and, if need be, destruction.”

“What about my plane?” Lucas asked, suspiciously.

“Your plane doesn’t interest me,” the couchemal spoke, with a broad grin. His feline eyes glowed like twin moons. “You and your kind will prove the destruction of your world. Not me. Now be gone, Mr. Glover. It is time for you to fight the good fight.”

Before Luke could pose another question, the scene vanished and the darkness overcame his senses for the last time.

CHAPTER 40

Harlson stood outside of Captain Fowler's office door, poised to knock on it. He had a fair indication about what to expect. Sergeant George Skinner had shown up at Herman Hospital, interrupting Harlson's vigil, to inform him that Fowler requested his presence and was quite prepared to put out an APB if he didn't report in. Skinner hadn't enjoyed the task, which was some consolation, and Harlson suddenly chastised himself for the dread he felt.

Fuck it, he thought. I'm dying. What's porky going to do? Throw me off the force?

He knocked.

"Come in," Fowler barked from the inside of his cage.

Harlson stepped inside. "You wanted to see me?" he said, closing the door behind him.

"Sit down," Fowler said, grimly.

Harlson shook his head. "I prefer to stand if it's all the same to you."

Fowler slammed his hands on his desk and stood up, abruptly. "What the hell is wrong with you, William? Always bucking the system, aren't you? Making up proper procedure as you go along, right? Well, you came out of the shit pile smelling like shit this time, my friend. What were you thinking? How could you permit Glover to come back on the case? Do you have any idea what trouble the department is in now?"

Harlson told himself to behave. To stand there quietly and take his medicine like a good boy. But the detest boiling inside of him cancelled any decorum he was going to keep.

"That's all the department thinks about, you know. The department. What about the people out there we're sworn to protect? Man, fuck your politics and fuck you."

Harlson dug his badge out and slammed it on Fowler's desk. "I'd give you my gun, too, but it belongs to me. I have a permit if you would like to see it."

“Wait a minute, William,” Fowler said, surprised. “No one has to quit around here. I’m not asking for your badge. You’re a good cop. Everyone is entitled to a fuck up now and again. I’m just letting you know that it might take a fair amount of ass-kissing to keep you from spending your remaining days on the force behind a desk.”

“You kiss the commissioner’s ass,” Harlson replied. “It’s your specialty. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have pressing matters to intend to. It’s been real, asshole.”

And with that, Harlson took his leave.

It was dark now. Tammy had no idea what time it was, but she wagered a guess at between eight and ten o’clock. Dreg had been in the shed with her until about fifteen minutes ago, and now she watched the house through a crack in the wall, waiting to see his next move.

She had run Dreg’s story in her head the whole afternoon. Being a *Traiteur*. Living like the wolf. The books that spoke. It all sounded like a bad B-movie, the plot convoluted by Dreg’s limited vocabulary.

He believed himself to be an animal. Tammy had understood that much. She had no idea how deep the psychosis went or how dangerous Dreg could be in the throes of it, and she was determined not to find out.

After Dreg had put his hands on her, Tammy had thrown away any reservations about the escape. She was waiting now for the house to grow dark as Dreg extinguished the Coleman lanterns in the windows or for Dreg to take a night jaunt, as she guessed he would be prone to do. Why not? It made sense to her. Maybe he would go off to bay at the moon like Lon Chaney Jr. or something.

She couldn’t care less. It wasn’t her problem anymore. Soon she would be free of this lunatic and she would go home and never leave and change the locks and buy an attack dog and a gun.

All she had to do was wait a while longer, then retrieve her friend Mr. Abandoned Screwdriver and pry a couple of boards loose and adios, *amigo*. She didn’t mean to be flippant or cocky, but she had to firmly believe, with complete conviction, that her plan would come off without a hitch. The desperation and fear were gone. She was now the little train that could and no amount of doom saying would stop her.

She waited, perched quietly on the floor. She had no idea how long she

squatted there before Dreg appeared on the porch, dressed in dark clothing. He looked in the direction of the shed, his gaze lingering there for several seconds. Finally, he stepped off of the porch and into the forest.

Tammy waited again, wanting a great amount of distance between them before she attempted her getaway. She waited several minutes then went to the generator and dug out the screwdriver. She found two planks that looked brittle and pried on them. Despite their condition, the task was a hard one. Patiently, Tammy worked at the boards. Finally, one came loose. She pulled it aside, greeted by the cool night air. She smiled and stifled a triumphant cry.

She worked at the next board, having more leverage from the open space, and soon had pried herself an exit. She gingerly stepped out of the shed. She stood in the yard, her heart racing. She had no idea what to do. Which way should she head? Dreg could have been anywhere, out there. She noticed the cars, slightly illuminated by the half moon, and spotted hers among them. She sprinted over to it, opened the door and climbed behind the wheel.

The keys were gone.

Damn! she thought, slapping the steering wheel. The house. The keys had to be in the house.

She got out of the car and went to the house, slowly stepping up onto the porch. The door was unlocked. She pressed it open cautiously, glancing around for Dreg to reappear before stepping inside. The lanterns barely lit the interior of the house. She stepped in what appeared to be a parlor. The place was in shambles. Garbage was strewn around the room and the furniture was destroyed. It looked like a hurricane had hit the place. Tammy stepped through the room and into the next one, which appeared to be the kitchen.

Tammy gasped.

Driver's licenses. Tacked on the walls. They covered every square inch of wall space. Hundreds of them. Everywhere. Tammy peered at them, noticing that some of the expiration dates went as far back as the early sixties.

Against a far wall, a huge, flat freezer hummed. Tammy guessed that was the function for the generator. Her head swam as a new revelation dawned on her. Her gaze went from the licenses to the freezer and back.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

Point A to point B.

And then she knew about Dreg.

She thought of the cars in the yard. Dreg's philosophy about being a wolf. To live like an animal and not a man. She thought of the hundreds of licenses

on the wall. She thought of that huge freezer against the far wall, humming. She brought a shaking hand to her mouth.

She suddenly felt sick and light-headed. Her inner voice screamed at her to leave and she forsook her search for her keys and ran out of the kitchen.

She bounded through the living room and out the open entrance of the house. Once on the porch, she paused and tried to figure out the best route to take. She decided on the opposite direction Dreg had taken and plunged into the dark woods, distance from this madness her only goal.

The woods were dark and she felt thin tree limbs whip her flesh through her thin blouse as she plodded on, oblivious to her destination. She had no idea where she might turn up and she didn't care.

Away away away... her feverish mind chanted as she physically cut through the thick brush.

Slivers of moonlight patched the area, and at certain illuminations, she would pause for a second to try and ascertain her position.

Solid growth. Dark and forbidding. Animals moving about and rattling the brush. No signs of the highway or another cabin. Tammy pressed on, grimacing as a thorn left a trail in her forearm. She ran into a thick spider's web, which immediately clutched her face. She nearly screamed, surprised by the sensation, and rubbed it away.

That's when she heard the noise. A guttural emission from behind. The unmistakable growl of an animal. She turned around slowly, her heart beating fit to burst.

Two bestial eyes glared at her from the darkness. The eyes grew as the dark form stepped into a dimly lit clearing. It was a German Shepard, standing its ground, poised to strike at her. It continued to growl, its black lips curled back, revealing moist fangs. The dog was dirty, its fur matted with soil. Tammy had heard about dogs abandoned to the wild. She knew full well that this animal could match a wolf for savagery, especially if it were provoked or hungry.

And this dog looked ravenous. It slowly advanced on her, its nerve fueled by Tammy's fear. She retreated slowly away from it, stepping precariously backward, her stare directly into the dog's eyes.

"Get out of here," Tammy said sternly, her legs shaking. "Go on, get!"

The dog continued to stalk her, the fur on its back standing up like a spike. Tammy's foot plunged into a low spot in the earth and she stumbled down, landing on her back.

Her eyes focused on the beast bounding at her, lunging with incredible

hind legs, coming off of the ground and seeming to ride the night wind toward her, its jaws open and ready to rend her flesh.

Suddenly, a blur of motion intercepted the dog. The two figures plunged into a spot of shadow beneath a tree. The sounds were horrible; two beasts locked in mortal combat. Growls of outrage and yelps of pain were a prelude to the action Tammy heard but could not see as the beasts rolled in the brush, a victor decided when she heard a pitiful death moan and the brush settled down, deathly quiet.

Tammy stood up, slowly stepping back from this. Her ankle hurt, but there wasn't any real damage. She had a slight limp. From the darkness, the growling began again.

No, she thought, turning and limping as fast as she could. Her mind could not fathom the irony of escaping Dreg to fall victim to a wild animal. She moved as quickly as she could, trying to move even faster when she was sure something was directly behind her. She ran, the whole forest seeming to oppose her as the trees tried to grasp her with ripe vines and the earth seemed to pitch in height, molehills laid like a minefield in the growth.

Something grasped her blouse. The cloth began to tear. She tried to jerk away and was pulled back and thrown to the ground. "Tammy!" Dreg's face towered over her, his glowering visage burning in the darkness.

A hand lashed out, slapping her cheek. Another came. And another. She tried to put her hands up to evade the blows but the third one had knocked her senseless. And still more came. Tammy tasted blood and her eyes felt puffy. She wasn't sure where she was until her gaze went back upward and Dreg was still there, ready to deal out more punishment. Tammy turned over on her stomach, burying her face in the moist earth. Dreg began to curse her in a language she didn't understand.

He ended the foreign rant with a kick in the small of Tammy's back. She gasped and arched in pain, her breath escaping her.

"Why you do this to Dreg, Tammy?" he demanded, crouched and shouting in her ear. "Now Dreg got to deal wi' you, Tammy! Deal wi' you good and proper!"

He grabbed a handful of her hair and painfully hauled her to her feet. He grasped her shoulders and stared at her hard, an inhuman sound issuing from the back of his throat. Tammy gazed at him in the silver light, her fuzzy vision distorting the insane expression on his face.

He's going to do it now, she thought vaguely. *He's going to kill me.*

Dreg drew his arm back again, his face silver and twisted in the moonlight.

But before the blow came, Tammy mercifully passed out.

She thrashed at the warm water, screaming at the top of her lungs and fighting against gravity as she felt her small frame succumbing to the murky depths.

Her father stood on the pier, having a cigarette. His grey features were calm and relaxed. "Who's going to save Sassy?" he said softly, the thin trace of a smile appearing on his lips.

"Who's going to save my poor Sassy?"

Tammy woke up. She was no longer a seven-year-old girl bobbing pitifully in waist deep lake water. She was back in the shed. Her face felt like raw meat and swollen about the size of a pumpkin. Manacles were connected to her wrists. A length of rusty chain about a yard long held her to a two by six that was nailed in the far corner of the shed. Upon closer inspection, Tammy saw that the corner stud had been cut one quarter of the way through in the rear to accommodate the chain.

She wanted to scream. Dreg had beaten her like an animal. Worse than an animal. And now he had added insult to injury by chaining her to the post. She wished he had just killed her. At least it would be over that way.

No more pain. No more fear. Her father's words echoed in her head, reaching beyond the pain, the fear, the hopelessness.

'Who's going to save my poor Sassy?'

She paused for a moment, then took up the slack of the chain and began to examine the wood it ran through. She couldn't break the wood, but if she used the chain like a saw, maybe rubbing it against the wood, maybe she could whittle it down to a vulnerable width. It would take hours, possibly the rest of the night.

'Who's going to save my poor Sassy?'

She began to move the chain, back and forth, using tension on the chain to keep it straight. Death was a sure thing, now. Dreg could catch her doing this and give her more pain, but at least pain was an attribute of the living. He had hurt her. But she wouldn't roll over and die. She wasn't going to make it that easy for the bastard.

'Who's going to save my poor Sassy?'

Tammy knew the answer.

CHAPTER 41

Dreg sat at the end of the cot, his eyes wandering the length of the decaying den aimlessly. He had no choice. His louve was as strong and untamed as he was. Tammy had to die. The thought of it actually made him queasy, but he was a child of the moon. A servant of Le Louf. The hunt took precedence over all, even his own happiness. His solemn duty as Traiteur demanded that he continue his line, but the voice told him to move soon and Tammy would never bend to him in the appropriate amount of time. He lay back on the bed, dreaming of how it could have been. Sexual forays played in his mind. But also scenes of tenderness. Shared burdens and responsibilities. A healthy, plentiful pack for him to learn and lead. And that one special cub, clasping his left paw with its own, passing the magic to another generation. A life no longer alone.

A life that would elude him for another season. Perhaps more. It was torture, what he had to do the next evening. He would kill the only woman to illicit such strong feelings from him and burn her body as an offering to Le Louf. If this did not prove his loyalty to the hunter of hunters, he did not know what would.

He contemplated the means of Tammy's destruction. It would have to be quick and painless. Maybe a bullet in her head. Maybe a pillow over her slumbering face. Maybe he would just snap her neck. But no, he couldn't bear to think about it any longer. It was too much for him.

The grief in him compounded the dread he had felt for two days. The voice told him to kill Tammy now and be gone, but Dreg could not will himself from the cot. No, he would do this up like a ceremony. Tammy would live this night.

But tomorrow night, she would feed Le Louf.

He had the nightmare again. The couchemal descending from the sky and rending him limb from limb. Dreg jarred awake, stifling the scream this time. He looked frantically around the den, reality asserting itself and the fear fading from him. He stretched back out on the cot, his body still shuddering, and decided he would not get any rest that night. It had taken him forever to drift off after his distress over Tammy. And now the couchemal was haunting him again, invading his sweet dreams of the hunt and turning them foul with its evil.

This was not good. He had never dreamt of the couchemal so frequently before. Maybe once every other season, and until the last season, his dreams had only been vague glimpses of the couchemal. But now this reoccurring dream with the couchemal tearing him apart seemed to rule his slumber.

He tried to think it away, as he usually did. He tried to scoff at it and reminded himself that after his solemn duty the next evening that things would go back to the way they had always been for him. He would feed Tammy to Le Louf and then immediately move on to Arkansas where the new hunting ground would help him forget her and the remorse.

He tried to convince himself that he was a crafty old wolf whose hunt was far from over. He pulled at every optimistic string he had.

But he was still frightened.

After tomorrow, he tried to assure himself. No more Tammy or bad feelin' or dream of couchemal. Move on. Strong wolf got strong magic. Traiteur wi' Le Louf above. Hunter of hunters. Keep couchemal away. Couchemal got no power. Dreg no foo' or lache. Can never hurt me. Nothin' hurt Dreg. Dreg got the magic.

But the dread still burned in his stomach.

CHAPTER 42

Harlson sat at Lucas' bedside. The room was dark and cold. So damn cold. He wondered why hospitals were so cold. It felt more like a morgue in that room, he thought, staring at Lucas. The psychic lay in the repose of a corpse, his body so motionless and breath so shallow that Harlson would squint close at him, making sure that a spark of life still fueled the man's heartbeat.

Dr. Spencer had every wire imaginable attached to Lucas. He was being fed intravenously and his vital signs were being constantly monitored. Harlson stared hard at the scene before him. Lucas' feeble body on the small bed. Tubes and wires coming out of his arms like extra appendages. Harlson would be in this position soon. Writhing in the starched white sheets. Cursing at the intolerable pain. Claspng Babb's hand and begging God for an end to the torment.

Shit, he thought, trying to shake the image.

He rubbed his aching brow and wished for just one painless moment. The cancer was really kicking in. Just like his doctor had told him it would. Once it begins to progress, it's like a brush fire. It moves quickly, consuming everything. One day he'd be fine and dandy, and the next he'd be an inch away from the hereafter. It was closing in on him. He had thought he could keep it at bay until his mission in life was complete, but now the agonizing reality was plaguing his body.

He suddenly twisted in his chair, a wave of pain surging from his stomach to his chest.

"Lucas," he muttered in a pain riddled rasp. "I'm trying to hang on, sport. I don't have much time, so you have to open your eyes now. I can save your wife. I need to save your wife. It's all I have left, so open your eyes. Come on, you bastard. Rise and shine. We've got a maniac to collar, partner. I can't do it alone, man. For God's sake, wake up."

Harlson gasped as an invisible hand seemed to dive into his abdomen and

twist his stomach. He clutched himself and fell to the floor, his face pressed against the cold tile. He began to pant, tears streaming across his face.

Not now, he thought frantically, his body paralyzed from the pain.

He was scared. Horrified at the prospect of cashing it in that very moment, so close from the goal line. Remembrances began to play in his head. Lost loves. His parents' death. His emotional distance from Babbs. He had thought his existence would be an easy one to shed, free of strings.

There were too many burnt bridges behind him. Too many sins to be atoned for. So many people to make peace with. He couldn't remember the last time he had told Babbs he loved her. Or treated any of the women he dated (mostly topless dancers) with the respect they deserved. Or laid flowers upon his parents' graves.

And he hadn't bagged the Keepsake Killer.

"Dreg," he muttered, hate issuing out of his lungs.

He rose to his knees, his body trembling from the pain. He grasped the chair and pulled himself into it. He forced himself to sit up straight, despite the urge to bend forward on the pain. *No way*, he thought, gritting his teeth and grasping the armchairs so tightly he thought he might rip them off. *Not yet. I refuse to die now. He'll wake up. I know he will. And when he does, he'll give me the information I need. And this Keepsake Killer, this Dreg, will pay for what he's done. And then I'll die. And maybe I'll go before I get a chance to tell the special people in my life how much I care, but I flat out fucking refuse to die while that son of a bitch maniac is still out there.*

The pain began to die down, but he had a deep feeling that the next time it had him in its clutches, it would keep twisting him until it had wrung the life out of him.

"Come on, Lucas," he appealed to the comatose man once more. "I know you're in there. So why not come out and play? You've got a life waiting out here for you. A woman who loves and needs you. She's at his mercy. We've got to move soon. We don't know how much time she has left. Please, open your eyes."

There was no response. Harlson settled back in his chair, sweating from his bout. He suddenly reached for the phone. He picked up the receiver and asked for an outside line. Once one was given to him, he paused, realizing he didn't remember the number.

Shit, he thought, feeling like a class A prick. He dialed information. He had a feeling he would be calling information at least a dozen times before the night was over.

The operator picked up.

“Yes,” Harlson muttered. “a listing for Barbara Harlson, please.”

CHAPTER 43

Morning came. It was grey and forbidding, thunderclouds sounding off in the angry sky. A sharp clap of the impending summer storm had shaken Tammy awake. She had immediately checked her progress on the stud. There was a noticeable groove in the thick wood, but she was still inches from freedom. She had worked on it for hours until exhaustion had completely taken her. Her arms were so tired from the chore that she could barely lift them.

I'm living on borrowed time now, she thought, convinced Dreg's punishment the night before had only been a prelude for what was to come. Stupid girl. Why did you fall asleep?

Her face still ached from the blows the night before. She felt like a fat woman, her face swollen and puffy. But she didn't have time to worry about her looks. She hauled the chain up and pulled against the board, leaning her weight back. There was an audible creak, but the board held fast. She began to manipulate the chain once more, her muscles burning from her previous labor, when she heard the bolt on the door being moved.

Oh, God, no, she thought, crawling into a corner as far from the door as she could.

Dreg entered the shed, carrying a tray of bread and a mason jar of water. He approached her, his face expressionless and his eyes avoiding her. He placed the tray within her reach then sharply turned and left the shed, slamming the door behind him.

He's pissed, Tammy thought, more frightened by his inattention than she had been by his rage the night before. This is it. He's going to kill me soon. When a psychopath doesn't even rant and rave anymore, then he's getting ready to lower the axe. Oh, God. Oh, sweet merciful God.

Tammy urinated on the ground as far from the board as possible. When she was done, she moved back to her stake, working on it feverishly like a woman possessed. Her shoulders protested, quivering with pain. Rain began

to patter the shed. At first, light pellets. Then a hard downpour fell on her prison. Thunder sounded, like a harbinger of tragedy.

The symbolism wasn't lost on her. She continued to rub away at the wood. She could smell the friction of the chain against the stud. She could feel slithers of wood speckle her hand. A small part of her begged for rest. For acceptance of the fate.

Just lie down and forget about it. He'll just catch you again. What do you hope to gain?

Tammy paused, reflecting on the thought. Then she gritted her teeth and went back to work.

I want him to kill me while I'm standing on my feet, looking him in the eye, she concluded. I refuse to die like a cornered animal. No more cowering in shadow. I want this to end out there, outside. And I won't beg and plead. I'll fight. I'll fight like I've fought all my life.

And she had always been fighting, it seemed. Either fighting the advances of lustful men or discrimination in the workplace or conservative politicians who wanted to take away the few rights women had managed to attain for themselves.

She would fight for respect and dignity. And if she should fall, there were worse things to die for.

This no good, Dreg thought. He sat in a straight back chair on the porch of his den, watching the torrents of rain engulf the woods. This was another bad sign. His duffle bag was packed and at his feet. He was ready to move. All he had to do was wait for nightfall, when Le Louf would be in observation, and offer his louve to the hunter of hunters.

Then he would be free of this place and Tammy and the bad feelings he was having. He had very little wolf left in him. The moon had diminished greatly since his recent hunt had begun, and he hoped the storm would not cast a pall over his ceremony that night. Le Louf had to see him making his greatest sacrifice ever. The significance of it all would be useless, and he would have a greater burden to shoulder if his louve were not to become a part of Le Louf.

The dread was as strong as ever, but he had no more reassurance to give it. He never traveled in the daytime when Le Louf wasn't there to guide him. He would have to wait for darkness anyway. So let the voice in his head

rattle on, as it had been. He was tired and too depressed to fight it any longer.

Something was going to happen that night. He felt it all the way down to his marrow. Something was going to happen and he was more man than wolf now. And though he could kill Tammy now and use the forest as camouflage until darkness, something kept him from doing that.

An unseen force was heading at him. Be it the couchernal or the cowboy-men. And the old wolf was tired of scurrying away whenever his voice told him to. He would stand his ground. Leave on his terms this time. And then he would gorge himself on the livestock of Arkansas. He had weapons and the experience of several seasons. Many had tried to stop his sacred hunt. And many had fallen to him. Whatever would happen that night, he was prepared for it. He had a gift to bestow upon Le Louf.

And no force on earth would stop him.

CHAPTER 44

Harlson stood at the window of Lucas' hospital room. The storm raged on, darkening the early evening. He had been by Lucas' side for nearly twenty-four hours now.

Dawn.

Lucas still didn't respond.

Noon.

Lucas still didn't respond.

Afternoon.

Still no response.

And now the nighttime was encroaching on them. Harlson stared at his watch.

Seven p.m.

There should have been light in the sky, but the sudden summer storm had shadowed the city.

Harlson had caught a glimpse of the weather forecast on Lucas' television. The local meteorologists were watching the system closely, hailing it the offspring of a tropical storm that could manifest into a depression by the next day. It meant that another hurricane was spawning in the ocean. The newsmen were dubbing it Tropical Storm Abigail, for the time being.

This storm was the first wave of the system, and by no means the worst storm Harlson had been through while living in Houston.

But this shit could louse up his ability to catch Dreg, if Lucas would snap out of it, that was.

It's a bad sign, he thought, watching as lightning lit up the darkness. The perfect ending to a perfect fucking day.

"...uh...Harlson."

The voice was so light that Harlson figured it was his own imagination, teasing him. But when he turned around, Lucas Glover stared back at him, frantically pushing the tubes aside and trying to sit up.

“Lucas,” Harlson said, rushing to the psychic’s bedside. “You came out of it. Son of a bitch. I knew you’d make it.”

“We...got to...Tammy...” Luke said, still disorientated. His arms flailed around and he kicked his sheets away, trying to climb out of the bed.

“Easy, sport. Easy. Relax a minute. Here,” Harlson said, pouring a cup of water for Lucas from the pitcher on his night stand. “Drink this.”

Luke inhaled the liquid then pushed the cup aside, his eyes a little clearer now.

“We have to move,” he said groggily, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

“*We* aren’t moving anywhere,” Harlson replied. “You tell me what you know and *I’ll* be moving. I’ve almost gotten you killed twice now. The third time’s the charm and I don’t need your death on my conscience.”

Luke grasped Harlson’s arm. “You have to take me with you,” he pleaded. “She’s my wife. Besides, the information I got was cloudy. I need to be in the car with you to figure it all out.”

Harlson pried Luke’s fingers away. “Okay, but you stay in the car. Shit, I must be crazy. I should be getting a doctor to check you out.”

“There’s no time,” Luke argued, pulling the monitor pads from his chest, glue balling up in his chest hair. “I can take us to Dreg, but we have to move now.”

“Where is he?” Harlson asked.

“He’s on Highway 45, that much I know. But there’s something to look for. Something that shields him.”

“What?” Harlson said, assisting Luke with his I.V.

“A red lantern,” Luke said, flinching as Harlson withdrew the needle and bent Lucas’ arm forward to stop the bleeding.

“He’s behind a red lantern.”

CHAPTER 45

He had stepped into the shed only three times that day.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

He had put the tray within her reach then turned and left, his eyes downcast. He had said nothing to her. Hadn't even looked at her in a threatening manner. Even his body language was cold.

Impartial.

He was going to kill her. The certainty of it was unquestionable to Tammy. She sat in the far corner of the shed, her arms too heavy to lift. She had made progress on the wood. She was halfway through. But the board was still strong and her strength had betrayed her. She had given it a good race, but it was nearly over. And she was finally accepting it, praying for redemption to a God she had seldom ever called on. Options had run through her head earlier. Screaming at the top of her lungs, which she finally decided would bring death quicker. From the look of the woods, she was far from anyone's earshot.

Humoring him. Proclaiming to be his louve until she could find a way out. But the thought of him touching her, having sex with her. It was an option she had quickly discounted.

Dreg had haphazardly tacked the boards she had pried loose up. If only she could bring the chain of her manacles through the wood. She was sure the boards would give easily. But Dreg would give chase. And catch her. And beat her again.

No, death was the only option left. And compared to the others, it seemed the best. She had wept. Long and hard. Many hours. But now the tears were finished and her head felt light and she lost her thoughts in the patter of the falling rain. So now she sat.

Waiting.

Dreg sat on the porch, listening to the rain fall in the darkness. Soon, it would subside enough for him to build a roaring fire and commence with his ceremony.

So now he sat.

Waiting.

Harlson had just made it out of city limits when Luke fell asleep on the passenger side of his car.

Poor guy, Harlson thought. Still weak from his coma.

He wasn't concerned about finding Dreg's lair. Luke had told him of his encounter with Bertha Hobbs and how she had told him to look for a red lantern. So, as absurd as looking for a red lantern in the thick woods of Highway 45 sounded, Harlson had his eyes peeled for anything that fit the description. Though how he was supposed to see anything through the veil of rain cascading down his windshield was beyond him. It did seem to be letting up, he noted.

He decided that Luke being conked out was good. Would make it easier for him to protect the guy. He had been a little concerned when Luke began to drift off. But he had drifted off, thank God. He had grown visibly lethargic. He hadn't passed out or had a seizure or anything, so Harlson was relatively unconcerned about him.

Just get your strength back, sport, he thought. Let me take care of the big bad wolf.

And he prayed he would be up to the task. He wasn't in the best of shape himself. His spasm at the hospital had taken the starch out of his sheets. Wasn't the best scenario in the world. He never gave much credence to psychic phenomena, but here he was, driving through a monsoon, following a psychic's vision. Went to show how desperate he was.

Driving in this weather, with a slumbering man who had just awoken from a coma, looking for a red lantern and completely convinced that it was out there somewhere, beckoning him. The only fear in him was of this being a blind alley.

What the fuck? He had nothing to lose, far as he was concerned. The Keepsake Killer was quarry to him, like a field mouse to a falcon.

Harlson was a man hunter, plain and simple. And the only thing that had

kept him alive on the force this long was either pure luck or uncanny skill, he could never decide which. Sure, he had taken his shots. Knife wounds, a bullet in his back in '78 that missed his spine by a cunt hair.

Luckily, it had been fired from a .22 from a good distance, so it did little more than wedge in his flesh. No major organs hit. He had his scars, like every consummate hunter should have.

But the Keepsake Killer meant more than all of that. Harlson had brought in some pretty hairy characters. Drunken rednecks, hopped up bikers, minorities who, justifiably so, he suspected, hated everything he represented. 'Puerco,' a Spanish guy called him one time, after Harlson had taken the guy into custody for beating his wife and kids. And Harlson, who didn't take kindly to men who abused women folk or children, had calmly read the fuck his rights and taken him to jail.

What he had wanted to do was take the son of a bitch down a lonely, dark road and teach him not to wallop his family. But he had to show the bastard that there was a system where everyone had rights. Where everyone was entitled to at least a minimal amount of respect.

He was so happy when his transfer to Homicide had come through, away from domestic squabbles and the penny ante bullshit. And he showed his gratitude by solving every case he could get his hands on. He was going to dunk this one. And in his favorite fashion. Alone. No back-up. No Swat team.

Luke had warned him that an entourage would send the fuck scurrying like a cockroach in the Fifth Ward when a light is turned on. Fine by him. He would show Fowler and Lubin and the commissioner and his fussy mayor how it was done.

Dreg was going to take a fall. And this dying half breed was going to have people kissing his ass, for once.

CHAPTER 46

The rain stopped. Dreg stepped off of the porch, staring up at the sky. Dark clouds parted, and Le Louf peeked through. It was only a quarter of the moon, but it was enough to make Dreg smile. He had the revolver he had taken from the dead cowboy-man tucked in the back of his pants. He would go into the shed, approach Tammy, tell her he was setting her free now.

'Go, go,' he imagined himself saying to her. *'You is free.'*

And then, as she turned to leave, he would press the revolver to the back of her head and squeeze the trigger. She would never realize the deception. It would happen so fast that she wouldn't have time to panic or plead. She would die joyous, and Dreg wanted it that way. As upset as he was, he still felt deep affection for her. He wasn't a heartless *mon vieux*, and his heart cried for another option.

Unfortunately, there wasn't one. So he would give her body and soul to Le Louf and carry her memory with him for his remaining seasons. He would find another to bear his cubs, Le Louf willing. But Tammy was the one he would be with after death, on the other side of the moon, where Le Louf was. She would understand, when Le Louf consumed her and made him a part of his glory. She would understand him then. And she would wait for him.

He started to make his way to the shed when the voice in his head shouted.

Wha is? he thought, incredulously. His earlier prediction had come true. A lone man was close to him, the voice told him. A lone man would be near his den soon. Dreg had been anticipating this, and a lone man would fair poorly against him.

He postponed the ceremony, checking the revolver to make sure it was loaded. He waded silently in the woods. An outsider had the nerve to interfere with a *Traiteur's* sacred ceremony. And that lone man was about to be dealt with good and proper.

Yeh heh.

Highway 45 was deserted. Harlson drove through Huntsville, discouragement beginning to settle in. Maybe he had missed something. Maybe he should turn around and head back toward Houston, with closer attention paid to his surroundings. Or maybe this was bullshit and a total waste of time. Luke still slept, and Harlson considered waking him up to go through the details of the vision one more time.

'That was a red lantern, right sport? Sure it wasn't a highway marker or tree because there are plenty of those fuckers out here.'

His hand reached for Luke's shoulder. Before it made contact, something caught his eye.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered, applying the brakes. He used his extended arm to keep Luke from hitting the dashboard. Luke protested groggily, then fell back asleep, his head lolling back against the headrest.

Harlson slowly backed the car up, until a weathered billboard, seemingly tacked to a group of trees, was visible in the headlights of his car. There it was. The red lantern. It was a picture of an antique lantern that emitted a red light. Below the image, the sign read: THE RED LANTERN INN HOTEL AND 24HR. DINER IN MADISONVILLE OFF OF EXIT 283.

Harlson killed the engine, but left the headlights on. He climbed out of the car, examining the sign. Upon closer inspection, he saw the left part of the sign was attached to a thick oak tree by rusted hinges. On the right side of the sign, a latch was applied to another tree. Harlson flipped the latch and the sign creaked open, like a possessed door in an old horror movie. He took his penlight from his shirt pocket and shined it into the forest. A clearing cut through the woods. And though the grass was as high as his knees, he could see the indication of tire tracks in the field.

I'll never question you again, Mr. Glover, he thought.

He went back to the car and cut off the lights. He checked on Lucas, who was still in a deep sleep. He nodded approvingly and shut the car door, after putting his keys on his seat.

He walked beyond the sign, following the tracks. About a hundreds yards ahead, heavier forest ate the tracks, but there was still allotment between the trees for them. Harlson put his penlight away and used the little moon light available as his guide. All he had to do was stay on the tracks. It would lead him to Dreg's doorstep.

He couldn't help but notice that the field was on an incline. The closer he came to the woods, the steeper the incline became.

Like climbing a mountain, he thought, remembering the story of his ancestors who climbed mountains to die on. He shook the symbolism away.

You're acting sort of nuts, he chided himself. *You're walking up a little dirt hill.*

He wasn't that cautious until he stepped into the woods. Then anything went.

He moved slowly. His .45 was in his hands and pointed up at the sky. He took in as much as he could between steps, his eyes staring in the darkness. He couldn't use his penlight here. It would make him an easy target. The only advantage to this was that Dreg had the same handicap.

He walked softly, toe to heel. His tread was so light that an imprint in the earth would be noticeable to only the keenest of eyes. He began to sweat, and he smiled to himself in the darkness.

Never let them see you sweat, he thought. He doubted that anyone would see him sweat in these woods.

Butterflies formed in his stomach, and the familiar pain was beginning to set in. He tolerated it, going about his business.

Searching.

Stalking.

And then he paused.

Something didn't feel right. He stood silent, absorbing the darkness. The soil at his feet was moist from the rain. Moisture rolled off of the tree leaves and pattered to the ground. The weather had driven most of the wildlife into their dens, so no other sound penetrated the silence. But something was out there. He felt it now. His intuitive sense was picking up something. No one was visible. No one made a sound. But Dreg was out there. He could feel him. At least the bastard couldn't squeeze off a decent shot.

He moved again, working his way toward a large tree for a shield. He couldn't give his position away, so he moved slowly. He paused once more, a tingle running the length of his back. Then he felt a hammer being pulled back on a firearm.

He didn't see it. He didn't hear it. He felt it.

Shit! his frenzied mind screamed. *Move!*

A shot rang out and pain exploded in Harlson's right leg.

"Mother fucker!" he screamed, following the curse with another scream of sheer agony.

He fell to the ground, his right leg useless. His knee was shattered. He pointed his gun into the darkness and fired three times. Despite the agony, he

tucked his gun into his pants and crawled through the mud, determined to regroup behind the tree. He panted and gritted his teeth, his open wound scraping the ground.

Come on, he thought. You can make it. Keep moving. The fucker fell back so keep moving.

Another shot came. Harlson fell back from the force of it. It had caught him through the right armpit, tearing through every organ in its path.

Harlson shuddered, his chest flaring with pain and limbs quivering uncontrollably. His painful march stopped. He sank slowly to his knees, his body suddenly feeling weightless. He couldn't breathe. Blood frothed from his mouth. His face collapsed in the mud.

His eyelids fluttered. In his sudden delirium, he had an image of the dead teen-aged girl, Susan, he had found sitting on the commode when he was rookie. The way she had extended both middle fingers on her stiffening hands as if to retort: *'fuck you world, I'm outta here. And so are you, Billy. So are you.'*

Then he saw nothing.

Dreg approached the body.

Dead.

He beamed at the sight, his inner voice finally quieting. Something was strange about this one. He sniffed at him.

"Bad meat," Dreg muttered, leaving the lone man to the elements.

The clouds had rolled across the moon once more, but they would soon clear.

He walked back toward his den.

There was a feast to prepare.

CHAPTER 47

Thunder woke him. Or at least it sounded like thunder. Luke jerked awake, his unfamiliar surroundings sending him into a half awake panic. Then everything seeped back to him. He wiped his eyes.

'Get a move on, sport.'

"Harlson?" Luke said, glancing around the car. He had just heard the man whisper, but where was he?

Luke stepped sluggishly out of the car. The wind was picking up. The storm was concentrating once again above him. The billboard sign slammed against the trees, manipulated by the strong wind.

And he saw it.

A dim highway light illuminated the sign. The red lantern. He stared ahead at the expanse of wilderness beyond the sign. He looked around for Harlson once more.

Then he stepped inside.

Tammy had heard the shots. Now she strained to see through the shed wall. Was Dreg dead? Had someone found her? Rescued her?

Her heart sank as Dreg appeared from the woods, walking slowly toward the house. He seemed to be scrutinizing the sky, shaking his head disparagingly.

She slumped back to the floor, giving the wood one final pull before hanging her head down. Still wouldn't budge. American made. The union would be proud.

'Who's going to save my poor Sassy?'

"Shut up," she muttered meekly, her body convulsing as she cried. She marveled at the cycle she had been following. Anger. Fear. Indifference. Just when she thought she was numb to it, she would realize how much she wanted

to live.

'Who's going to save my poor Sassy?' she heard again.

She dried her eyes and sniffed. Well, if there had been a knight in the forest, it was a fair bet that the dragon had won the fight.

Luke paused, staring down at Harlson's body.

Oh God in heaven, he thought, kneeling to Harlson's motionless form.

He grasped the detective's wrist, searching for a pulse.

Nothing.

He saw the butt of Harlson's .45 tucked in the front of his pants. He pulled the gun out slowly, barely disturbing Harlson's corpse.

He had known it would happen. His power told him long ago that Harlson would die. But as he stared at the dead man, he felt shock and guilt. Guilt for the knowledge.

But there was no more time to spare on the fallen detective. He felt his wife in the distance. Her essence called out to him.

Despite the horrible dread he felt at the sight of Harlson, he felt good. Better than he had in years. His head was clear and free of pain. His body felt healthy and strong.

And that was good.

He needed everything he had inside to save his wife. He had never been a warrior. His pursuits had been cerebral ones for obvious reasons.

His nerve faltered. He needed Harlson. Harlson was the warrior. Luke was only the seer and if an experienced soldier like Harlson had fallen victim to Dreg, what chance did he have?

Not much of one, probably. But he had a weapon. And maybe his psychic awareness would compensate for his inexperience. He didn't know.

He had touched Dreg, but feared reaching out with his mind for a fix on his position. He recalled his first dream with the couchemal. What it had told him.

'He cannot feel your rapport. But beware. Close proximity will give you away.'

So he was going in relatively blind. He closed his eyes, searching for Tammy. She was near. And alive still. Thank God. He turned to Harlson's body.

"You were a good man," he said, "and I'll never forget you or let anyone

else forget.”

If you live, that is.

He paused, taking a deep breath and building his courage. His plan wasn't to defeat Dreg. He would engage him, and hopefully afford Tammy an opportunity to escape. He had no optimism regarding his own survival. Dreg would kill him, most likely. But it was a fair bargain, as far as he was concerned.

He turned one more time to Harlson. “See you, partner.”

He began to walk.

Tammy sat in the shed, her knees drawn to her chin. The fear was gone and the reoccurring stage of resignation had set in her mind. Suddenly, her head rose, her eyes widening. She felt something. Someone. Invisible tendrils lightly probed her brain.

“Luke?” she whispered.

Dreg stood on the porch, exasperation setting in. He cursed the lone man for showing up when the sky had been clear. Now the dark clouds had once again obscured Le Louf. And the gathering of the shadow stretched across the sky. The rumbling storm might never clear now. Which meant his ceremony was ruined.

He would simply have to kill Tammy and be off. There was no other way. The dead lone man probably had l'auto on the highway, which meant cowboys might find it and descend on his den. He might have to abandon this one all together. He didn't think there would be enough time to retrieve the car and bury the body before he left. Besides, if someone had spotted l'auto, someone would eventually begin to nose around the sign that hid his road. It was a sin. All of the meat in his freezer would go to waste. He would carry as much as he could to sate his hunger on the road, but so much of it, enough to feed him two seasons, easily, would be forfeited.

He sighed, beginning to wonder if Tammy had been more of a curse to him than anything. He heard a sound in the woods. The rustling of brush. His inner voice was quiet, so it must have been a critter. He had brushed off the noise when he heard another. A heavy tread. Steps, too big to be an animal.

Who is? he thought, shocked. No one had ever been able to sneak up on him without his inner voice protesting.

A man emerged from the woods. Dreg stepped to the side of his den, watching curiously. The man, tall and thin with dark features, took in the surroundings, his eyes going over the cars and Dreg's den. Finally, his eyes found the shed. The man walked slowly to it, glancing around nervously.

Dreg smiled, amused. He could easily nip this in the bud with one shot before the man took another step, but he wanted this outsider to think he had managed to fool the old wolf.

He was intrigued by this meat. He had the power to be invisible to Dreg's senses. And Dreg would know why before the little lamb perished.

CHAPTER 48

Tammy froze as the shed door opened. A figure lingered in the darkness, then stepped forward into the dim lantern light.

“Tammy?” Luke said, rushing to her.

It took her a moment to believe it. She watched him approach, his arms wrapping around her.

When she felt his warmth, inhaled his familiar scent, felt his pounding heart pressed against her chest, it began to sink in. This wasn’t some fanciful dream or mirage. This was Luke, holding her, stroking her head, squeezing her so tight that she almost lost her breath.

“Luke?” she said, grasping him in return. Her eyes clouded. She hugged him tighter, pulling at his jacket. “You came. You found me. Oh, Luke.”

He broke the embrace and kissed her. She returned the kiss. He pulled back, examining her face.

“Oh my God,” he said, his face contorting into an expression of rage. “That bastard. I’ll fucking kill him.”

“I’m okay,” she tried to assure him, ready to leave the shed.

Luke was with her now and he would get her out of this. But she had to steer him away from that macho revenge bullshit. She didn’t care if Dreg was ever caught or punished for his crimes. She only wanted away from there.

“Let’s go,” Tammy said, grabbing at him again. She had to feel him. Know for certain that he was there and that he wasn’t a dream or hallucination. “We have to get out of here. Let the police handle it. Just find something to get these off of me.” She held her hands up to the light. Luke saw the chain and manacles for the first time.

He began to glance around the shed. “He had you penned up like an animal,” he muttered, his voice so raw with anger that it chilled her. He had the .45 out and waved it around as he looked for something to pry the manacles loose. “Don’t worry,” he told her. “I’ve got this gun and I’ll kill him if he

shows up.”

“Just hurry, Luke,” Tammy urged him. “Shoot the chain, if you have to. He’s a maniac. He killed a wild dog with his bare hands.”

She glanced past him out at the darkness. “He could be anywhere. Hurry, Luke.”

He gave up the search and went back to her, grabbing the chain and tugging on it. It moved. He put his foot against the wall and pulled harder. It gave more.

“One more pull,” he muttered, letting go of the chain. He rubbed his palms on the legs of his pants, drying the perspiration off to get a better grip.

Luke’s left shoulder exploded, followed a second later by a harsh blast from a shotgun. His head snapped back as his body lurched forward from the shot. Tammy screamed as his body fell against hers and rolled off, leaving her soaked with his blood.

“No!” she shouted, reaching out for him. He was still alive. He grimaced and his eyes fluttered open and shut.

“Keep pulling,” he muttered, taking the gun from his useless arm with his other. His shoulder was gone. His arm looked as if it were hanging on by a single ligament. The wound was blackened and she could smell his flesh. She looked up and Dreg towered over them, grinning evilly.

His arm reached for the gun just as Luke had leveled it at him and he swatted it away toward the generator.

“This why you no be Dreg’s louve, huh, Tammy?” he sneered, stepping on Luke’s chest. “You got uptown beau. Pretty boy face beau, yeh-heh?”

“Don’t you hurt him anymore!” Tammy hissed, lurching at him.

Dreg struck her forehead with his open hand, forcing her back against the wall. He then grabbed Luke’s feet and pulled him out of Tammy’s grasp. Luke screamed, clutching his wounded arm. Tammy leapt back at him, staring against the chain. Dreg knelt down to Luke, who could do no more than suffer. His head lolled and his eyes looked far away.

Dreg brought out the knife from his boot sheath. He held it up for Tammy to see. “When Dreg get through with ya’ beau, maybe Dreg be pretty then. Maybe Dreg look better than beau.”

“Please don’t hurt him, Dreg,” Tammy said softly, tears running down her face. “I’ll do anything you want, but please leave him alone. This is between me and you. Understand? He has nothing to do with it.”

“Too late for Tammy!” Dreg bellowed, pointing the knife in her direction. “And too late for beau.”

“You sick mother fucker!” Tammy shrieked, straining even harder against the chain. “Leave him alone!”

Dreg snickered, lowering the knife slowly to Luke. Suddenly, Luke’s fist shot upward, catching Dreg in the nose. Dreg fell back slightly, dropping the knife. Blood surged from his nostrils.

“You will never have sage femme, Traiteur!” Luke suddenly shouted.

Dreg stared at Luke in shock. He froze, sprawled on the dirt scant feet from the psychic, his eyes big with fright.

“Wha is?” he muttered, fearfully.

“The couchemal has sent me for you,” Luke continued, speaking with authority despite his pain. “Your line ends here and now. You join your brother, now, Dreg. You join him in hell, where Le Louf will never shine upon you. Where you will be forsaken and swallowed by the darkness.”

Dreg shook his head frantically. “You...no, no...you,” he stammered, his eyes traveling from Luke to Tammy and back to Luke again, searching for a reason his secret thoughts were exposed by the outsider.

“He waits for you in hell, Dreg,” Luke said hatefully, his voice waning from the pain. “*Il attendez-vous dans enfer!*”

“Evil thing! Evil thing!” Dreg shouted, pouncing on Luke.

Luke groped at Dreg’s face. “Keep pulling, Tammy!” he shouted, his voice hoarse with pain.

Dreg grasped Luke’s throat with one hand and held down his free arm with the other. “Got enough wolf left to deal wi’ you, evil beau! Deal wi’ you good and proper! Sen’ you to couchemal, now! Sen’ you to hell! And sen’ Tammy afta you!”

Dreg opened his huge mouth, his head lunging toward Luke’s face. Luke managed to squirm his arm free and he slammed it against Dreg’s jaws. Dreg bit into Luke’s forearm, blood squirting his cheeks. Luke screamed again, trying to shake Dreg off.

Tammy bucked on the chain. Suddenly, she fell forward as the post snapped. She ran headfirst into Dreg and Luke, who both cried out in pain and surprise. Dreg was flung to the side from the action. Tammy rolled past him, stopping short of the open door. Her head slammed into the dirt. She glanced up. Luke was crawling madly for the knife. Dreg bound at Luke, sinking his teeth into Luke’s calf, opening another geyser of blood.

“No!” Tammy shouted. She charged, jumping on Dreg’s back. Dreg stood up immediately, reaching for Tammy.

“Off!” he screamed. “Off!”

Tammy held on for dear life, her legs clamped around Dreg's waist and arms pressed against his throat. He began to thrash about, grabbing at her hair, her face, clothing, releasing his grip only when she would squeeze on his throat harder in an attempt to cut off his oxygen. He rammed her into a wall. The jolt nearly made her let go, but she held on, catching her breath. He slammed her a second time harder, and she felt her grip relax. Her lower back screamed with agony. She looked over Dreg's shoulder.

Luke tried feebly to help, but Dreg quickly kicked him down. Luke slumped to the dirt, his strength depleted.

And then it came to Tammy. Her only recourse. The only possible way she and Luke might leave there alive. She felt Dreg's pounding jugular vein against her cheek. She rejected the idea. There was no way she had the strength or nerve to do such a thing. Then Dreg managed a handful of her hair and he pulled it from her scalp. She screamed and nearly lost her grip again. She would fall eventually. And she saw that she had no choice. No choice at all. It was her only defense. God forgive her.

She craned her neck to Dreg's throat, opening her mouth and closing it over Dreg's foul-tasting flesh.

He froze for a moment, then thrashed around harder. He began to scream as Tammy penetrated further, rending the soft flesh of his neck with her teeth. She didn't stop until the pounding was in her mouth. She had her eyes closed the whole time. Dreg slammed her against the wall once more, then her teeth opened his jugular vein, blood gushing all over her face.

Dreg fell to his knees. Tammy released him, wiping the blood from her face and nearly retching from her gruesome labor. She could still feel Dreg's blood pound against her tongue. Dreg stayed on his knees, his back to her. His hand was clamped over his throat, blood squeezing between the fingers. He rose to his feet slowly. He turned and faced Tammy, his eyes wide and horrified.

"Ta-Tammy?" he muttered, blood following her name, coursing down his chin and onto his tank top. Dreg stumbled out of the shed.

Dreg made his way into the forest, the world spinning around him. He lost his footing and fell to the mud. He sucked in air shallowly and began to choke on his blood. He arched up and looked to the sky. The clouds still hid the moon.

“Le Louf?” Dreg muttered, before his voice was reduced to a gurgle.

His blurry eyes trailed back down to the wet earth, and Dreg saw the dogs. The wild dogs. They sat around him in a circle, at least a dozen in number. They sat as quietly as a shadow, their bodies just as still. Though there was no light to aid in it, Dreg noticed that their eyes burned like glowing coals. Dreg began to choke, as the dogs watched him, patiently waiting for him to die.

Dreg’s last bid for oxygen was rewarded with a hot, crimson flood. He obliged them.

“Luke, Luke,” Tammy said, crawling toward him. He lay motionless, his eyes closed. She pulled his head into her lap and shook it slightly. “Come on, Luke. Open your eyes, honey. Snap out of it.”

He opened his eyes and looked at her. He smiled softly. “You did it,” he whispered. “You saved us.” His body convulsed with tremors. “I love you so much,” he added, his teeth chattering and eyes misting. “I’m so sorry.”

She shushed him.

“No,” he replied. “It was all my fault. All of it. I should have never left you in the car. You could have been killed.”

“You can’t see everything, Lucas Glover,” she said, stroking his cheek. “No one can. Let’s leave, now. I have to get you to a hospital.”

He clasped her hand, with very little strength. “Tammy, I can’t make it.”

“Yes, you can,” she replied, sternly. “You have too.”

“No, honey. I’m dying. I can’t make it,” he said, his voice trailing off. His eyes closed.

“Listen to me,” Tammy said, her voice choked. “I’ve been through a hell of a lot and if you think I intend to lose you now, you’re insane. Now, you’re going to hold on. You’re going to make it. You better not die on me, Luke. Do you hear me? Don’t you die on me.”

He didn’t respond. “Luke, you’re going to wake up, then we are going to get out of here. Do you hear me, Luke?”

“Yes, Mrs. Glover,” he mumbled, his head stirring. “After all, you’re the boss.”

“And don’t you forget it,” she replied, squeezing his hand.

CHAPTER 49

Tammy struck at the water, trying not to succumb to its murky depths. Her father stood on the pier, watching her with a thin smile stretched across his gray face.

“Who’s going to save my poor Sassy?” he said softly.

Her strength began to fade and her struggle ceased. As her weight dropped, her feet immediately made contact with the sludge at the bottom of Eagle Mountain Lake. She glanced at her father, who threw his head back and laughed heartily.

She sighed, her limbs quivering. Water suddenly erupted in front of her. Dreg rose to the surface. Half of his face had decayed to the bone. The wound on his neck was blackened and festering with algae.

“Too late for Tammy!” he gurgled, grabbing her with skeletal hands and tugging her down. Suddenly, the bottom of the lake disintegrated and a cold abyss lapped at her legs.

“Goin’ to deal wi’ you good and proper, Tammy!” Dreg shrieked, laughing manically.

He pulled her under.

Tammy burst awake, jumping in her seat. She was in the waiting room of Herman Hospital. A dozen people who waited with her stared curiously at her, too grief stricken to offer assistance.

Tammy hugged herself with quivering arms, feeling her heart pound. Outside, the storm still raged. Lightning flashed in the waiting room window. It had only been a few hours since she had brought Luke to the medical complex in William Harlson’s car. The doctors had conferred with her earlier, talking about reconstructive surgery on Luke’s shoulder. The possibility of amputating the arm. That notion was dismissed after a specialist had been summoned, much to Tammy’s relief.

Dr. Spencer had come by, ordering her to have the abrasions on her face cleaned up and suggesting that a complete check-up might be in order. But

she had made it quite clear to him that her place was in the waiting room until Luke was out of danger.

The police had sat in the room with her earlier, taking all the information she could avail. A news broadcaster on the waiting room television had made an announcement about a police entourage descending on the Keepsake Killer's lair. The details were sketchy and the immaculately polished female broadcaster had promised further updates throughout the night.

It's over, she thought, rocking herself softly in her chair. *He's dead. So everything's okay. Luke will pull through and everything will be fine.*

But she still felt nervous. Edgy. She had drifted off three times in the waiting room only to be shaken back awake by nightmares of Dreg. She didn't think she could ever sleep again. If this condition persisted, she decided she would try to get a prescription for valium or heavy duty sleeping pills. Anything to forget the madness. To forget Dreg.

She kept thinking of how close death had danced toward her. She wondered if she would ever feel safe again. If the world would ever be more than a maze of death traps that she would spend the rest of her life trying to avoid. She was almost as scared of living now as she had been of dying. Dreg was dead. But evil wasn't. Insanity still thrived out there. Innocent lives would always be fodder for the many Dregs still roaming the highways and lurking in the shadow.

The world had always scared her. Now it horrified her. How many killers had she passed on crowded sidewalks? Sat in darkened theaters with? Spoken to at social gatherings? Slept with, even?

A nurse stepped into the waiting room, interrupting her misery. "Mrs. Glover?" the young woman said softly. "You can see your husband now."

She stepped into the room. Luke lay in the hospital bed, smiling at her meekly. His shoulder was bandaged, as well as his forearm. His injured leg lay limply in traction.

"How are you feeling, baby?" Tammy said, walking to him.

"I'll live," he said, his eyes drowsy from pain killers. "I just thank God you're okay. I couldn't have made it alone." His eyes trailed away suddenly, staring at the foot of his bed. Tammy knew he was pretty high on the pain killers, but there was something more to the serious set of his features. Something troubled him. She lightly took his hand.

“Tell me about it,” she said.

He stared back at her, his eyes big with pain and fright. “All of the years I worked with the force took a big toll on me. All of the depravity and cruelty I was exposed to. The only thing that helped me put it into perspective was you. I could always say, ‘I’m going home to Tammy. I’ll hold her in my arms and it will all go away.’ And then you were taken away by the bad things. Sucked up by the darkness and there was nothing there holding me back from the pit. I fell in this time. I was completely vulnerable and I touched something in the process that made Dreg tame by comparison. I saw a devil in a vision and I made a deal with it to get you back. I pray it was just an image. Just a dream that either Dreg had conjured or I had conjured or we both made up together. But if it’s not, then evil is as strong as ever. And it helped me get you back. What kind of sense does that make?”

“I don’t know,” Tammy replied, realizing for the first time how traumatic it all most have been on Luke. She had no idea what he was talking about. Perhaps he would elaborate on it further when he was clear headed. But she could feel his pain.

“I can’t help but wonder what the point is,” Luke continued. “It’s like a cosmic joke and I don’t understand what the fucking punch line is, Tammy.”

His eyes clouded, and Tammy bent down to him, wiping his cheeks. “I wonder about it too, Luke,” she said, staring sympathetically at him. “I wonder what makes up for all of the evil in the world. It’s out of our hands, and I know how scary that is. Believe me I know. But we continue to live, despite it. To learn. We survive and we love and that’s the only point to it, my darling. The only thing that makes up for the evil. We’re both scared now, but we’ll see this through like we’ve seen everything else through. Nothing can stop us. Nothing can stop our love. Everything will be all right.”

And for the first time since the ordeal had ended, Tammy believed it.

CHAPTER 50

Agent Thomas Lubin stood on the front porch of the weathered cabin. Forensics hauled out garbage bags full of the packed human remains in the freezer. They brushed past Lubin solemnly, spiriting their burden to the van parked in the clearing. Policeman and agents scoured the grounds, dressed in thick raincoats.

They hadn't found his body yet. Dreg's corpse was unaccounted for and Lubin was beginning to wonder how long the search could continue. The downpour was cleaning the forest of any scents the canine units might latch onto to track the body down. The Glover woman had reported that Dreg was in a critical condition when he fled the scene. His throat ripped out.

Where could he have gone? Could he possibly have survived such a wound?

Agent Sally Lane stepped up on the porch, closing an umbrella.

"Hello, Thomas," she said, good-naturedly. He was glad to see that her wound was healing nicely. He had to fight the urge to reach out to her, to embrace her and beg for another chance.

"How goes it, Sally?" Lubin replied, going back to the procession of policeman going through the abandoned cars in the clearing.

"I spoke to Captain Fowler briefly," Sally said, her eyes pained for a moment. "About Harlson. It seems he quit the force before coming here. Fowler has offered to decline Harlson's resignation, so William will be decorated post mortem for his actions here tonight. Tammy and Lucas Glover are both recuperating and we can question them in more detail in a few days."

"Excellent," Lubin replied.

"They still haven't found him, have they?" Sally asked, watching the men fight the elements.

"No," Lubin replied, flatly. Concern was etched in his face. "I'm going to have to pull everybody back soon. Dammit, I thought we had him this time."

"According to the report, he was mortally wounded. Maybe we should

sweep any residence within a five mile radius, make sure he didn't go to someone for medical attention," Sally offered.

"I don't know," Lubin said, shaking his head slightly. "Tammy Glover tore his neck open with her bare teeth. She was sure, and the blood in the cabin would indicate, she severed his jugular vein. How far can a man travel with a wound that severe? We should have found him within a hundred feet. And the torrents of rain have already washed away any trail for us to follow. The press will have a field day with this."

"We will find him, Thomas," Sally said, gently grasping his shoulder. "Right now, you can barely see your hand in front of your face out there. When the sky clears, we'll find him."

"I hope so," Lubin said, sounding unconvinced.

Lubin was glad that Sally was next to him. Still in his life. He honestly didn't think he could function without her. He may have lost her as a lover, but she would always be his best agent.

Lubin looked at Sally for as long as he could before the pain rose in him again. It would still be a while before he was healed. His eyes went back to the night.

"Where are you?" he whispered, praying that the nightmare was over.

EPILOGUE

The dogs cringed in their earthen den, listening to the men move about in the woods. The leader of the pack, a dog that was a hybrid of Doberman and Shepard, gazed up at the mouth of the cavern. This place was a good place. A thin fracture in the earth that the dogs had slipped into and made home. Brush camouflaged the maw of their den and thinned most of the moisture that was pouring through.

Many seasons ago, the dogs had hollowed out individual spaces in the earth, so they remained dry and warm in their holes as the storm raged on.

The leader of the pack, Prince had been his name when he was a puppy, before the man he had known as master left him on the shoulder of Highway 45, yawned and stretched his legs, unconcerned with the commotion the men were causing. It sounded as though they were leaving, their loud voices and machines moving toward the highway, the place were men used their machines. The bad place that was crossed only when a bitch was detected on the other side or sure prey was to be found.

So Prince finally relaxed his tired muscles. His stomach was full now and his only goal was rest. Something had stirred in his head earlier. Some force had touched his canine brain, prompting him to go up into the woods during a brief respite from the storm. And though the area was thick with man smell and some deep sense had told Prince that more men would soon come, he had lead the other six members of his tribe to the old one.

When they found the old one, the bad man who fed them occasionally, the pack acted as one, bringing the old one into their den. The way usually called for the pack to divide the meat and carry it back to their den, but some unseen force had caused the dogs to act as one, to pull the old one into the den.

Once inside, Prince had his fill first. After his appetite was sated, he left the rest to the others, letting them snarl and fight over the meat, though there was quite enough to feed them all.

So now Prince slept.

The dog didn't have the capacity to question his actions. A brief, primal curiosity had risen in the dog's small brain, only to fall to the hunger that had overwhelmed him. The intruder in Prince's mind faded as the dog feasted. The pack would regard this night as any other night. There would be no inquiries as to why they didn't follow the way, not that there could be.

They never emerged during storms. They never lingered if the man smell was strong, especially the man smell of the old one. And they never brought a kill back in one piece.

It was an oddity that was immediately lost on Prince. So he simply slept. And dreamed of the hunt.