

Eye of the Witch

Dana E. Donovan

Smashwords Edition

Books in this series include:

The Witch's Ladder
Eye of the Witch
The Witch's Key
Bones of a Witch
Witch House
Kiss the Witch
Call of the Witch
Gone is the Witch

Other books by this author:

Abandoned
Death & Other Little Inconveniences
Resurrection
Skinny

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EYE OF THE WITCH

Book Two

Pride, paranoia and paranormal forces all conspire to derail Detective Marcella's investigation into a series of suspicious suicides in New Castle, Massachusetts. In this sequel to *The Witch's Ladder*, Marcella learns that because of the ties that bind their pasts, every potential victim is also a possible suspect.

One

It started with that dream, the one where Doctor Lowell had me tied to a tree and came at me with a knife. Only in the dream, I was younger, much younger, like maybe by forty years.

Lilith was there, too, only this time not tied to the tree with me. I saw her standing on the sideline with Carlos, talking and laughing and playing with that confounded witch's ladder. I screamed for one of them to untie a knot on the ladder. They paid no attention. They couldn't hear me. My screams were only in my head.

Carlos leaned in and kissed Lilith. She pulled back and giggled. I thought to myself, that's so unlike her. I'd never seen her giggle before. Then the two of them looked back at me and waved before the mad doctor plunged his knife into my chest.

That's when I woke up, dripping in sweat, my heart pounding harder than a sixty-four-year-old heart had a right to.

In the old days, I would shrug something like that off, grab a cigarette and a shot of whiskey and then gone back to bed. But my days of smoke and whiskey seemed more distant than the young detective I left tied to that tree in my dreams. The best I could do then was get up and fix myself a grapefruit and guava smoothie, and so that's what I did.

As I sat sipping my concoction and thumbing through that silly string of beads I brought down from New Castle, the phone rang. I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost midnight. Even though my home phone didn't have caller ID, I knew right away who it was.

"Hello, Carlos," I said after answering. "What do you want?"

"Tony, hey, I didn't wake you, did I? I mean I know how you like to stay up late watching old westerns and.... You were up, right?"

"I was up, yes, but it's nearly midnight. I know you didn't call just to say hi. Is everything all right up there?"

He grew silent. My experience told me that he had a whole ice-breaking spiel ready for me, but I derailed his train of thought. It was selfish of me, really. I owed him more than that.

We hadn't talked for a while, not since I moved away. It all came to a head after our last case together. I sort of lost it. I grew despondent and my carelessness nearly got us both killed in a car wreck. That's when I knew I had to retire. I had been thinking about it anyway.

My captain recommended the condominiums at Del Rio Vista. Said his mother lived there and loved it. He said it was a great place to launch the exciting second half of my life.

What he meant was, it's a great place to go and die. Just look at his mother. For years he sent her checks every month for room and board, and a card on Mother's Day. Last month she slipped into a coma and passed. It took four days before anyone noticed. I suppose living at Del Rio Vista was just too much excitement for the old girl.

In the back of my mind, I believe the captain found some relief in the news. He had to know that his mother was fading like old denim.

But Carlos never expected I would hate it in Florida. I'm sure he hated to see me leave New Castle, but he believed it was for the best. He promised he would come down a couple of times a year to do some fishing with me. He hasn't yet. I don't blame him, though. Detective work is all-consuming. It's the reason he's still single, the reason I never married. I let him stew in silence awhile longer before finally letting him off the hook.

"Carlos, it's okay that you haven't called me before now. I know you're busy."

"Yeah?"

“Sure. I’ve been busy, too.”

“You have?”

“You kidding? Man, what with all the biking, swimming, canoeing, golfing, shuffleboard, bingo, cocktail parties and socializing, I don’t know if I’d have had the time to talk anyway.”

All right, so I lied to him. Truth was that I hadn’t done half those things in years. The other half I had never done at all.

“Really?” he said.

“Yeah, but I have time for you now. So tell me. How’ve you been? You make captain yet?”

“Me? Come on. That’s not my gig. I’m a field guy. You know that. The minute they promote me to captain, I’m taking that retirement train straight down to Florida where I can start really enjoying life—like you.”

“Right, like me. Well, all in good time. Don’t rush things, my friend. So tell me. You keeping busy up there?”

I said that and he went quiet again. It’s funny how two friends can sense when something is not quite right. I thought for a moment he had detected the discontent in my voice, but I wasn’t sure. Carlos Rodriguez and I had worked together for nearly thirty years, and in that time we both learned more about the other than either intentionally divulged. I assumed he was simply feeling the void in my words, but as soon as he spoke again I realized it was his misapprehensions I felt, not he feeling mine.

“Carlos? Is something wrong?”

“I probably shouldn’t have called you tonight. You have your life there now. It’s late. I didn’t realize. How ‘bout I call you back another time and we’ll—”

“Carlos, no! Look. I’m up. You called me. There’s something going on that you thought I should know. What is it?”

He hesitated. “I don’t....”

“Caaaarlos.”

“All right. You sure? I mean, I don’t want to burden you. It’s just that....”

“Damn it, Carlos. Spill it!”

I heard him take a deep breath and snort it out like a bull. “Okay, I’m just looking for advice, though, that’s all.”

“Fine. That’s all you’ll get.”

“I have this case I’ve sort of been working on.”

“I figured that.”

“Yeah, but it’s not just any case. It’s a real conundrum, and if you’re not looking at it just right, it appears not much of a case at all.”

“Maybe it’s not,” I said. “Sometimes things *are* what they seem.”

“Yes, but if there’s one thing I learned working with you, it’s that you’ve got to trust your instincts, and my gut instincts tells me there’s something going on here. Something big.”

“All right, wait a minute.” I set the phone down on the kitchen table and poured another glass of grapefruit and guava. I took a sip, smacking my lips from the tartness before returning the pitcher to the fridge. As I put the phone back to my ear, I heard Carlos rambling on without pausing between breaths.

“Carlos!” I said. I think I was laughing. “Carlos, slow down. I told you to wait a minute. I was getting something to drink. Start over.”

“What? You didn’t hear what I said?”

“Not a word. Now, start from the beginning, and slow down. I think half of what you said was in Spanish, anyway.”

“Tony.” He sounded frustrated. “There’s been a number of suicides in New Castle lately.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, and all very suspicious.”

“You think they weren’t suicides?”

“I can’t see it. The last one we had in New Castle was Gordon Walsh, who hung himself in our jail cell the night—”

“Yes, I remember Gordon. Damn it. How could I forget? I’m the reason he—”

“Whoa, Tony, easy. I’m sorry. I didn’t... What I meant was, before Gordon, the last suicide in New Castle was back in ’52. Now we have three in as many weeks, all seemingly unrelated.”

“School kids?”

“No. Adults. All women.”

“Are you thinking serial?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Who were they?”

“The first was a lawyer with Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli—a real sharp one, Tony, with the whole package, beautiful, bold and bodacious. She had just been named full partner in the firm.”

“Sounds like she had everything to live for.”

“Yeah, sounds like. I mean definitely not your typical Prozac type.”

Typical? I tried to visualize what the typical suicidal type might look like, so that I might put a face to the person Carlos described. I had to conclude there probably wasn’t any one image to attach to such a stereotype. What we see on the outside rarely mirrors the person we find on the inside after one has committed the ultimate act of self-persecution.

I asked Carlos about the second girl, trying to keep an open mind on the kind of person I thought I might find behind his words.

“She was pretty,” he said. “Cuban born, like me. Not as successful as the lawyer chick, but well-liked.”

“Well-liked? Huh.” That seemed unqualified. “Maybe not by all.”

Carlos laughed faintly. “I suppose.”

I asked him about the third woman. He got quiet again. I heard him take a short breath and then swallow. “Yeah, her.” he said. “You see, hers was the one that told me things were not what they seemed. She had plans that night. This woman had plans and they didn’t include killing herself.”

“Maybe something came up at the last minute that changed her mind.”

“No way.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Yes, I am. And Tony, this woman? There’s something else you need to know about her.”

“What?”

“She was one of ours.”

“A cop?”

“Yeah.”

“Anyone I know?”

“You remember Karen Webber?”

“Webber. Yeah, Travis Webber’s sister, the cop from Ipswich. We met her at Travis’ funeral.”

“Ah-huh. And you know she transferred to New Castle, right?”

“I heard.”

“Yeah, well, she’s number three.”

Now it was my turn to fall silent. I remembered Karen Webber well, a beautiful woman and a good cop. We met her at her brother’s funeral. She drove down from Ipswich to stand in uniform in the rain, unflinching as they buried Travis, still not knowing who killed him or why.

The fog had not yet lifted the morning they found Travis slain on the front steps of the New England Institute for Research of Paranormal and Unexplained Phenomena. He had participated in group studies there for years, he and others in his workshop, all equally gifted and proficient

in the psychic academia of clairvoyance, mental telepathy, bilocation and telekinesis. It was Travis' love and dedication for his gift that kept him at the institute that night, and his gift that ultimately got him killed.

I remembered Karen telling me they had just promoted her to detective up in Ipswich the week before. Still, she came to the wake and subsequent funeral in full dress uniform.

I don't believe she ever really bought the final report that Carlos and I filed when we closed the case on his murder. I don't suppose I could blame her. The wild and bizarre story that unfolded in the months following his murder still seems hard for *me* to believe. It's likely the reason Karen Webber transferred to the New Castle police department after I retired. Perhaps she hoped to uncover further clues into her brother's death that I could not. Heaven knows there were plenty of questions left unanswered in our final report.

So this was the Karen Webber I remembered, young, brave, spirited and dedicated—all the qualities that make for a good cop. And something else about Karen, like her brother Travis, she was no quitter. Carlos said he was sure Karen Webber didn't commit suicide. In my heart, I agreed. That meant only one thing. Karen Webber, and possibly—probably the other two women were murdered.

Though my thoughts had drifted to a place I thought I would never revisit, I still had Carlos on the other end of the line to reel me in. I heard him clear his throat, this after what seemed like minutes. I blinked myself back to the room where the smell of grapefruit and guava now sicken me. All I could do was imagine a cold gray New England sky, the graffiti-riddled sidewalks and the pothole-filled streets of New Castle and wish I were there.

Carlos cleared his throat again. "Tony?"

"I'm here," I told him. "Check the flights coming in tomorrow morning. I'll need a ride."

I hung up, though just long enough to get a dial tone. The airline had a flight leaving at seven in the morning, so I packed my bags and phoned a taxi. They say you should get to the airport a little early. I imagined six hours ought to do it. Besides, I suddenly craved a lousy cup of coffee to wash down the grapefruit and guava and figured where else was I going to find one?

Two

Carlos met me at Boston's Logan in the baggage claim area where we greeted each other with a hug—sort of. I mean it wasn't really a hug. It was one of those things where two guys are happy to see each other but they don't want to seem too friendly in public. We somehow managed to slap each other on the back a few times without our chests or bellies ever touching. It's a practiced art.

I claimed my luggage and we headed out, walking the equivalent of four city blocks to get to the car. He had come in a company sedan, a typical unmarked jobber, which means that the vehicle stuck out like a sore thumb.

Aside from the obvious government license plates, the vehicle sported two curly antennas sticking out the trunk lid, limo-tint side windows and of course, no hubcaps. To top it off, the little door over the gas cap was riveted shut, a telltale sign that the city finally converted their police cruisers to propane.

"Nice," I said, nodding my approval. "They moved you into a Crown Vic."

Our old car was an Impala that could barely get out of its own way. A gondola on wheels, Carlos called it. The State Patrol drove Crown Vics. We used to hate them for it.

"Yeah," said Carlos, "they weeded out the Chevys last year. I got one of the first delivered to the department."

"You crash it yet?" I knew he had.

He dropped his head and opened the driver's door. "It wasn't my fault," he said, and he got in without another word.

As we drove on to New Castle, I alternated stares out the side window and the windshield, noting how nothing had changed. I mentioned this to Carlos and he smiled. "You want change? Wait till you see the new box."

He was talking about the police station. I knew they built a new one. Construction began a full year before I left the force—and none too soon, either. The old precinct building was in shambles, moldy, leaky and drafty. And that I nearly destroyed it with a mini tornado didn't help matters much. But that's another story.

"Did they do a good job?" I asked.

He just nodded and winked. "You'll see."

And I did see. They did a great job. It wasn't just a police station. It was an ultra-modern criminal justice center, complete with jails, courtrooms, administration offices and a state-of-the-art crime lab. It had everything a small town cop could want. Hell, it had everything a big town cop could want, too. I told Carlos if he threw in a couple of suites, a swimming pool and valet parking, he'd have a five-star resort. He laughed, and later when he took me past the workout center complete with pool and sauna, I understood why.

"It's really different here, Tony. This facility serves the entire county. We all share resources now. We're connected to an interstate computer network linked to a national database in Washington D.C. From here we can pull up information on anything and anyone, from murderers and pedophiles to check forgers and deadbeat dads. And get this. Soon we'll process for DNA matches right here. Can you believe it?"

"No," I said. "I can hardly understand it all. Maybe it's a good thing I got out when I did. I mean..." I shook my head, and my loss for words overwhelmed me. Carlos' expression melted with concern. He came up and put his arm around me.

“You okay?”

I shrugged his hand off my shoulder. “I don’t know. Police work is a young man’s game these days. I don’t know why I came here. I must have been a fool to think I could help you. If you don’t mind, I should take a taxi back to the airport and—”

“No! Absolutely not. Tony, don’t let all the sparkle and glitter discourage you. These are only tools. They mean nothing if you don’t have the know-how to use them.”

“But that’s just it. I don’t have the know-how to use them.”

“Yes, you do. You just don’t know it.”

“Come again?”

“You have it. You know what information you need and when you need it. All of this? It’s just a machine, a big calculator. I can run the calculator. All you need to know is what problems to ask it. I’ll feed them into the machine.”

“No, I think that’s nice of you, but—”

“Nice? Tony, this isn’t about being nice. Nice is having you up to my cottage in Rhode Island and taking you out for some of the best fishing this side of Narragansett Bay. Uh-uh, no, I’m talking about putting all of your forty-plus years of investigative experience to work behind some of twenty-first century’s finest technological advances to help solve a crime that no one here seems to even recognize has taken place.”

“You mean that?”

“Yes. This equipment is topnotch. Besides, I’ve already secured top-level clearance for you to work as a civilian consultant. You’re all ready to go.”

“No. I mean you really have a cottage in Rhode Island?”

He looked at me and winced. “Yeah, about that. It’s a shack, really. I was going to tell you about it.”

I plugged his arm with a stiff punch. “Forget it.” He fell back, but caught himself on replanted footing. “Listen. Do you really believe I can help you with your case?”

“Listen,” he said, and I have never seen a more serious look on his face before. “You’re the best I know at this game. You’re old school, but your aptitude for understanding criminal behavior is uncanny, and your deductive talents are immeasurable. I think we owe it to Karen Webber and the other women to do this.”

“And to Travis,” I said. I put my hand out and we shook on it. “All right, then. Where do we start?”

“My office. This way.”

“You have an office?”

We started down a long hallway, past a checkpoint where they issued me a VIP pass and scanned me for weapons.

“It’s not really an office,” he said, as we single-filed through a door that required him sliding an ID card through a barcode reader before opening. “We call it a think tank, though I suppose that term really means something else. Anyway, you’ll see.”

We went through a door that opened into another hallway, this one wider and longer with a carpeted floor and acoustic-paneled ceiling that absorbed stray sounds like a recording studio.

Along the walls were large plate glass windows etched with the emblems of the police departments working behind them. I noticed that the room designated for the New Castle PD was larger than the others. When asked why, Carlos explained that the other municipalities only share police resources at the justice center, whereas New Castle’s entire police force worked from that single location.

“So then this is the entire NCPD now?” I asked.

“Oh, this is only the detectives’ area,” he replied, smiling. “The uniforms still work downstairs where booking and processing takes place. There’s no need for them to go through the layers of security that we go through here. Come, I’ll show you my workstation.”

I followed Carlos behind the glass where he introduced me to the gang. Some I knew, old faces I had worked with for years. Others were not so familiar. We headed to the back of the room where the best desks sat situated by the outside windows overlooking the parking lot. It wasn't the greatest view, but it was a view, and that's more than what I had with my old desk for nearly forty years.

Carlos sat down and motioned for me to take a seat across from him. There were no cubicles or half-walls separating his workspace from those of his coworkers. But careful placement of potted trees and furniture-styled filing cabinets, along with cushioned chairs and muted-colored carpeting, gave the room warm character and an impression of personalized space.

I kicked back in my chair and started to prop my feet up on the desk, when Carlos shot me a look as if I might burn the place down with just the thought of it. I apologized with a simple, "Sorry," and he dismissed it with a wave.

A young man entered the office area. I say young because he looked like a kid to me, skinny, glasses, combed back hair and one of them pen protectors in his shirt pocket.

Carlos acknowledged him with a nod and waved him over. The kid approached the desk and handed Carlos an envelope. He looked down at me and smiled politely. I smiled back. I noticed he wore an ID card on a chain around his neck and a detective's badge on his belt. The ID card said his name was Spinelli, Dominic, Detective, Second Precinct, New Castle, Massachusetts. I'm sure it meant to read, Eagle Scout, 2nd class, Boy Scouts of America.

"What's this?" Carlos asked.

"It just came up from evidence," Spinelli replied. "I thought you'd want it."

"It came up? Or..." Carlos made little quotation marks in the air with his fingers. "It came up."

The kid smiled. Carlos pointed to me and then to the kid. "Tony. I want you to meet my partner, Detective, Dominic Spinelli. Dom, Detective Anthony Marcella."

"Retired," I said, reaching up to shake his hand.

His eyes lit up like a Jack-O-lantern. "Detective Marcella? Wow! What a pleasure to meet you, sir! You're a legend around here!"

I turned to Carlos and laughed. "Nice. You put him up to that, didn't you?"

"Not me, amigo. The kid read up on you. You're like a second hobby for him."

"Second? What's the first?"

Carlos looked at Dominic and gave him a nod. I turned back to the young detective. "Well?"

He smiled bashfully. "Actually, my hobby is the occult. I study Neo-Pagan religions, customs and traditions."

"Do you?"

"Yes sir. Oh, but I don't practice none of that. I'm Catholic by heritage. I just think the off-religions are fascinating."

I thought he was putting me on for a moment. I half-smiled to let him know the jig was up, but he didn't break. And so I turned to Carlos and gave him the old highbrow. When that didn't work, I decided to play along. "This wouldn't have anything to do with that case Carlos and I worked on last year, would it?"

"Would what have anything to do with it?"

"You know. You're trying to get me to talk about the Surgeon Stalker case."

"Tony," said Carlos, bluntly. "Dominic knows all about the case. He's read every report ever written by every cop, inspector, paramedic, detective, Indian chief and shoeshine boy. He's combed over every newspaper article, watched every newsreel, talked to every witness and pored over every Internet site on the subject since the story first broke. He can probably fill you in on a few details."

"Really?" I turned to Spinelli and saw panic fill his eyes.

"Oh, n...not that you need any details," he stammered. "I'm sure you and Detective

Rodriguez handled the case most expertly at the time.”

“At the time? So, what you’re saying is that you would conduct matters differently now.”

“No, not at all. I...I just...I mean....”

“Relax, Dom. Detective Marcella’s playing with you. Tell him, Tony.”

“He’s right,” I said, laughing a little. “Spinelli, tell me, son. How old are you?”

He straightened his shoulders back. “I’m twenty-six, sir.”

“Twenty-six, you still have time. Listen, kid, don’t make excuses. Learn to say what you mean and mean what you say. I know that sounds cliché, but it’s true. When did you make detective?”

“A month ago, sir.”

“A month ago?” I turned to Carlos. “And they partnered him with you?”

“I asked for him.”

“You did?”

“Sure. After all those years with an old fart like you, I figured I deserved a break.”

I picked the folder up off his desk and threw it at him. He blocked it with the reflexes of a cat. I heard Spinelli start to laugh at that, but a cutting glance from Carlos put an end to it quickly.

“All right,” I said. “Enough horseplay. What’s in the envelope?”

“Surveillance photos,” Spinelli replied. “Detective Webber tailed that suspect for weeks before she died. These are some of the photos she took.”

That seemed promising. I pointed at the package. “Let’s see them.”

Carlos opened the envelope and spilled the contents out onto the desk. There were six photos in all, two taken at night, but on different nights, and four in daylight. All were of the same man, dark-skinned—likely Hispanic, not too tall, good-looking, well-dressed, mid-to-late thirties and well built.

The day shots showed the man coming and going from an office building, nothing unusual and always alone. The night shots, though grainy and distant, appeared to show the same man meeting someone at an outdoor café. Carlos gave the snapshots a gratuitous look before sliding them my way.

“You don’t want to see them more closely?” I asked.

“Don’t have to. I know who it is.”

“Oh?”

“That’s Ricardo Rivera. He’s a lawyer with Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli. I believe you know him, too.”

“Yes,” I answered, as I thumbed through the pictures. “I recognize him now. Wasn’t he a criminal defense attorney somewhere?”

“He was, and a damn good one before the firm recruited him.”

“So, how did he end up on the other end of Karen’s lens?”

“To answer that, we have to know what she was working on before she died.”

“And that was?”

“We don’t really know, but I can guess.”

“Yes?”

“Well, she was supposedly working a string of warehouse burglaries down by the docks, but anyone related to that case will tell you they hadn’t seen or heard from her in weeks.”

“So, what’s your theory?”

Carlos scooted forward in his chair and planted his elbows on the desk. Spinelli and I both leaned in closer, understanding that he didn’t want anyone nearby to hear. “Remember I told you over the phone that Karen’s suicide made three in as many weeks?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t suppose it’s any coincidence that the first suicide victim was Bridget Dean, a lawyer at Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli.”

“Where Ricardo Rivera works.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s right. You mentioned that. So then, Karen must have thought Rivera had something to do with Dean’s death.”

Carlos nodded. “Why else would she have him under surveillance?”

“But why wouldn’t she tell somebody what she was up to?”

Carlos eased back into his chair. “Because there wasn’t a case. The medical examiner ruled Bridget Dean’s death a suicide. If the captain knew she was spending department resources investigating a suicide when she should have been working the warehouse burglaries, he would have reprimanded her.”

“Interesting.” I picked up one of the night shots of Rivera and studied it more closely. “Hey, check it out. Is it me, or does that guy at the café with Rivera seem sorely out of place?”

“Carlos pulled up for another look. “What do you mean?”

“Well, look. Everyone else in the photo is wearing business attire and office dress. This man is sporting a sleeveless shirt, cutoffs and flip-flops.” I fanned the photo over the others before pitching it back onto the pile. “I’d sure like to know who he is. I mean he looks more like someone Rivera would defend, not socialize with.”

“Maybe he is,” said Spinelli.

Carlos and I both looked up. “Come again?”

“Maybe the guy’s a criminal, or should I say accomplice?”

“Keen observation, Dom,” said Carlos. “It’s probably why Karen took the picture. Maybe she had the same thought.”

“What about the other one?” I asked.

“What other one?”

“The other suicide victim. You said there were three. Did she also work for Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli?”

Carlos shook his head. “No, I believe she was a waitress somewhere.”

“But she did work in the same building.” Spinelli said.

Again Carlos and I looked up at him. “What?”

“Yeah. I read that in the papers. There’s this coffee shop in the Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli building, downstairs from the offices. The woman worked there as a waitress. I remember thinking that she had to know Bridget Dean, and how coincidental it seemed.”

“Maybe too coincidental,” I said. I turned to Carlos, who looked slightly embarrassed. “You didn’t know that, Carlos?”

“No, I didn’t,” he said, almost stuttering. “Dominic, why didn’t you point this out to me before?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t realize you didn’t know.”

For a while we all just stared down at the photos on the desk, scratching our heads, trying to make sense of it all. To believe that two women working in the same building committed suicide only weeks apart, but that there were no other connections between them seemed ludicrous. Unless someone had put something in the water there, our suspicions, like Karen Webber’s, drew a very different conclusion than that of the coroner’s. I tapped on the photo of Rivera and his café mate to get Carlos’ attention.

“Look, we need to know more about what Karen was working on,” I told him. “I know her surveillance of Rivera flew under the radar, but she had to have kept a record of her investigation if she ever thought it might come to prosecution. We need to see her files. She’s probably hidden clues among her caseload.”

Carlos shook his head. “Can’t. Her files aren’t ours. Karen worked out of the First Precinct. We have some of her people here in the satellite office down the hall, but they’ve been no help.”

“They won’t help you?”

“Not that they won’t. They can’t. Her death was ruled a suicide. They had no reason to sequester her files. Her supervisor divvied up her caseload and dispersed it throughout the entire department. I’m afraid we’re starting from scratch.”

I looked down at the photos again. At least we had those, so it wasn’t really like starting from scratch. But we did have a long uphill battle ahead of us. I turned to Carlos and then to Spinelli. Both seemed ready and eager, and probably both had more confidence in me than I deserved. But their confidence felt like a shot in the arm. I had flown back to New Castle with reservations about getting involved in another serious case. My dread of failing notwithstanding, the thought of letting Carlos down I feared would crush me. I gathered the photos and stacked them into a neat pile.

“That’s fine, then,” I said. “Starting from scratch might prove the best place to start anyway. Let’s take it from the end and work backward.”

“The end?” said Spinelli, almost to himself. “For Detective Webber, the end was the sidewalk outside her apartment building last Friday night.”

Carlos and I traded looks, undoubtedly thinking the same thing. Dominic Spinelli may have been one of the youngest detectives ever assigned to the Second Precinct, but he had an experienced sense of investigative direction. I stood up, pressed my hat to my chest and asked, “Do we have the address?”

Carlos answered, “We do.” He scooped the photos back into the envelope and handed it to Detective Spinelli. “Dom, will you do me a favor?”

Spinelli took the package and tucked it under his arm. “Sure.”

“Find out everything you can on Rivera. I mean it. I want to know where he lives, what he drives, who he sees, if he’s ever had run-ins with the law: Everything.”

“All right.”

“And see what you can dig up on that waitress, too. You got it?”

“Got it,” Spinelli answered, and he vanished down the hallway like a ghost.

Carlos turned to me and smiled proudly. “Huh? How’s that for diligence?”

“Nice.”

“Damn straight. Does he remind you of me when I was just starting out?”

“A little.”

“Yeah? Why, because of his tenacious thirst for knowledge?”

“No, because he’s just a tad clumsy.” I pointed down the hall at the trail of photos that spilled from the envelope Spinelli had carried away under his arm.

Carlos shrugged it off. “Yeah, well you should taste his lasagna. The kid’s got marinara running through his veins.”

I shook my head and laughed. “Oh, like that’ll come in handy in this profession.”

“It could,” he said, as we started down the hall, picking up photos of Ricardo Rivera along the way. “Especially on long stake-outs. Hey that reminds me. You hungry?”

Hungry? I considered it. I hadn’t eaten since the day before, and it was already pushing noon. But I didn’t feel hungry, only anxious. I attributed that to the thought of going back to work on a new case. It was bad enough that the last one still haunted me. The possibility of a new one ending poorly nearly frightened me to death. Eating anything just seemed like a bad idea.

Nevertheless, I knew Carlos. The guy is always hungry. And unless we could close the case on Karen Webber by simply scooping up the photos of Ricardo Rivera, then I knew I would have to sit down and eat with the man sometime.

“Sure,” I said. “I could eat. What did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking maybe The Percolator. They have some awesome lunch specials there.”

“The Perk, huh?”

“Yeah, it’ll be like old times. What do you say?”

What could I say? The Percolator was like a second home to me for nearly forty years. I

started going there when coffee was only a nickel. Of course that was the price for civilians. Cop coffee was always free. I started thinking that maybe Carlos was on to something. Still, I had to ease into the idea of putting solid food into my belly.

“I’ll tell you what, Carlos,” I said. “How `bout we go check out things at Karen’s apartment first, and then we’ll grab some grub?”

He soured his face at that. “I guess.” He sounded disappointed. “In that case....” By then we were back in the lobby. Carlos dug deep into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of change. “Let me grab a Snickers.” He dropped some quarters into the vending machine and relieved it of its last Snickers bar. To see the look in his eyes, you would have thought he had rolled three cherries, only the pay out here was much more satisfying. I slapped him on the back as he joined up with me at the front door.

“That going to hold ya?” I asked. He smiled and held the candy bar to my face—minus one very large bite. I smiled back. “Nice. Maybe I should drive.”

Three

We arrived at Detective Webber's apartment building just as it started raining. A faint chalk line in the approximate shape of a human body was still visible on the sidewalk out front.

I stood on the spot and looked straight up, blinking into the drizzle. One of the balconies four stories up still had crime scene tape flagging from its railings. I imagined that a fall from such a height would almost certainly kill a person instantly. For Detective Webber's sake, I hoped that was the case. I looked at Carlos and found him assessing the situation similarly. He looked at me and we both looked down at the chalk line.

"Probably quick," he said.

I nodded. "Yup."

We took the elevator to the fourth floor and found the sounds of life abuzz within the building. A television set in one unit drowned out a baby's wail in another.

Down the hall, a woman hollered at her husband to get out and find a job. He hollered back that there weren't any because the Mexicans had moved into town and taken them all. Carlos found that exchange particularly amusing, since the debate had been argued in Spanish. On the other side of a door, marked STAIRWELL, the steady thumping of a boom box pulsed like the heartbeat of the building. A small dog, probably a terrier, yelped upon our approach from behind another closed door. I imagined it trotting off in triumph back to his doggy bed after hearing us move on without breaking into his castle.

We found Karen Webber's apartment at the end of the hall, next to the Spanish couple's unit. Carlos had secured a door key from the building super earlier, exercising the rule of domain jurisdiction for tactical investigative purposes.

"For what?" I asked him, after learning of the excuse he gave. "The rule of..."

"Domain jurisdiction for tactical investigative purposes. You've heard of it?"

"I didn't," I said, "because you just made it up."

He pressed his finger to his lips. "No. I didn't just make it up. I made it up this morning. But the super doesn't need to know that."

He unlocked the door. I pushed him into the room when it opened. The apartment seemed a lot smaller than I expected, barely a studio, really. But then, Karen lived alone and hardly needed anything larger. And considering the atmosphere of the rest of the building, she had managed to transform the place into quite a cozy little flat.

The furnishings, a little too French Provincial for my taste, were neat, pictures on the walls tasteful and aesthetic. As a trained eye, I saw where police investigators had turned a few things over and poked at some of Karen's belongings, but otherwise I imagined the apartment appeared just as she left it.

On the dinette table, a place setting for two remained untouched. Two empty wineglasses sat next to a water-filled ice bucket containing a bottle of Bordeaux. A three-day-old pan of cooked lasagna sat on the stovetop growing brown and fuzzy.

I turned to Carlos and found him thumbing through a stack of CDs by the stereo. "Carlos, run it by me again. What's the going theory about what happened here?"

He pulled a CD from the stack and held it up, smiling. "Ooh, I love this one. Have you heard this girl yet? She kicks at old school."

I shook my head. "No. What is it, that Rap crap Hip-Hop?"

He laughed. "Yeah, Tony, that's it. Rap crap Hip-Hop. That's the kind of music I like."

“Well I don’t know. I don’t pay attention to that stuff.”

“Don’t you?”

“No. I’m more into classical: Beethoven, Mozart, that kind of stuff.”

“I know. You’re stuck in a time warp. You should broaden your horizons. Think more contemporary.”

“I do think contemporary. I listen to Goodman, Miller, Artie Shaw...guys like that.”

“Ooh, real hip.”

“Hey, songs like Moonglow and Stardust, they don’t ever go out of style.”

He looked at me with creased brows. “Yeah, like your trench coat?”

I splayed my arms and looked down at my attire. “What?”

“Detectives haven’t worn trench coats since the days of Sam Spade, Dick Tracy and Inspector Clouseau.”

“So? Those men were all fine detectives.”

“They were all fictional.”

I looked down at my coat again and pulled on the creases. “Can we get back to what happened here?”

He tossed the CD on top of the stack. “There’s the balcony,” he said, pointing across the room. “She jumped from there.”

I looked back at it. “Any witnesses?”

“Yeah, four teenage boys hanging out on the street corner. They all saw the same thing. Karen Webber stepped out onto the balcony, alone, hiked her dress up above her knees, climbed up over the railing and fell forward.”

“And they saw no one else?”

“Not until the police busted into her apartment ten minutes later.” He turned and pointed to the door. A security chain, still attached to its latch, dangled from a piece of wood on a splintered jamb.

“The door was locked from the inside?” I started looking around for other points of entry, when Carlos stopped me.

“Save it, Tony. There are no other windows or doors. There’s only one way in and two ways out.”

“Two?”

He pointed across the room again.

I looked back over my shoulder at the balcony. “Oh, right.” I walked to the dinette table and refocused my attention on the place settings. “She was expecting company.”

“Yup.”

“A dinner date?”

“I guess.”

“Did he ever show?”

“Not while the investigation was going on.”

“Don’t you think that’s strange?”

He crowded his brows and thinned his lips. “I don’t know.” Then he perked up. “Maybe that’s why she jumped.”

“Because she got stood up?”

“Possibly.”

“I thought you thought she didn’t jump.”

“Right. I don’t. I’m just looking at it from all angles.”

“Keeping an open mind, eh?”

“Yeah.”

I took the conversation to the sliders overlooking the balcony. “I see black powder here on the glass and handle. They must have dusted for prints.”

“They did,” said Carlos. He pointed to several other places around the apartment where prints had been lifted. “I think they got about a half-dozen really good ones. Unfortunately, they all belonged to Karen. Hey, do you suppose the killer wiped the place down?”

“That thought crossed my mind, but if there was a killer, it’s more likely he wore gloves.”

I watched a wisp of disappointment blow across his face. “If? So, you think she committed suicide.”

“Like you said, we have to keep that door open, which leads me back to this dinner date of hers. Has anyone checked her phone records to see if she received any calls before she...went over? Maybe her date phoned in a cancellation.”

Carlos took a small notepad from his pocket and started writing. “No, but that’s good. It might help us. I’ll get Dominic on it right away.”

“While you’re at it, have him ask around the station and—”

“The box.”

“What?”

“That’s what we call the justice center, Tony. We don’t call it the station.”

“How come?”

His eyes looked down briefly and then up, empty. “I don’t know.”

“Hmm, that sounds about right. Anyway, have Dominic ask around. See if anyone knows who Karen may have been dating.” I pointed to the broken chain on the door. “And what about that? Do we know for sure the cops broke the chain busting into the apartment?”

“I suppose.”

“Suppose isn’t certain.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that you know me better. You tell me?”

He turned and gave the door a good hard look. I could see his thought process at work, churning out ideas that he had not previously considered. He touched his chin whiskers and stroked them absentmindedly. Then his eyes moved down to the doorknob, and I imagined a light bulb in his head turning on at that moment. He spun about on his heel and pointed at me, excitedly.

“They didn’t bust in, did they? If the cops busted through the door, then the jamb along the doorknob would also have splintered! Karen opened the door with the chain still latched, right?”

“Possibly,” I said.

“Yeah. I bet she answered the door for someone she knew, and then had second thoughts about letting him in.”

“You’re working it now.”

“So, Karen tried to shut the door, but whoever it was pushed it open, breaking the chain in the process. Then at gunpoint, forced Karen to the balcony and made her jump. He probably stood back far enough from the window so that no one in the street could see him. Right?”

I smiled proudly, rewarded by the enthusiasm of his spirit. It reminded me of all the years we worked together, and of his total willingness to embrace new possibilities. “Honestly,” I told him, “I don’t know. But if the investigators believed that the first responders broke the door in, then they would have no reason to suspect that Karen wasn’t here alone.”

“Makes sense.”

“Let’s follow up on that. And I don’t just mean reading the responding officer’s report. Maybe the medical examiner took the wording too literally. If it said, ‘We broke in...’ and he assumed the broken chain meant by force, then we could have a serious misinterpretation on our hands.”

Carlos made another notation in his little book. “Got it,” he said, punching a period at the end of his note. “I’ll get with Dom, find out who the officer was and we’ll go straight to the horse’s mouth.” He looked up from his notepad. “Now, there’s just one more thing.”

I checked my watch. It was twelve-thirty. "You want to go eat now."

He pulled the car keys from his pocket and jingled them in front of me. "It's Monday."

I admit that I shrugged at the significance of that. "What's so special about Mondays?"

He looked at me as if I had just stepped off the short bus. "Tony! Monday is meatball madness day at the Perk. Twice the meatballs for half the price."

"You're a meatball," I said, and I snatched the keys from his hand. "I'll drive. I don't want you getting us killed over mashed meat."

We shut the apartment door and locked up behind us. The rain had stopped while we were inside, but that didn't make me want to give the keys back to Carlos. The truth was I didn't want to get to The Percolator too quickly. The thought of meatballs smothered with grated Parmesan made me want to hurl. I hoped we would spot another restaurant that I might talk him into going to, instead. Almost anything else would do. But Carlos had his heart set on meatballs. He's like a kid that way. And me, I'm just a big softy with kids.

Ten minutes later, I pulled the car into the parking lot of The Percolator. We spotted another unmarked cruiser there, though not a Crown Vic. Carlos informed me it was Dominic Spinelli's ride.

"What, you all get a car?" I asked.

He laughed. "Sure, since you retired we can afford it now."

I jabbed him in the arm. "Smart ass." I knew it was someone else's ride, but I let him believe he got me. "Just for that," I told him. He should have seen it coming. "You can buy."

He grumbled his acceptance.

The Percolator had not changed much in the months since I last visited it. But then months in the life of the Perk were like minutes in history. They still brewed coffee from a vintage brewer, circa 1940, and I swear the grease on the griddle is left over from the hash browns I ordered on my first day on the beat. In a way, it was sort of like coming home again. It gave me a warm feeling and a sense of nostalgia that made me long for the old days. It's funny how the simple things in life can sometimes stick with you the longest.

Carlos and I got lucky and found a booth in the corner that had just opened up. We no sooner sat down, when Carlos asked if I remembered an incident that happened there, involving a coffee spill and a certain waitress who tried to dry the spill from his lap. I told him I did, and that he should still feel embarrassed about it.

"I do," he replied, and then pointed across the room at a young blond-haired beauty working the lunch counter. "But you know after that little misunderstanding, we became good friends. Her name's Natalie, and she hears all the dope on everything going on around town, both from the cops here and her regulars. Maybe she heard some scuttlebutt about Karen Webber or Bridget Dean."

I picked up a menu and began leafing through it, hoping to spot something lighter than the usual grease plates that were hard to hold down. The entire time I could see Carlos leaning forward on his elbows, straining to peer over the menu to hold my attention.

"So, what do you think?" he asked. When I didn't answer, he put his finger on the top of my menu and bent it down an inch. "Ya think I should go over there and ask her?"

He seemed eager for me to say yes. I didn't know if it was motivated by his desire to show me how well he connected with young women, or by his drive to solve the case. And since he doesn't connect well with young women, I had to assume the latter. I snapped the fold back into the menu and pulled it from his reach.

"I don't know, Carlos. Maybe later. She looks busy now. Besides, I'd rather not everyone within earshot know our business."

He settled back into his seat, a little deflated. I knew that would only last a minute before he perked up with another bright idea. He hadn't even opened his menu when it hit him.

"I know!" he sounded more excited than the idea warranted. "I could leave her a note; ask her

to call me on her break.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea.” I rolled my eyes, expecting he’d pick up on the sarcasm. “Why don’t you do that, Carlos?”

I didn’t have the heart to stop him after he pulled his notepad from his pocket and started writing. Besides, it bought me a little peace and quiet for the moment, long enough to decide what I wanted for lunch. When our waitress came by, I ordered up toast and coffee. I figured I couldn’t go wrong with that. Carlos didn’t need to look at the menu. He ordered a meatball sub with extra meatballs. I thought he might even ask for a meatball shake to wash it all down. If I gave him the idea, he probably would have. Instead, he went with a more reasonable choice: Coke. I can’t tell you how glad I was for that.

After taking our orders, the waitress accepted the note from Carlos intended for Natalie. He instructed her not to let anyone else read it. “It’s police business,” he whispered, his hand to the side of his mouth. Then he gave her a wink and shooed her away. He looked at me after she left, smiling at his own cleverness. I shook my head and made a tisk-tisk sound through my teeth.

“What?” he said. I watched his smile fade.

“Do you think that was wise?” I asked him.

“What do you mean?”

“That note. You don’t really think she’ll give it to Natalie without reading it. Do you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You told her it was police business. Curiosity will surely get the better of her. She’ll read it and think you’ll want to ask questions about her. Natalie will never get it now.”

“You think?”

“Sure.” The urge to laugh nearly overtook me. But a cop learns to keep a poker face, especially when playing a joke on a fellow officer. And the longer you can keep it up, the greater the reward. I kept a straight face and dismissed it as if it meant nothing. “You know what, Carlos?” I waved my hand in a flutter. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll talk to her some other time.”

I probably shouldn’t have done it to him. Carlos worried so much about Natalie getting his note, that he barely touched his extra meatballs. All during lunch I caught him looking over his shoulder at the lunch counter to see if she would notice him. Each time he saw her eyes drifting toward our booth, he would try nodding or waving to get her attention. Despite his efforts, or in spite of them, she failed to acknowledge his existence.

We were about to ask for our tab and leave, when I heard the little bell chiming up over the door. At once, nearly every head in the place turned, including Carlos’. In all my years, I only knew one individual who could command that kind of presence when entering a room. I turned to the door, and her name spilled from my lips like a song.

“Lilith Adams.”

Four

She appeared more stunning than I remembered. Perhaps because the last time we met, I was actively engaged in an investigation to nail her for murder. You tend to see through a person's beauty when you factor a homicide into the equation. With the fog of nadir lifted, I could now fully appreciate the utter brilliance of her beauty. Her skin, the color of cappuccino even in the perpetual gloom of New England's April rains, seemed to radiate a luminescence unequaled in nature. Her long black hair flowed in silky threads like smoke on glass.

She stood against the open door, one hand on her hip, one knee bent, her blue jeans tighter than cellophane, her buttoned shirt half-opened down the front but tucked in along the back.

It's not to say that I had forgotten Lilith Adams altogether, though hard I tried. Visions of her all but consumed me the first few weeks I was away from New Castle. Shades of Lilith filled my sleepless nights. I could not shake the insult of her sassy attitude, snide remarks and daring laugh. Her cocky posture burned in silhouette deep within the crevices of my mind.

A man my age can only hope to forget such things in a woman, especially one so much younger and vivacious. But there is one thing a man can never forget, something I will never forget: her eyes, her wildly captivating, hopelessly hypnotic, fathomless, flirtatious, blazing and beguiling ebony eyes. They shall haunt me in my dreams for as long as I live. I've looked into those eyes and seen the fervency of hell, yet I hold that somewhere in her soul she knows of it only from a distance.

Lilith patrolled the diner with sweeping glances, starting at the front by the lunch counter and working back. Those who recognized her scooted their chairs away from the door. Those that didn't, followed suit just the same. When the mine sweep crossed our booth, our eyes locked. I heard Carlos swallow back the lump in his throat. I reached across the table without looking and patted his hand to hush him.

"Easy, boy," I said. "She's not going to bite."

His whispered reply I could hardly hear, but I believe he said, "Are you sure?"

She let the door go, and as it hit her ass, she started walking. She headed straight for our booth with a whip in her strut. I saw Carlos' hand slip behind his jacket on his holster side. He could have pulled his gun and shot her, and I suppose it would have all been worth it, except for some paperwork. But I slapped the hand that he still had on the table and I made him stop reaching. Lilith clicked her heels at the foot of our table and folded her arms tightly below her breasts.

"Detective Marcella," she said, and it didn't sound very cordial. "I heard you were in town."

I smiled up at her, pleasantly as I could. "Lilith, what a coincidence. I heard you were in town, too."

"No coincidence. I live here. But you know that."

"You're right. I also know you didn't come here for the food. Please, have a seat anyway."

I scooted over enough to let Lilith slide in next to me. She smiled pretentiously, and instead slapped Carlos on the shoulder.

"Move it, Fidel!" she barked, and then crowded him into the corner where the rips in the imitation leather seats jabbed at his butt. I tried not to laugh, but the look of absolute violation on his face seemed priceless. It didn't help matters when she nudged the plate of extra meatballs in front of him with a fork like it was nuclear waste. Carlos relocated the plate to a section of table less offensive.

“Do you mind?” he said, wiping his fingers clean of sauce with a paper napkin. “Really. What is your problem?”

“My problem,” she said, and this she directed at me, “is that I’ve been trying to find a way to reach you for nearly a year.”

“Me?” I pointed to myself.

“Yes. Nobody in your stinking precinct would tell me where you went or what happened to you.”

“Lilith, I’m touched. I didn’t know you cared so much.”

She made a face as if a sour nut had just come up her throat. “You have something I want.”

I straightened up in my seat and pulled the kink from my tie. “Do I? Frankly, I didn’t think I was your type.”

“Pah—leeease, Detective. I’d sooner sleep with Fidel, over here.” She jabbed her thumb into Carlos’ side, hitting his holstered gun. They turned and looked at each other, equally surprised. “Yeah, you,” she said. “You can just forget about it, my little Copacabana boy. You’re already about as close to me as you’re ever going to get. So, take a deep breath and savor it.”

“Lilith!” I said, no longer amused. “You’re getting a little mean-spirited in your old age, aren’t you? Whatever happened to graciousness and courtesy?”

“They’re dead, Detective, along with my friends from the research center.”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Not mine!” she snapped, loud enough for heads in the diner to turn again. “If that’s what you’re insinuating.”

“Oh, no?”

“Certainly not.”

“Right, I forgot. I guess Shekina and Akasha Kayo weren’t friends of yours. So, killing them doesn’t count.”

“You can’t prove that.”

“How about Doctor Lieberman?”

“Yeah, how about Doctor Lieberman? You had his killer in jail and you let him hang himself. Or maybe he had help.”

I slammed my fist down on the table hard, causing silverware to chatter on plates and Carlos’ Coke to splash from his glass. “What’s that supposed to mean? Are you saying I had something to do with Gordon’s suicide?”

“I’m saying he was yours to watch. You had a responsibility. Hadn’t enough people already died by then?”

“Why—you little bitch....” I lunged across the table at her. So help me, I wanted to hurt her. I don’t know why. I had already beaten myself up over Gordon Walsh’s death. To a great degree, though, Lilith was right. Gordon was mine to watch. I should have known he was suicidal after all that happened. But things were really falling apart at that point in the investigation. And that I was with Lilith when he killed himself only made matters worse. I suppose Carlos, witnessing this verbal joust, predicted my unprofessional response to her overtures. As quickly as I came at her, he somehow managed to insert himself between us, preventing my fool-hearted assault.

When things settled down, I apologized to Lilith and to Carlos. I expressed my regrets and condemned my actions as conduct unbecoming an officer of the law, retired or otherwise. Carlos, of course, accepted. Lilith’s forgiveness came in a more roundabout way.

“That’s all right, Detective,” she said. Strange, but I noticed how not a single hair on her head went amiss. “I understand you still have some unresolved issues regarding your last case. Believe it or not, so do I.”

“You?” I said. “That’s funny, because I thought you were the only one that got from the case what you wanted.”

“And what was that?”

“Validation. I know they all laughed at your witchcraft and your witch’s ladder. But you showed them. Didn’t you?”

“That witch’s ladder saved your wrinkled old ass.”

“I’m not denying that.”

“No, you’re not. But since we’re on the subject, let me tell you why I came looking for you.”

There is something very unsettling about having a witch tell you that she’s been looking for you. I couldn’t imagine it was a good thing. I pitched back in my seat and gestured for her to continue.

“As I said, Detective, you have something I want.”

“And that is?”

“You remember when you rescued Leona Diaz from the basement of the research center?”

“Where Doctor Lowell had her tied to the bed, of course.”

“Well—”

“Detective Rodriquez! Detective Marcella!” Dominic Spinelli had come into the diner and spotted us from the front door. He hurried to the booth in a sprint. “There you are. I thought I might find you here.”

“Dominic!” Carlos clearly seemed happy to see him. “How did you get here?”

“I caught a ride in a black and white.”

“Well, good.”

“Spinelli,” I said. “Have a seat. Let me introduce you to Lilith.” He took a seat next to me and offered her his hand. She looked at it, at him, and then finally at me. That sour expression revisited her face. I smiled and said, “Humor him. He’s a good kid.”

She reached out and they shook. “You’re a detective? What are you, like, fifteen?”

“I’m twenty-six,” he replied, insulted I’m sure, but I suspected he got that a lot. “Probably older than you.”

“Don’t go there,” I said. “You don’t ever want to ask a witch her age.”

He looked at her with wide eyes. “A witch? Right, you’re Lilith Adams! I read about you.”

She pulled back, and although she seldom showed it, we all saw her smile. “Did you?”

“Yes, in the official case reports that Detectives Rodriquez and Marcella filed last year. Of course, there was no mention of you being a witch. But Detective Rodriquez filled me in on all the juicy tid-bits. Hey, you know someone should write a book about you.”

“You think?”

“Absolutely! You’re fascinating.”

Lilith glanced our way. “Detectives, where did you find this boy? He’s absolutely adorable.”

“Hey,” said Carlos. “Maybe Dominic should write a book.” He turned to Lilith and offered, “He’s expertly versed on the occult, you know. He would do a great job with it.”

“Would he, now?” She leaned her head back and sized Dominic up one side and down the other. “You’ve studied witches?”

“Some,” he replied. “Witches, witchcraft, the Wiccan religion and basically all the Neo-Pagan theologies.”

“What do you mean all of them?” Carlos joked. “Isn’t one Satan worshiper the same as another?”

“Ho, boy, here we go,” said Lilith, rolling her eyes. She turned to Carlos and fed him a—let me tell *you* something—look. She started in, “First of all, Fidel, witches aren’t—”

“Please,” said Dominic, reaching across the table and touching Lilith’s arm. “Allow me.” He looked at Carlos, but kept his hand on Lilith’s sleeve. Surprisingly, she didn’t pull away.

“Carlos,” he said, “if there’s one thing you should know about Neo-Pagan worshipers, it’s that they don’t worship Satan. And although witches are Neo-Pagans, not all Neo-Pagans are witches. Some Neo-Pagans are Wiccans. And, though witches aren’t Wiccan, some Wiccans practice witchcraft. And most, particularly witches, don’t even believe in Satan. Like Wiccans,

some witches believe in deities of nature—natural spirits. A traditional witch’s creed is, ‘If thee harm none, then do as thou wilt.’” He turned to Lilith and smiled. “Does that sound about right, Miss Adams?”

She smiled back, her thin brows punctuated in parentheses. “Yeah,” she said, satisfied. “Close enough.” They held eye contact for a curiously long time. Looking at Spinelli it wasn’t hard to tell what he was thinking. Lilith, on the other hand—and as usual, was much harder to read. This continued until both Carlos and I felt sufficiently uncomfortable. I nudged Spinelli out of his groove like a stuck record needle. He blinked the spell broken. Lilith turned to me next, and her expression changed dramatically.

“Detective,” she spat, “about Leona Diaz.”

“Yes,” I responded, zeroing in where we left off. “Of course, I remember rescuing her from the basement of the research center. What about it?”

“Leona had in her possession at the time a string of beads. Do you remember that?”

“Her rosary.”

“No, not the rosary.”

“Ah then you must mean the witch’s ladder.”

“Yes. I want it.”

“I don’t have it.”

“But you said—”

“I didn’t say I had it. I knew about it because Leona had it when she showed herself to me in an apparition during one of her out-of-body experiences.”

“Detective, I talked to Leona. She told me the beads were on a nightstand next to her bed where you found her.”

I threw my hands up in surrender. “Then, I’m sorry. Someone else must have taken it because I don’t have your precious witch’s ladder. What’s the big deal, anyway? Why do you want it back so badly? You can make another one.”

“I don’t want another one.” She slid out of the booth, sweeping a set of silverware off the table with her hand. All eyes in the diner turned toward the commotion and watched her storm out the door in a devil’s fury.

Carlos, Spinelli and I traded uncomfortable glances, ignoring the patrons that turned their eyes on us. I reached down, collected the silverware and set the pieces back on the table. Carlos, in his uniquely optimistic manner, summed it up best when he said simply, “That went well.”

Spinelli nodded. “It did.”

“Yes, not bad,” I echoed.

Again, Spinelli, “She seemed nice.”

Carlos and I let that one go.

We flagged our server and called for our tab. Carlos paid for it with a twenty. As we waited for his change, I noticed that Spinelli seemed unusually quiet. Asked if everything was all right, he said yes, but admitted that he remained confused about something.

“About what?” I asked.

“The witch’s ladder,” he said. “I’ve done enough studying up on them. I know you can make a ladder from almost anything: a piece of rope with forty knots tied in it, a string of forty beads, a lock of someone’s hair braided in a herringbone pattern with forty stitches (that one was new to me). And it can harbor awesome energy. But what I don’t get is why she wants hers back so badly. Once a witch’s ladder has served its purpose, or failed to serve it, it degrades back to a powerless object. By now, that ladder is useless to anyone.”

I looked at Carlos and gestured with my thumb at Spinelli. “Who is this guy? And where was he last year when we needed him?” The two laughed, but I was only half joking.

“Hey, Tony,” Carlos asked, “what did happen to that witch’s ladder?”

“Shut up,” I snapped. “I don’t have it.”

Carlos got his change and left a nice tip. We gathered at the door when Natalie, the lunch counter waitress, hurried over to us. She excused herself to Spinelli and me before crowding Carlos away from the door for a more private conversation. I could see from the look on his face that he thought the reward for his clever note was about to pay off big. She squeezed his forearm lightly and dropped her eyes in a bashful pout.

“Mister Rodriquez,” she said. I couldn’t help overhearing. It’s a curse in the business. “I got your note about you wanting me to call you. And I noticed you waving at me, trying to get my attention earlier. But I want you to know that I like you as a friend. I mean, you’re a few years older and.... I know you’re nice and everything, but I’m afraid it just wouldn’t work out between us. I hope you’re not too hurt.”

Carlos’ jaw dropped, but his words could not find their way out. I decided to help him and so I stepped in without asking. “Oh, he understands,” I said to Natalie, patting her hand and prying it gently from his arm. “It’s a shocker, I know, but he’ll get over it. Just give him some time.”

I got her turned around and ushered her back to her lunch counter. Meanwhile, Spinelli steered Carlos out the door before he could totally make an ass—a bigger ass—out of himself. Outside, the gravity of the moment hit him and he realized he couldn’t possibly eat at the lunch counter ever again.

“Don’t worry, Carlos,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. “We’ll always have our special booth.”

We all got into the cruiser for the ride back to the justice center. It was Spinelli sitting in the back seat who summed up Carlos’ mishap best this time, when he repeated an assessment made earlier, saying simply, “That went well.”

Five

When we got back to the justice center, Spinelli presented us with a wealth of information. He did his thing with E.I.N.I. (Electronic Intelligence Network Interface) or on-line database, as Carlos referred to it. All I know is that in my day you had a telephone, a radio with dispatch and if you were lucky, a good pair of walking shoes, because unless you hit the streets you weren't going to learn a damn thing about the case you were working on. But the kid did all right with what he had, and as it turned out his best information did come from working the field.

Carlos kicked it off. "All right, Dom, lay it on us. What do you have?"

Spinelli produced an envelope from inside his jacket and pulled from that a photo of Bridget Dean. Carlos and I both nearly swallowed our tongues. The woman screamed class with a capital C. I pegged her at around thirty-ish, but she could have passed for much younger if her hair was down and you traded in her business suit for blue denim. Just going by the photo, you would have to say that the woman was a peach, but Spinelli had the dirt to paint her in a much different light.

"Her name was Bridget Jean Dean," he started, "thirty two, single, born in New Castle, educated at Harvard. She joined the law firm of Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli after her hard-hitting, take-no-prisoners attitude as a prosecutor caught the attention of Mister Petruzelli himself."

"I bet it was more than her lawyer skills that caught his attention," Carlos joked.

Spinelli barely paused. "The woman displayed an almost sixth sense with her cases. She never lost. After five and a half years of undying dedication to the firm, not to mention her recent win of a high-profile, extremely lucrative, class-action law suit against a major pharmaceutical, HP&P decided to make her a full-fledged partner."

"Wow. Kudos to her," I uttered.

"So, what was her problem?" Carlos asked. "Sounds like she was riding on top of the world. Why would she kill herself?"

"Good question," I said. "Spinelli? Any theories?"

"Just one. She didn't."

Carlos: "But she's dead just the same."

I said, "Seems logical then, someone killed her. Let's look at Rivera. What did you find there?"

"Plenty." Spinelli reached into the envelope and pulled out another photo. "This woman..." He handed the photo to Carlos. I came around his desk and leaned over his shoulder to have a look. Neither he nor I needed as much time to study that one. The woman in the photo was about as ugly as a train wreck. I know that's not very professional, but sometimes you just have to call a spade a spade. "...That's Mallory Edwards," he continued. "She works at HP&P on the same floor as Rivera. She's not a lawyer. She mostly transcribes documents, prepares legal briefs—that sort of thing."

"And she gave you her photo?"

"I downloaded it from my laptop. She has a page on Blog-Hog."

"What's that?"

"Blog-Hog dot com. It's a community web site where anyone can post pictures, bios, things you'd put in a blog."

I turned to Carlos. "Do you know what he's talking about?"

“Sure. A blog is short for weblog. People upload pictures, videos, poems and essays, bits of their life that they want to share to express themselves.”

“Why would someone want to do that?”

“It’s called inclusion, Tony. It’s a way to keep in step with the world at-large, to meet people and to have fun.”

“Do you have a blog?”

“No.”

“How `bout you, Spinelli. Do you have one?”

Spinelli shook his head. “No, sir, I don’t.”

“I see. So, it’s just some passing fad. Is that it?”

“Yeah, Tony,” Carlos answered, though I think I detected a touch of sarcasm. “It’s just like the Internet in general: a passing fad.” He looked at Spinelli and gave the kid a nod. “Continue, Dom.”

“Sure.” Now he and Carlos were sharing secret smiles. “Anyway, this Mallory woman absolutely hates Rivera, and his feeling is mutual. She told me that Ricardo Rivera became livid when Bridget Dean got the promotion he felt he deserved.”

“Really?” I said. “Was he supposed to get it?”

“I don’t know, but he expected it. Rivera has been with the firm four years longer than Dean has. He and Hartman played golf together all the time. And when Hartman confided in Rivera that he planned on retiring soon, Rivera assumed he told him so that he could prepare for the promotion.”

“But then Bridget Dean won that big case,” said Carlos, “and that changed everything, right?”

“I don’t know if it changed everything. According to Mallory Edwards, Bridget Dean was a pit bull, a no-holds-barred attorney. Pierce and Petruzelli aligned her for that job long before Hartman announced his plans for retirement. If Rivera didn’t see it coming, he should have.”

I came back around the desk and gave Spinelli a good hard slap on the back. “So, now we have a suspect and a motive. Good work, kid.”

He hunched sharply under the slap with a wince that indicated pain. It made me think he didn’t have the bone structure Carlos had. I used to whack the crap out of Carlos all the time, and he never flinched. Then again, Carlos is built like a brick shithouse. Spinelli stood his ground, though. I’ll give him that. I mean he didn’t actually fall over or anything. He smiled thin-lipped at me. “Ah, it’s Dominic, sir,” he said.

“What?”

“My first name is Dominic. It’s okay if you use it. I much prefer it over, kid.”

“Dominic?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Huh. All right, Spinelli, I’ll remember that.”

I pulled the chair out from across the desk and sat down just as Carlos stood up. “Wait a minute.” I watched him herd his brows down low over his eyes. “It doesn’t add up. We have a suspect and a motive, but we still don’t have a crime. Remember Dean’s death was ruled a suicide. We need more evidence before we can call it a murder.”

“I’m working on that,” Spinelli answered. “Mallory Edwards told me that Dean’s suicide took place in her office. The firm is very conscientious about security. They may have videotape of the incident. She’s trying to get us a copy as we speak.”

“Excellent!” I clapped my hands and rubbed them together vigorously. “Now tell us what you have on that third woman, the waitress from the coffee shop.”

Spinelli shook his head. “Not much. I’m still calling in favors on that one. I know her name was Anna Davalos, but that’s about all.”

I slapped him on the back again, this time easy, so as not to fracture his obviously

compromised skeletal structure. “It’s okay, son, you did well.”

“Wait,” he said, with a smile usually reserved for the ever annoying, *I-told-you-so* and the *What-do-you-think-of-that?* “Don’t you want to hear the rest?” Oh, yeah, and that, too.

Carlos and I both looked at his throat. Together we figured we could wring fourteen to sixteen fingers around it—plus our thumbs. “All right,” I said, biting. “Let’s hear it.”

“The man in the picture at the café with Rivera? Do you want to know who he is?” Our fingers really began twitching now. I suspect he noticed, because he didn’t wait for us to answer. “His name is Gregory Piakowski. He’s an ex-con who went to high school with Ricardo Rivera.”

“No!” said Carlos.

“Yes. The guy has a rap sheet a mile long. And get this. Back when he was a public defender, Rivera got a conviction of murder-one overturned for Piakowski.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Unbelievable.” I said, dumbstruck at that. “So, I guess this Piakowski fellow owes Rivera big.”

Carlos agreed, adding, “Yes, but the question is: has he already paid that debt back?”

“Do we know how to find this guy?” I asked Spinelli.

He shook his head. “I searched E.I.N.I. We have no known addresses on him. His last place of residence was the Billerica Correctional Institution. He spent two years there before getting out on parole for good behavior.”

“Well, he’s got to have a P.O. What does he say about it?”

“Not much. His parole officer hasn’t seen or heard from him in months.”

“All right, we’ll look into that later. In the meantime, we need that videotape.”

“I know. I know. I’m—”

“You’re working on it. We know. Just don’t leave any stone unturned, especially with Anna. I want to know how she plays into all this.”

Carlos asked, “You think she does?”

“I’m sure of it. I just don’t know how. Yet.”

Spinelli left, and soon after, Carlos and I decided it was time to sit down with Ricardo Rivera for a little one-on-one. Okay, so that’s two-on-one, but we promised to take turns.

We caught up with Rivera at his office on the fourteenth floor of the Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli building.

I remember when the San Juan Bank was the tallest building in town, five stories and a radio tower. That was before HP&P built a mega-monument designed to rival anything New Castle had ever built before. The new justice center notwithstanding, at fifteen glittering stories plus a penthouse loft, the glass and marble structure of the HP&P building dwarfed and embarrassed all others built previously. It didn’t matter whether or not you held partnership in the firm. If you were lucky enough to occupy an office above the ninth floor, you commanded a superior view of New Castle and the Greater Vicinity.

Rivera’s secretary buzzed us into his office. He greeted us warmly (though I have met lawyers before. It means nothing. Trust me). We shook hands, and he offered us a seat on two fine leather wingbacks that likely set the firm back a cool ten grand.

Rivera’s dress didn’t let the ambiance down, either. He sported an Armani with gold cufflinks the size of dinner plates, a diamond tie clip that probably doubled as a chandelier at evening cocktail parties, and an oddly undersized gold ring on his pinky finger, shaped like half a broken heart.

We all took our seats, but not before Carlos found it necessary to comment on the fantastic view out the window behind Rivera’s desk. I think he may have even said something like, “Hey, look. I can see my house from here!”

Rivera laughed at that, and a few other things that weren't funny, and then we got down to business. I could see why he thought he might become the next full-fledged partner in the firm. His confidence level read off the charts. He came off remarkably astute and seemed apt at anticipating ones moves by gestures alone. It's probably the reason he didn't seem surprised to see us, nor did he appear particularly worried. I let Carlos have the first crack at him. You should have seen the old boy. After the novelty of high-rise gawking wore off, he really came out swinging hard and made me proud.

"Mister Rivera," he started. He tossed the picture of Rivera and Piakowski at the café down on to the desk. "You want to tell us who the man in that photo is?"

Rivera picked up the photo and examined it closely. "It's me."

"Funny. I mean the other man."

"Detective, am I to understand that you have me under surveillance?"

"Just answer the question, please."

"Do I need a lawyer?"

"If you feel you must."

He laughed. "That's a joke, Detective."

"We're not here for jokes. If you prefer, we can go downtown and do this."

"There's no need for that." He pitched the photo back onto the desk. It slid across the surface and came to rest teetering on the edge in front of Carlos. "That man's a friend of mine. Name's Gregory Piakowski. Looks to me like we were enjoying a coffee together. Is that a crime?"

"Piakowski is a known felon. Why would a man in your position socialize with him?"

Rivera pushed his seat away from the desk enough to cross his legs and cup his hands over his kneecap. I recognized the body language as a deliberate attempt to portray a comfort level not necessarily enjoyed.

"Detective, whom I choose to socialize with is none of your business," he said, "nor anyone's for that matter. I'm not running for public office, and I'm not worried about winning any popularity contests. Piakowski is an old school chum of mine. We keep in touch now and then. Like I said, the last time I looked that wasn't a crime."

Carlos pulled his notepad from his jacket pocket and started writing. I leaned over his shoulder and saw that his notes were merely loose scribbling. It's an old trick I taught him years ago. If you let the interviewee think you're taking notes on everything he says, even if you're not, then it helps to trip him up. They tend to become preoccupied trying to remember what they told you to keep their story straight.

I didn't expect that trick would work on a guy like Rivera all that well, though. A practiced lawyer with highly polished debating skills would not allow himself the contradictions. Still, I gave Carlos high marks for effort.

Carlos finished his scribble and looked back up at Rivera. "Let's move on to Bridget Dean. I understand you didn't like her very much. Is that true?"

"What? Are you suggesting I killed her?"

"I didn't say that. I merely asked—"

"I know what you asked. And unless you don't believe she committed suicide, the question is totally out of line—regardless of whether I liked her or not."

"So, you didn't like her."

"Nobody liked her, except maybe that tail-chasing hound, Petruzelli. I mean, Bridget Dean was an insensitive bitch. She stepped on more toes climbing the success ladder than I care to imagine."

"I see. So, I take it you don't feel she earned her promotion to full partnership fair and square."

"Oh, she earned it, Detective, on her back. The woman stopped at nothing to further her career—and I mean nothing."

"I'm sensing more hostility here than simple office rivalry." I knew right away where Carlos was going, and I was glad to see it, because if he hadn't gone there I'd have taken that road myself. "Mister Rivera, do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"You want to know if I ever dated Bridget."

"Do you mind?"

"Please, Detective...Rodriquez, is it?"

"Yes."

"Detective Rodriquez, of course I dated her. Who hasn't? Truth is Bridget and I go way back. We actually dated in high school. How do you think she got her job here at HP&P?"

"I thought she caught the eye of a senior partner."

"She did, but only after I introduced her into my inner circle at one of our company picnics."

"You invited her to a company function as a date?"

"Sure. I thought it might be nice to hook up with her again after the years we spent apart."

"You mean you wanted to sleep with her again."

"I wanted to get to know her again."

"And what? She used that opportunity to get her foot in the door at HP&P?"

He splayed his hands like a man surrendering. "Just another rung on her ladder, I guess."

"So you resented her for that?"

He shrugged. "At first, maybe. But I knew what she was when I slept with her the first time. I blame only myself. A leopard doesn't change its spots. She's trashed my heart before, but I'm over it."

"Has she done worse by you before?"

"How do you mean?"

"Did she abort your child?"

"Carlos!" I said. I reached over and grabbed his arm.

Rivera slammed his hands down on the desk and shot to his feet. "Where did you hear that? Mallory Edwards? I suppose the woman told you I killed Anna Davalos, too."

"You knew Anna?"

He got suddenly quiet. I thought he might point to the door and ask Carlos and me to leave. Instead, he reeled his emotions back in. He pulled at his jacket, brushed out wrinkles that were not there and then calmly reclaimed his seat. I imagined that sort of self-discipline proved invaluable to him in a courtroom. What it might do for him on a witness stand remained unseen. After sitting back down, Rivera folded his hands neatly on the desk and continued.

"Of course I knew Anna Davalos. She worked downstairs for God's sake. And if you dig a little deeper, I'm sure you'll find it's no secret that we dated on and off for years."

"So, you freely admit this to us?"

He looked at me and pointed at Carlos. "Is this guy for real?" I shrugged. "Detective, like I said, it's no secret. If you're looking into her death, then it'll come out. I have nothing to hide. The woman was unstable. So was Bridget Dean for that matter. That's the reason women kill themselves, isn't it? If you ask me, they're doing society a favor. Now if only Mallory Edwards would jump off a tall building somewhere and do us all a favor."

Carlos and I exchanged immediate glances. I could tell he wanted to bring up Karen Webber's death after that comment. But I gave him a no with a subtle head shake, not wanting to lay all the cards out on the table at once. He scribbled the name, Mallory, on his notepad and tilted it toward me. This time I nodded yes.

"What's your beef with Miss Edwards?" Carlos asked. "Wanting her to jump off a building is kind of rough. Don't you think?"

He scooted his chair forward and squared his elbows on the desktop. "Life is kind of rough, Detective. But my beef with that woman is her obsession with my kid brother, Benjamin."

"Is your brother a minor?"

“No. He’s twenty-one, but he’s...special, if you know what I mean.”

“Retarded?”

“Slow. But he’s a good kid and he works hard. I got him a job here in the building so that I could keep an eye on him.”

“What does he do?”

He shrugged. “Simple janitorial stuff mostly, you know, he changes light bulbs, empties wastebaskets, distributes the mail, that sort of thing. He gets by, don’t get me wrong, but he’s led a very sheltered life and he doesn’t need the predacious attention of an older woman like Mallory.”

“Predacious?” said Carlos, sounding surprised. “You consider her a predator?”

“I do when she tries to lure mentally compromised boys to her apartment for sex.”

“But your brother’s a grown man.”

“Physically, perhaps, but....” He stopped and seemed to shake the thought from his head. “Listen. I’m not opposed to Benny getting lucky with a woman, just the right kind of woman, someone his own age without weird secrets. He’s fragile. He needs someone gentler.”

I saw Carlos look over at me, and then down at his watch. I knew what that meant so I gave him the nod. He folded his notepad and slipped it back into his pocket. “Mister Rivera.” He started to his feet. “I want to thank you for your time.”

Rivera stood, and I followed. “You’re entirely welcome.” He offered us a departing handshake, which Carlos and I accepted. “If I can assist you further gentlemen, don’t hesitate—”

“Actually, you may,” I told him. Carlos and he froze in mid-handshake to look at me. “I understand that some of your offices here have video cameras for security.”

Rivera gestured toward the corner up over the door. “We do. All the partners and associate lawyers have cameras in their offices. It’s partly for security reasons and partly for legal protection. There are a lot of kooks out there willing to claim something happened behind closed doors that maybe really didn’t.”

“Do you suppose we might get a copy of the videotape Bridget Dean’s camera shot the night she killed herself?”

Rivera’s brows crowded some. “You already have that, Detective.”

“I do?”

“The medical examiner’s office requested it the morning they removed Miss Dean’s body. Maybe you should check with them.”

“Of course,” I said. “We’ll do that.”

Carlos and I thanked Rivera again before heading for the elevators. On our way down, I suggested we stop on the second floor and check out the coffee shop.

“You want coffee?” Carlos asked. I saw him check his watch again.

“I know,” I said. “It’s late for coffee. What I really want to do is ask around to see what we can find out about Anna Davalos and Ricardo Rivera’s relationship. I don’t buy it that Anna killed herself because she was unstable. If anything, after meeting that pertinacious twerp, I would think she’d have killed him.”

We stepped off the elevator and found ourselves staring directly across the hall at the coffee shop. It was mid-afternoon, so we missed the lunch crowd, but with a building that size there were still plenty of people there, snacking and taking coffee breaks.

We entered the shop and claimed a small table by a window overlooking a duck pond. I expected we’d only order some iced tea or a Coke, but Carlos, with his ever-ferocious appetite, picked up a menu and started leafing through it. I reached across the table and snatched it from his hands.

“Carlos, you just ate a couple of hours ago. You can’t possibly be hungry again.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m starving,” he explained. “But Lilith came in and I never finished my extra meatballs.”

A more reasonable excuse I've never heard. I handed his menu back and drew my gaze to the window. Out on the pond, a mother duck with her spring brood paddled blissfully along the water's edge. It made me think of the small lake behind the research center and the gazebo where my last case really began to spin out of control. I thought of an unusually talented group of individuals that somehow lost their way and began turning on one another. And about Lilith Adams, whose complicity in that case is both the origin of my sleepless nights and the reason I'm alive today.

I began to hear the voices of doubt in my head again. Did I really want to be there, helping Carlos, maybe steering him blindly down a road he might not otherwise take?

He did all right interviewing Ricardo Rivera. And as far as taking Dominic Spinelli under his wing, well, I could not have made a better decision myself. I looked at my watch and wondered if I still had time to catch the afternoon flight back to Florida. That's when Courtney came into our lives and changed everything.

"Hello!" said this jaunty young woman, spirited as a puppy and damn near as cute. "I'm Courtney. I'll be your server today. Can I start you two gentlemen off with something to drink?"

She reminded me a bit of Natalie down at the Percolator, only Natalie's hair is blond (natural), and this girl's was more auburn. I pinned her age at around nineteen, twenty max, single (no ring) and probably no kids either, not with the body of a cheerleader and breasts like perky little plums.

"Hi, Courtney," I said. "I'll have an iced tea please, sweetened."

"And I'll have the tuna melt," said Carlos. "With chips and a Coke, thank you."

"Would you like fries with that?" Courtney asked.

I could tell Carlos was disappointed that the fries didn't already come with it. He looked over at me to gauge my reaction. What could I do? I gave him a smirk and shook my head as though to say, *I don't know about you, Carlos. It's your heart attack.* He rolled his eyes up at Courtney, "Nah, I better not. I gotta watch the old figure. I've been working out, you know."

She smiled like a veteran politician. "Yeah, it shows," she schmoozed. "You looked pumped."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah, totally."

Carlos straightened up like a cobra. "Why, thank you."

"Sure. You bet, hon. I'll go get those orders in now and have your drinks here in a jiff."

As she walked away, I reached across the table and slapped Carlos on the arm. "You've been working out?"

He puffed out his chest. "I used to. I mean, I still do once in a while."

"Com'on, give it a rest. She's obviously sucking up."

"What do you mean?"

"She's playing you for a bigger tip. How does she know your workouts are showing? She's never seen you before."

"People can tell."

"Yeah."

"What?"

"Listen, aside from her barely legal ass, did you notice anything else about Courtney?"

"You mean her—"

"Not her tits."

"Oh. Well, then no."

"You didn't see that necklace?"

"What necklace?"

"The one with the pendant."

"Pennant?"

“No! Pendant! Carlos, for crying out loud. I’d expect this from Spinelli. I’m talking about that little gold pendant hanging from the end of her necklace. It’s a broken heart, the opposite of the one on Rivera’s pinky ring.”

“Oh, yeah I saw that. Hey did you see his diamond tie clip? Man, I bet you can—”

“Carlos. Concentrate!”

“All right, I’m concentrating.” He sat back and made a face like someone trying to divide one hundred and seventeen by sixteen and three-quarters.

“Carlos, it’s obvious. Ricardo Rivera comes down to this coffee shop all the time. He’s admitted he had a relationship with Anna Davalos, who just happened to waitress here. What do you suppose are the chances that he’s also seeing Courtney?”

Now the light bulb went off in his head. “Right. I see. He’s got a ring with a broken heart on it, and she’s got the other half on a chain.”

“Now you get it.”

“Do you want me to ask her about Rivera?”

“No. Better let me do it. You follow my lead.”

Courtney returned to the table with our drinks and delivered them with a practiced smile. As she turned to leave, I called her back.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No. Everything’s fine,” I said. “But I was wondering. My associate and I came here to talk to a lawyer about a case we’re working on.”

“Oh, are you lawyers, too?”

“Not exactly. We sort of work with lawyers in our line of business. Now, if we were to go upstairs and ask for the best lawyer in the company, who would we ask for?”

“Well, that depends,” she said, without hesitation. “Is money an issue?”

“No.” I looked at Carlos. “Money is no issue. Is it, Mister Rodriguez?”

He waved his hands with fluttering fingers, as if dismissing the question as ridiculous. “Sir, you embarrass me. Do I look like money is an issue to me?”

I thinned my lips and shot him a look to tone it down. If the girl had any maturity behind her fluttering eyes, she would have known that Carlos bought his suits off the rack at Penny’s. I turned to Courtney and rigged my thinning lips into a smile. “Money,” I said, “is not an issue for my associate or me. We would like to know who you consider the best lawyer in the building, regardless of fee.”

“Then that’s easy. You want one of the partners.”

Her answer nearly floored me. “You mean Hartman, Pierce or Petruzelli?”

“Heavens no. I mean the other partner, Mister Rivera.”

“Rivera, Rivera, I don’t recall his name outside on the building.”

“Oh, but it’s not,” she said.

“But you said—”

“Not yet anyway, but soon. Mister Rivera is expecting an offer for partnership any day now.”

“Is that right? Well, good for him. But you know I thought someone else was getting the job.” I looked at Carlos with a modified frown. “Mister Rodriguez, didn’t we read somewhere that the firm planned on offering a partnership to a woman?”

“I think we did.”

“What was her name? Do you remember?”

“It was Dell, or Devons, or something like that.”

“You mean, Dean?” Courtney offered. “Bridget Dean?”

“Dean! Yes, I do believe that’s it.”

“Yes, well forget about her,” she said coldly. “Dean is out of the way now. Ricardo’s getting the partnership.”

“Ricardo?”

“I mean, Mister Rivera.”

“I see. I suppose he’s equally qualified.”

“More,” she said, just a little insulted. “Mister Rivera is the smartest, most talented lawyer this town has ever seen.”

“Is he? So, you like him?”

She reeled back with a smitten look, her fingers teasing the dimpled cleft in her chin. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, I don’t mean like that, of course. I mean, as lawyers go, you favor him above the others.”

Her expression softened, and both Carlos and I watched her petite chest rise and fall with her sigh. “Yes, I do. Now, if there isn’t anything else, gentlemen, I have to go look after your order.”

“Oh, just one more thing,” I said. She had already started away. When she turned around I could see she had rolled her eyes up at the ceiling, only they hadn’t fully dropped forward in time for us not to notice. I smiled at that, and she grimaced at the little faux pas.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “I’ll make this one quick. My associate and I came here a few weeks ago, and a lovely young woman waited on us. I believe her name was Anna. Is she here now?”

“Anna?”

“Yes. We believe that’s her name. You see, we forgot to leave her a tip, and so now we want to make it right.”

“Anna is.... She’s not here.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she moved away, I think.”

“You think she moved?”

“Yes. She moved.”

“Do you know where?”

“Alabama. Back to her family.”

“Really? How strange, I never noticed she had a southern accent.”

“Oh, did I say Alabama? I meant...Alaska, yes, but she left no forwarding address.”

“Hmm, that’s too bad. All right. Thank you for your time, Courtney.”

She turned and hurried off into the kitchen. Moments later, another waitress emerged with Carlos’ sandwich and brought it to our table. This girl looked even younger than Courtney. I looked for any jewelry sporting half a broken heart and felt a sense of relief to find none.

“What happened to Courtney?” I asked.

“She went home,” the girl replied.

“Not feeling well?”

She shook her head. “No, I feel fine. But thanks for asking.”

I let it go at that.

Six

I let Carlos drive us back to the justice center after the iced tea I had failed to deliver the jolt I so sorely needed to keep from falling asleep behind the wheel. I'd been up since midnight the night before, and although that's not an unusually long time for me to stay awake, it came on the heels of four particularly sleepless nights earlier in the week.

"We have a room back at the box with sleeping cots," Carlos said, after assessing my lack of energy. "You're welcome to grab a few winks when we get back."

"Forget it," I told him. "You know me. I'll get my second wind soon. In the meantime, let's review what we know so far. What do you make of Ricardo Rivera?"

Carlos began tapping his thumbs on the steering wheel. To me, that meant one of two things. Either he couldn't make heads or tails of Rivera, or he was afraid his assessment would differ from mine. As it turned out, it was a little of both.

"You know, I don't know what to think of Rivera. Either he's a perfect liar, or he's perfectly innocent," he said. "And let me tell you why. First off, he admits to not liking Bridget Dean. Now, if I killed someone, I wouldn't want you to know that I didn't like the person."

"Ah, but he also said that everyone disliked Dean."

"That's my point. If everyone disliked her, than anyone could have killed her."

"Okay, point taken. What else?"

"How 'bout that he told us he once dated her even before I asked him?"

"He's a lawyer, Carlos. He saw the question coming."

"But he didn't have to volunteer the information. He could have lied about that. If I killed someone, I wouldn't want you to know we once dated. You might think I was a begrudged lover."

"Maybe he is."

"Then he would have lied about it."

"All right, what about the obvious?"

"The promotion to full partnership?"

"It's the six hundred pound gorilla in the room."

"Well, that was no surprise to him. You heard him say that Bridget Dean was sleeping with Petruzelli. He couldn't have felt suddenly slighted by her promotion."

"All valid arguments," I said, handing him credit where credit was due. "However, the examples you present to exonerate him provide equal grounds to incriminate him, as well. Case in point, their past relationship. You mentioned a begrudged lover. Imagine his rage when he learned that she only used their relationship to further her career within the firm. Compound that anger with the real possibility that she aborted his child."

"He never said that."

"No, but you saw his reaction when you asked him." I leaned over and tapped his arm. "By the way, that was a real gamble."

"Asking him that?"

"Yeah, real ballsy."

"Thanks. It did hit a nerve, didn't it?"

"Yes it did. So, add that to the equation. Then ball it all up and take it downstairs to our little miss homemaker, Courtney. Did you catch what she said about Rivera getting the promotion?"

"What?"

“When speaking of Bridget Dean, she said, ‘She’s out of the way now. Ricardo’s getting the partnership’. She didn’t say that she was dead or that she killed herself. She said, ‘out of the way’. That’s what you say when you’ve taken care of a problem. If you ask me, everything about this case revolves around Ricardo Rivera. And Miss Courtney? She’s in this thing up to her tight little ass—literally.”

“What about Piakowski?”

“What about him?”

“Rivera admitted they were friends. If he hired Piakowski to kill Dean, wouldn’t he deny knowing him?”

I shook my head. “He’s smarter than that. Rivera would know how easily we could tie the two together. His defense of Piakowski in his appeal is a matter of public record. He can’t bury that.”

“Then it’s all too obvious, isn’t it? There’s just one big problem.”

“I know. Why does Dean’s death look like a suicide?”

“And Karen’s, too.”

“And Anna Davalos. What’s her story?”

The answer to question number three awaited us back at the justice center. Questions one and two would have to wait a little longer.

Carlos and I ran into Spinelli out in the parking lot the moment we pulled in. I say that barely figuratively, as Carlos almost hit Spinelli’s car angling for the same parking space. We all walked back to Carlos’ workstation together, Spinelli, catching us up on Anna Davalos as we wound our way down the halls past security.

“Her name was Anna Marie Davalos,” Spinelli said, reading off a multi-colored sheet of paper with a thumbnail picture of Anna on the top. “Twenty-eight-years old. Born in Cuba. Became an American citizen at age eighteen. Occupation: waitress. Hobbies are reading, biking, morning jogs and romantic comedies. Turn-ons: men in business suits, fast cars and slow dancing. Turn-offs: bitchy co-workers, hip-hop, and men who drink. Strong points: smart, bilingual and thrifty. Weak points: rude, hot-tempered, sassy and insensitive.”

He finished up with ‘sassy and insensitive’ just as we reached Carlos’ workstation. It didn’t seem right to sit down, and yet a round of applause didn’t quite cut it, either. I looked at Carlos and asked, “Does he do this all the time?”

He smiled smugly. “He is amazing, isn’t he?”

“Spinelli, where did you get all that information?”

He turned the paper over and showed us. “She has a page on Blog-Hog.”

“She posted that information about herself?”

“Yeah, well, the personal stuff about where she came from: occupation, hobbies, turn-ons and turn-offs. The stuff about her being rude, sassy and insensitive, I got from interviewing her friends.”

“Her friends said those things?”

“Go figure. You know, she really wasn’t that well liked. Her boss had good things to say about her, though. She was punctual, good-natured to customers, especially to the big tippers. She seemed to know who they were and always anticipated their needs. And her ability to read her co-workers proved uncanny. That’s the reason everyone else hated her. Despite what they said to her face, she always knew what they really thought about her.”

Carlos and I sat down. “Speaking of co-workers, you didn’t happen to talk to Courtney, did you?”

“Courtney Lusk?”

“Is there another Courtney there?”

“No.”

“Then yes.”

He snapped his head back and smiled suspiciously. "How do you know her?"

"We talked to her," said Carlos. "Only she wasn't so forthcoming with information about Anna with us. Did you tell her who you were?"

"No, I told her Anna owed me money. She couldn't wait to tell me she was dead."

I turned to Carlos. "Were we talking to the same girl?"

"It's the generation gap," he said. "Kids today, they're on the same skiff."

"What else did she tell you?"

Spinelli rolled his eyes. "Ho, boy, plenty. She told me she was dating Ricardo."

"Courtney or Anna?"

"Both. Apparently, that's the major rivalry between the two girls. Rivera's been dating Courtney and Anna on and off for as long as the two have been working there. He gets with one, grows tired of her after a while and then goes back to the other. In-between, he works on the rest of the girls in the waitress pool. He's got them lined up like a softball roster."

"What a player," I said. "I don't believe the guy. What does he do when he reaches the bottom of the batting order, start at the top again?"

"Not if Courtney gets things her way. That girl has her sites locked in tight. She told me she fully expects to get back with Rivera for good now that Anna is out of the way."

"She told you that?"

"Yup."

"And she used the phrase, 'Out of the way'? Carlos, are you listening to this?"

"I told you, Tony, it's the generation thing. Young people tell other young people everything."

I laughed. "Well, if that's the case then why don't older folks tell other old folks everything?"

"Experience."

"Experience? Or paranoia?"

He threw his hands up. "Pick your poison."

I turned to Spinelli. "What did you find out about her suicide?"

"The medical examiner hasn't filed his final report yet, but I know a girl in his office: Theresa. What she said, and what I confirmed independently, is that Anna went to work the day of her suicide. She only worked a half-shift, though.

"Co-workers told me she was excited about going straight to the car dealership to put a down payment on a new car, which she did. I verified that with the dealer. Later that afternoon, she confirmed an appointment with her dentist, picked up her dry-cleaning and stopped at the ATM for some cash. There's a few hours where I couldn't verify her activities, but—and this is from the coroner's upcoming report—around eight o'clock that evening, she prepared a hot bath, climbed into it, still in her nightgown, and then slit her wrists. She bled to death within minutes."

I looked at Carlos. His face drew long and blank. "What do you make of that?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Sounds to me like up to eight o'clock this was definitely not a girl planning on killing herself."

"I agree."

"Was there no signs of foul play?"

Spinelli pulled a small notepad from his shirt pocket. I noticed it looked identical to the one Carlos carried. He flipped the first page open and read the name, "Ida Reynolds."

"Ida who?"

"That's who noticed it."

"Noticed what?"

"Water pouring out of her ceiling from the apartment above hers."

"Anna still had the bath running?"

"Yes. So, Ida called the landlord, who used his key to enter the apartment and..."

"And they found Anna in the tub."

“That’s it. No signs of foul play, forced entry, struggle—nothing.”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“Nothing about this case makes sense,” said Carlos. “That’s why I called you.”

I felt myself shrinking back in my chair. “Yeah, thanks for the vote of confidence, but I’m not sure we’ll ever put the pieces of this one together.” I turned to Spinelli. “Nice work, kid.”

“Thanks.”

“Got anything else?”

“Just that you asked me to work on getting that videotape.”

“From Dean’s office camera.”

“Right, so I located a copy at the coroner’s office. Again, my girl Theresa is working on getting it sent up.”

“How long will that take?”

“It shouldn’t take—”

“Spinelli!”

We all turned at the same time. A uniformed officer from downstairs hailed us from the hall. Spinelli waved him into the work area. “Bruce. Hey! Let me introduce you.”

No need,” he said, smiling. “I know Detective Rodriquez.” He put his hand out and they shook. “And Detective Marcella, how are you? I thought you retired to Florida.”

“Officer Bruce Burke,” I said, smiling. I stood and gave him a hug, remembering the circumstances surrounding our last meeting. “I’m fine, and I did,” I said. “I came back to see if Rodriquez would take me fishing at his cottage. How’s things with you?”

“Better.”

“The wife and kids?”

“All fine. Thanks.”

We stood a moment longer, lost in an awkward silence. Then he mentioned the one damn thing I didn’t want anyone to mention as long as I was there.

“Listen, about Doctor Lieberman,” he said. “I know we never caught his killer’s accomplices. I just wanted to say....”

“No, don’t. It wasn’t your fault.”

“But I left my post that night. I should have....”

“You followed procedure. You radioed in; you received permission to terminate your watch. You did everything you could. I don’t want to hear another word about it.” I looked down and noticed him carrying a large manila envelope. “What do you have there?”

He looked at the envelope and then at Spinelli. “A courier from the coroner’s office left this downstairs for you.”

“The tape!” Spinelli said. “Thanks.” He took the envelope and tore into it like a kid on Christmas morning. “Yes! It’s the Dean tape. All right!”

“Bridget Dean?” Burke asked.

“Yes,” I said. “You know anything about the case?”

He scoffed. “Just that I don’t think it was suicide.”

We three exchanged glances before turning our curiosity back to Burke. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, forget that it was one of three suicides in such a short period. That alone is strange. But everyone knows how badly that guy, Rivera, wanted the promotion that she got.”

I agreed, adding, “That’s why we have the tape. We want to take a closer look at it ourselves. What do you know about the other suicides?”

“Ha. Funny you should ask. I know that Karen’s death occurred in precinct one’s jurisdiction, but as you know, we all work out of the same building now. The precincts are all going to melt back into one super-precinct soon anyway.”

“I heard that,” I said, “but continue.”

“My buddy, Mike, got the call: a woman jumper. He recognized the address as Karen’s. He phoned me on my cell and alerted me right away. We arrived at the scene together. I took one look at the woman. We found her face-down, but neither Mike nor I had any doubts.”

“Did you go up into her apartment?”

“Yes. About then two more units rolled up. They secured the scene while Mike and I went upstairs. A man identifying himself as the building super approached us. He recognized Karen’s body, too, and offered to let us into her apartment.”

“The door was locked from the inside?”

“Yes.”

“So he unlocked it and you went in.”

“He unlocked it, but Karen had the security chain latched. I had to throw my shoulder into it—busted the doorjamb all to pieces.”

“Guess that answers that,” said Carlos.

“What?”

“We were wondering whether someone could have broken in, forced Karen off the balcony and then locked the deadbolt behind him when he left. But if that chain was already in place when you arrived....”

“Oh, it was on there, sturdy too. I got the bruises on my shoulder to prove it.”

“Then there couldn’t have been anyone in the apartment when she jumped,” I said.

“Not unless he went over the balcony after her.”

“And that’s impossible,” Carlos added. “The kids out in the street who saw Karen jump would have seen someone climbing down behind her.”

“Maybe the kids did it!” Spinelli offered. God love him for trying.

“Yeah, and maybe Karen just jumped,” I said. “You know, cops do have one of the highest suicide rates in the country.” I reached out and shook Burke’s hand. “Thanks for the info, Bruce. It’s good seeing you. Give my regards to the misses, will you?” He promised he would, and then said his good-byes to Carlos and Spinelli.

I had been on cases before that offered high hopes, but delivered dead ends. This one was different. This one offered no high hopes, only the dead ends. At the risk of setting ourselves up for another fall, I suggested we look at the videotape.

Carlos told me about a room down the hall where they set up all the latest in audio-video technology. It was a good thing, too, because the videotape I expected wasn’t videotape at all. It was a memory cartridge, of sorts, with digital video imprints copied from a hard drive down at the Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli building.

The concept proved completely foreign to me. It’s not that I’m opposed to new technologies, but things like that make me glad I retired from detective work when I did. Carlos claims to understand it all, and probably does, somewhat, but it was Spinelli who wheeled total command over the complex high-tech equipment there.

“They gave us a lot of footage,” he said. “But I’ve got a queue-up number here, so it’ll get us right to the target point in no time.”

I turned to Carlos. “Do you understand what he just said?”

He nodded and made a face designed to make me feel stupid. “It’s child’s play, Tony. Anyone can figure it out.”

“Sure,” I said. I had *him* figured out. And I figured I’d see him pay for dinner before the night was through.

In a matter of seconds we were watching high resolution colored video of Bridget Dean working behind her desk in her office. The camera angle, as was the case in Rivera’s office, appeared just above the door, facing her desk. The time and date stamp in the corner indicated April, 7th 9:03 p.m. No sound accompanied the video, but none was needed.

“Look at her,” said Carlos. “Nine o’clock on a Friday evening. What a workaholic.”

“The coroner’s report said she was working alone in the building that night,” Spinelli mentioned.

“Unless she’s writing a suicide note,” I said, “she doesn’t appear to me like a woman about to commit suicide.”

Then a strange thing happened. The video image shuddered and went static, though it did not black out completely. It only lasted a couple of seconds, but at that instant, Bridget Dean stopped and looked up from her work.

She stared toward the door and appeared to mouth the words, ‘Who’s there?’ Carlos and I leaned in closer to the screen. Bridget put down her pen, opened a desk drawer and took out a gun.

We watched, awestruck, as she came around the desk, the gun clearly pointing in front of her. She stepped hesitantly, almost tiptoeing. Before long, she had walked out of the camera’s view. Next, we saw a muzzle flash reflecting off the blackened window behind her desk, and then her body fell to the floor, just partially within camera view again.

Spinelli let the video run another thirty seconds or so before shutting it off.

“That’s it,” he said, leaving us both speechless and numb. “She lay there another five hours before a cleaning crew came in and found her.”

“There has to be more,” I said. “Bridget Dean definitely saw someone.”

“Or something,” Spinelli replied. “There are more videos. Investigators have pored over hours of tapes from dozens of cameras, including the ones out in the hall and the offices adjacent to hers. Bridget Dean was alone in that building up until the moment she died.”

“Damn it!” I said. Almost without realizing it, I reeled around and punched a hole in the wall out of sheer frustration. Spinelli sprung back, shocked. Carlos hurried to me. He tried putting his arm around my shoulder, but I shrugged it off.

“Tony! What’s gotten into you?”

Already, I had forced composure upon myself. “I’m fine,” I told him. “Leave me alone. I’ll pay to repair the hole in the wall.”

“But, I don’t get it.”

“What’s to get? I told you I’m fine.” I crossed the room, pulled up a chair in the corner and sat down with my head in my hands. Spinelli started to follow, but Carlos held his hand up to stop him. He gave me a minute, then came over and pulled a chair up next to me.

“You want to talk?”

I didn’t look at him. I just shook my head and kept my eyes on the diamond patterns in the carpet. “No. I’m fine now. I lost my cool. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not fine, Tony. You’re like an old snapping turtle. You almost took Lilith’s head off at The Percolator today. That’s not like you.”

“She got on my nerves.”

“She gets on everyone’s nerves. She’s Lilith. But she’s never riled you like that before. So come on, we’re buddies. We’ve worked together for what, thirty years? Tell me what’s up.”

“I can’t. I don’t know what’s up. That’s the problem. You remember how bad it got right after our last case.”

I saw him nod through the corner of my eye. “Oh, it wasn’t that bad.”

“Not after we freed Leona, maybe. Hell, I was on such a high after that. But later, when I realized I had nothing on Lilith, and we failed to find Doctor Lowell’s remains.”

“But we know what happened to the doctor and Jean Bradford.”

“We couldn’t put it in the report. Gordon killed himself, so we couldn’t put him on trial for murdering Doctor Lieberman. Then there were Michael and Valerie’s mutilated bodies in the woods. They disappeared. None of that ever got resolved, on paper anyway. As far as the people of New Castle are concerned, we still have a serial killer out there somewhere.”

“But we don’t, and we know it.”

“Yes, but they don’t know it.”

I felt his hand on my back. “I see. So, that’s it.”

“What’s it?”

“It’s a legacy issue. The Surgeon Stalker was your biggest case ever, and on paper you couldn’t solve it.”

“No, Carlos. That’s not it at all.”

“Well, what then? Why the hell are you so irritable? Why can’t you eat or sleep. Why can’t you give Lilith that stupid witch’s ladder?”

I turned sharply at him.

“Yes,” he said. “I know you still have it. But you heard Dominic. It’s just a string of beads now. It’s useless except that it reminds you of the Surgeon Stalker. If not for that, then maybe you could get some sleep. Unless you want to remember the Stalker, is that it? Is that why you still have it? You need it?”

“No! I don’t need it, and it doesn’t remind me of the Stalker.”

“Then whom? Leona? Are you holding on to it because it reminds you of her? Are you clinging to the memory of a sweet young woman who, if not for you, would have suffered a fate worse than death?”

“No!”

“Is it Lilith? Are you…”

I turned my eyes away in guilty denial.

“You are. You’re holding onto that ladder because it’s the only thing tying you to Lilith Adams. But why, Tony? Why can’t you let go?”

“I don’t know, Carlos. Damn it! Don’t you see, I just don’t…” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Look. Whatever my issues, I’ll work through them. In the meantime, we have to decide if there’s a case here or not.”

“Fine,” he said. I watched him mentally wrap up my troubles and stash them aside. If only I could do the same, I thought. He waved Spinelli over, and together we formed a loose huddle. Carlos said, “So, what do we do?”

“For now,” I said, “let’s assume we have a case. We’re totally lacking in evidence, but we have suspects, motives, victims and opportunities. What we need to do is build a scenario and then try to fill in the blanks. Any ideas—anyone?”

“I’ve been working on one,” Spinelli offered.

“Let’s hear it.”

“All right. It goes like this. Ricardo Rivera decided to kill Bridget Dean because she got the promotion he felt he deserved. So he recruited someone that he knew could get the job done.”

“Piakowski,” said Carlos.

“Right, Gregory Piakowski, his old high school pal, whom, it just so happens, owes Rivera big for getting him off on charges of capital murder. You with me so far?”

“Yes, I think Carlos and I have entertained that much already. How do you figure Anna Davalos’ death in all of this?”

“Jealousy: the oldest motive in the book. The way I see it, either Rivera told Courtney about his plans for Bridget Dean, or Courtney overheard him and Piakowski planning the murder.”

“I’d believe the latter,” Carlos remarked. “Ricardo Rivera is too smart to let anyone in on a secret like that, even a lover, and especially a flake like Courtney. Look how much trouble she had keeping information to herself when questioned by you and Tony.”

“I’m good with that,” Spinelli said. “The important thing is that I believe she found out. Once armed with that knowledge, she blackmailed Rivera into killing her rival, Anna Davalos. That way she could have Rivera all to herself.”

“Excuse me,” I said, “but why wouldn’t Rivera just kill Courtney, instead? You get rid of her; you get rid of a loose cannon and silence a potential tattletale.”

“Are you kidding? Have you *seen* Courtney Lusk? Killing her would be like destroying a Michelangelo. The girl’s a work of art.”

“More like a piece of work,” I replied. “I’m sorry, but I don’t give Courtney that much credit. She lacks the initiative. I’d sooner believe that Anna Davalos found out Rivera murdered Dean, and then *she* tried to blackmail him into leaving Courtney. Faced with blackmail, Rivera had no choice but to kill her.

Carlos and I differed on that view, but we had seen wilder outcomes in affairs of the heart. Love, sex and all matters in-between often yield unpredictable consequences. Regardless of technicalities, I apologized for the interruption and asked Spinelli to continue. He cleared his throat and proceeded.

“One suicide may look perfectly innocent to the average cop—especially if it appears cut-and-dry on video. But add another suicide: a woman from the same office building, and a cop like Karen Webber will start asking questions. When that happens, you have another problem. And if you’re Ricardo Rivera and Gregory Piakowski, you do what you have to do; you make the other problem go away.”

“By killing Karen Webber,” Carlos concluded.

“Exactly.” Spinelli stood with arms splayed to receive his review. I looked at Carlos, whose face I can usually read with no problem, but this time I had nothing. I asked him, “So, what do you think?”

He gestured ambiguously, and for a moment, I thought maybe he didn’t want to speculate. Then he turned his palms up empty and said frankly, “It beats what I had.”

“Which was?”

“After watching the video, I thought the three probably did commit suicide, but what Dominic says isn’t bad. It’s got me thinking again.”

I turned to Spinelli. “Not me. Nice try kid, but your theory is full of holes. You have to plug some of them up. Why don’t you go through that video again and see if you can’t find something else we can use.”

“Got it,” he said, and he turned and walked off.

I waited until he was gone and I said to Carlos, “He acts as if I handed him a compliment. Does he get it that I just shot him down?”

“Did you?”

“I thought I did.”

“So, you have a better theory?”

“No.”

“But you did say nice try.”

“Yes.”

“Well then there you have it. If I were Spinelli, I’d take that as a compliment, too.”

I stared at him a while, blinking back my disbelief. “Does the city actually pay you to do this job?” I asked.

He laughed. I didn’t have the heart to tell him I wasn’t kidding. I felt the stress and fatigue beginning to work on my last nerve, so I decided to call it a day and find a hotel room where I could grab a hot shower and maybe something to eat. The thought of it still made me queasy. But you can’t think straight on an empty stomach, and every indication told me that I definitely wasn’t thinking straight.

Carlos offered me a bunk at his place, but I knew better. He likes to stay up late watching infomercials, crunching potato chips and picking at his feet. When he did finally sleep, he snored like a grizzly. I thanked him for the offer and headed out.

In the old days, we had only one real hotel in town, called the Minute Man, which offered a pool with Jacuzzi, cable TV and a view of the swamp. Now there are lots of places to stay—places where the air-conditioning works and hookers don’t. But they’re not for me. I don’t need

AC in April, and though I don't employ them, the hookers don't bother me. I even know most by name. So I took a taxi to the Minute Man and I booked myself a room.

I ran into an old acquaintance there, a guy named Mike Riley. He recently married, but his marriage was on the skids now. Can't say I was surprised to hear that. A while back, he blew up his farmhouse and burned his girlfriend's house to the ground. Doctors said it was something in the water, and that he was okay now, but you could have fooled me.

We ate dinner together in the hotel restaurant. The entire time he kept disciplining his little brother, Patrick. Harmless enough, you might think. Except that his little brother has been dead for over thirty years.

After dinner, he offered to buy me a couple of drinks at the bar. I respectfully declined, explaining that I had business to attend to in the morning. He said he understood. Then he did something I'll never forget. He leaned his ear down to...well, to his brother, I suppose, and he came up with a word of advise. "Don't let it eat at you," he said.

I smiled awkwardly, blinking back my surprise. "What?"

"We all have demons. Some are all around us, others only in our heads...." He leaned his ear down again and came up smiling. "Oh, yeah, and some are in our dreams. But they don't define who you are, so let them go. Don't let them eat at you."

"All right," I said, half-smiling. "Thanks, and...ah, take care."

I turned away, and as soon as I thought it was safe to do so, I looked back over my shoulder. I saw him walking towards his room, his arm by his side, though reaching slightly, as if holding someone's hand. I understood then, he was right. We all have demons. The difference is in how we deal with them.

I slept better that night, except for that one damn dream. Doctor Lowell had me tied to the tree again, but this time Lilith was tied up with me. She kept calling for that damn witch's ladder, but I wouldn't give it to her.

"I can free us!" she hollered. Doctor Lowell moved in closer, his butcher knife raised and gleaming in the full moonlight. "Let me have it, Detective. Now!"

I reached into my pocket. The ropes fell away like paper ribbons. Next thing I knew, the witch's ladder appeared in my hand. I shook it violently and the beads spilled to the ground. Lilith's ropes were still bound tightly, but she knew that mine were loose. She pleaded for me to scoop the beads up and give them to her.

"We'll die!" she cried. "We'll die together!"

I held the bare string dangling at my chest. Lilith's sobs echoed in my ears. Then it occurred to me, I didn't want freedom. I wanted Lilith. Better still, I wanted to meet my demise with the witch who had outsmarted me. I closed my eyes and....

I awoke in a sweat, my heart pounding, my hands trembling. I wanted badly a grapefruit and guava, but in New Castle, I realized that was probably against the law. I thought of getting up and going out for coffee. Instead, I closed my eyes and sleep arrested me. I didn't awake again for seven hours.

Seven

What a difference a day makes. I've heard that saying before and thought what a crock. But it's true. After a real dinner and a relatively sleep-filled night, I was feeling on top of the world. I phoned Carlos, who met me at the Minute Man restaurant for toast and coffee. He told me that Spinelli had some big news waiting for us at the box (his words, not mine).

"Any idea what kind of news?" I asked him.

He shoveled a forkful of French toast into his mouth just as I asked. He does that often, I've noticed. Once food is on its way to his mouth, there is no stopping it. If Carlos was on an airplane spiraling down to Earth, and a microwave burrito touched his lips, he would have to go for it. I sipped my coffee and waited patiently for him to stop chewing. The answer came at the bottom of my cup.

"Something about Piakowski," he said, "and the video."

"He's got a video of Piakowski?"

Another payload of French toast left his plate, but this time I was ready. I stretched my hand across the table and intercepted his fork mid-flight. It left him dazed, his jaw unhinged and maple syrup oozing from his toast like a bloody stump. He closed his mouth and swallowed, then looked at me blankly. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know. I'm sorry it's come to this. But tell me, does he or doesn't he have a video of Piakowski?"

"Who?"

"Spinelli!"

"No. He has information about Piakowski. The video news has got something to do with the one we watched last night: the one with Bridget Dean."

I let go of his hand and the french toast landed squarely in his mouth. Mission accomplished. Carlos' breakfast afforded me time for three cups of coffee and a brisk review of the New Castle Times. I saw an article there that mentioned Karen Webber's' upcoming funeral. My mind flashed back to the day nearly a year ago when Karen stood in the rain at the funeral of her brother, Travis. It saddened and softened my heart to think they were together again.

Carlos finished his breakfast, and on a promise that he wouldn't go for desert, I paid the tab. We were climbing into the car when I heard my name called. I looked back at the restaurant and saw Mike Riley heading in.

"Who's that?" Carlos asked.

"Never mind," I said, "just drive. Drive!"

We tore out of there as if our asses were on fire. I waved to Riley and then pointed at my watch. "Gotta go," I mouthed through the closed window. "Gotta go, you poor sick bastard."

We got to the box (yeah, I know. He got me saying that, too), about ten minutes later. Four minutes after that, we had cleared all layers of security and were standing with Spinelli in the audio video room. Spinelli couldn't wait to get started.

"Where were you?" he asked Carlos, hopping about like he had to pee. "I thought you were just going to the hotel to pick up Detective Marcella?"

I saw Carlos discreetly wipe a syrup spot from his mouth with his cuff, as though to scratch an itch. "I know. We were going to come straight here, but we had to, ahm..."

"My razor broke," I said. "We had to go buy a new one, and then drive back to my room so I could shave. Sorry for making you wait so long."

“Oh no problem, Detective. You could keep me waiting all day. I wouldn’t mind at all.”

I think Carlos was about to say something, offended as he was, but I pointed tactfully to the spot on his mouth that he had just wiped clean. He faded back and turned away to wipe it again.

“So tell me, Spinelli, what’s the big news you have for us?”

“A couple of things. First of all, I did some more digging on Courtney Lusk and found that she was married, briefly. Lusk is her married name.”

“Oh?”

“Right out of high school she hooked up with a loser named Christopher Lusk, a guy nearly fifteen years her senior.”

“That might explain her attraction to Rivera,” Carlos said. “She digs older men.”

I laughed, adding, “I’m sure his money doesn’t hurt, either.”

Spinelli continued. “Like I said, this guy was a real loser, in and out of prison his entire adult life. But that’s not the interesting part.”

“Don’t tell me,” said Carlos. “This guy, Lusk, he’s really Piakowski.”

“Close,” said Spinelli, smiling at the near-hit. “Christopher Lusk isn’t Piakowski, but he was Piakowski’s cellmate at one-time and Piakowski liked him so much he introduced Lusk to his younger sister.”

“Courtney?”

“Yes. Courtney Lusk’s maiden name was Piakowski. She and Gregory are brother and sister. How bizarre is that?”

“Too,” I said. “Nice work, Spinelli. Go to the head of the class.”

“Looks like you were wrong,” said Carlos, giving me the *how does it feel* look.

I shot back a look of my own. “What do you mean?”

“This validates Dominic’s theory about Courtney involving herself in Anna Davalos’ murder.”

“How so?”

“Come on. You asked why Rivera wouldn’t sooner kill Courtney if she were trying to blackmail him. Now you know.”

“Because of her brother?”

“Of course.”

He had a point. I could see that. However, I still wasn’t convinced that killing Anna Davalos was Courtney’s idea. I dismissed Carlos, rather rudely I’m afraid, and turned to Spinelli. “What else you got?”

“Only this.” He waved us to the monitor and turned on the audio video machine. “You told me to go back to the tape of Bridget Dean and see what else I could find. I spent hours last night combing through it, only to find the most interesting part of the footage right under my nose.”

He queued up the segment of video that we had seen together the night before. He let it roll, and once again we stood there watching Bridget Dean working at her desk. We saw her set her pen down on the blotter and call out silently.

“All right, I’m going to slow it down now,” Spinelli said. “Watch closely here.” He pointed to the window behind Dean’s desk. “It’s night time. Dean’s office overlooks the duck pond out back, so there’s nothing but black outside.” He moved his finger vertically over the window. “Watch this area closely. You see a reflection in the glass. It’s the light coming from the doorway in Dean’s office.”

The video continued rolling. Carlos and I huddled closer to the screen. We saw Bridget Dean reach for her gun, stand and start for the door. Spinelli slowed the image down further.

“Okay, here,” he said. He froze the image. “Look closely at the reflection of the doorway. You see that?”

“Yes,” I said. “It looks like a figure: someone standing in the doorway.”

“Maybe it’s Dean’s reflection,” Carlos suggested.

Spinelli shook his head. “No. Watch this.” He started the video again, frame-by-frame. “Look here. Just as Dean walks out of the camera’s view and into the doorway, we see her reflection: a distinct, separate figure.”

“But better defined than the other,” Carlos noted.

“Maybe it’s a bend in the glass,” I said, “distorting Dean’s image and creating a double exposure.”

Again, Spinelli shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’ve watched this a hundred times last night. I’m going to back it up a bit and roll it a little faster. This time, watch how Bridget’s reflection crosses the glass, but the movement of the second figure doesn’t mirror hers. Instead it moves independently.”

He rewound the tape and played it back at one-third speed. Although not as distinctly defined as Dean’s image, the second figure in the reflection clearly moved out of sync and independently of hers.

“That’s it. I’ve seen enough,” I said. “Spinelli, great work. Carlos, let’s roll.”

“Where to?”

“Back to Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli. I want another chat with Rivera, and I want to see Bridget Dean’s office for myself.”

Carlos grabbed his coat and followed me out. “He’s pretty ambitious, isn’t he?” he said, as we got into his car.

“Spinelli? Yes, he is. I think he’ll make a fine detective.”

“He makes.”

“Excuse me?”

“He’s a fine detective already.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, Tony, it’s not. Why are you so averse to recognizing his credentials?”

“I recognize him. Didn’t you hear me compliment him on his good work?”

“Complimenting one’s work is not the same as acknowledging his equality.”

“So what might you have me do, Carlos, raise a banner proclaiming him the world’s best detective?”

“No, but you could start by inviting him out with you on these little jaunts. He looks up to you, and he’s earned it. By the way, would it kill you to call him by his first name once in awhile?”

“That’s not me. I’m not like you. I can’t get all buddy-buddy with someone so easily. I didn’t start calling you by your first name for five years.”

“Six. And you only started calling me Carlos then because Raul Rodriguez promoted in from traffic.”

I grunted under my breath. He was right about that. Two Rodriguezs complicated things almost as much as four O’Briens and three O’Connors. “Look, I like Spinelli. I think he’s a good detective. He certainly has the talent and tenacity to do great things. But I’m just not a huggy-feely kind of guy. It takes me a while to warm up to people.”

“A while? Ha! You still have Monroe down in evidence thinking you hate him because he wouldn’t give you those confiscated lobsters that time.”

“They were going to spoil. There’s no refrigeration down there.”

“Tony, it was evidence. He couldn’t let you have them!”

“Yeah, and what happened to them?” Carlos buttoned up. I saw his hands twisting on the steering wheel. “Carlos?”

“All right. They spoiled.”

“Yes, a hundred and sixty pounds of lobsters and he had to throw them away. The guys who caught them got off scot free.”

“That’s not the point.”

"I know. The point is that we could have had one hell of a lobster bake."

"That's not what I mean."

"All right. I'll tell you what. The next time we go out, we'll take your little friend along."

"Tony."

"Okay. We will take Detective Spin.... I mean, Dominic along. Happy?"

"How about just Dominic? Just the two of you? Make him feel like part of the team. Okay?"

"Fine," I said, and I found myself folding my arms to my chest. "He's probably a better conversationalist anyway."

We arrived at the HP&P building around ten. Rivera's secretary advised us that her boss wasn't in, but if we wished to make an appointment, we could. We declined. I asked if we could see Bridget Dean's office. The woman told us Ms. Dean's office was being carpeted, and almost as a side thought added, "You understand."

Carlos and I nodded and smiled thinly.

On the way down in the elevator, we decided to revisit Miss Courtney Lusk. Our newly acquired information regarding her relationship with Piakowski reshaped our opinions enough to question her more aggressively. If nothing more, we hoped to ascertain clues as to the whereabouts of her brother.

We exited the elevator on the second floor and proceeded to the coffee shop. Again, we arrived between crowds and found the place all but empty. A quick look around fed our suspicions that we had missed Courtney. We asked a young fellow pushing a broom there if he knew her schedule.

"C...Courtney quit yesterday," he said, his words, besides the stuttering, slow and deliberate.

"Quit? Did she give a reason?"

"I'm not sup...p-posed to talk to strangers. You should ask C...Courtney."

Carlos looked at me, his brow fixed in that, *are you thinking what I'm thinking?* sort of arch. I dropped a nod and said, "We're not strangers. I'm Tony, and this is Carlos. We're friends of your brother, Ricardo."

"Y...you know Ricky?"

"Sure. You're Benjamin, right?"

"B...Benjamin, yeah. But my f..fr...riends call me B...Benny."

"Benny. That's nice. May we call you that, too?"

He folded his lips and contorted his mouth, the entire time raking the floor with his eyes as he thought the question through. After deep consideration, he looked up at us and smiled. "Yeah. Y...you can call me Benny, t...too."

"Are you the janitor here, Benny?"

"Y...yeah. I make it better f...for the w...women."

"Nice. Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

He shook his head no.

"Do you know Courtney's brother, Gregory?"

"G...Greg is a bad m..m.man."

"Why do you say that?"

"Greg makes f...fun of Benny."

"He teases you?"

A nod yes.

"Does he make fun of the way you talk?"

Another nod.

"Has he ever hit you?"

Head shake no. "He won't h...hit me. I know ju...judo," He set the broom handle against his chest and struck a Kung-Fu pose with his hands slanted sharply at opposing angles.

"I guess you do," I said. "That's very impressive."

He relaxed and smiled proudly. "He can make f...fun of me a...all he wants. "S...sticks and s...stones may break my b...bones..."

"Yes, but names will never hurt you."

"Yeah. That's what R...Ricky s...s...says."

"Well, your brother is a smart man, Benny."

"Y...yeah, h...he's a l...lawyer, you know."

"I know that. Don't we know that, Carlos?"

"That's right, a damn smart lawyer."

Benny laughed. "Yeah, d...damn sssm...mart. He tells Gr...Greg not to make f...fun of m...me all the t...time."

"Yeah, but like you say: sticks-n-stones. You don't let that bother you."

He gave a strongman muscle flex. "J...just as long as he d...doesn't make f...fun of m...my girlfriend."

"You have a girlfriend?"

"Yeah, she's like m...me."

"She likes you?"

"No. She's l...like me."

"Who, Mallory?"

"Noooo!" He blushed, and then giggled some. "M...mallory is not my g...girlfriend."

"She's not?" Carlos and I exchanged curious glances. "Then, who?"

"L...Leona."

"Leona?" I said, and I think I heard Carlos say it with me. "Leona Diaz?"

He blushed some more. "Y...yeah, but sh...she don't know it y...yet." He put his finger to his lips and shushed us. "M...mums the w...word."

I smiled. Carlos smiled, and Benny smiled as if the world was a cup full of love and his alone to drink.

"Don't you worry, Benny, your secret's safe with us." I turned to Carlos. "Ready?"

"Yeah," he said, and we left.

We talked very little on the ride back to the box. Carlos seemed content tapping to the tunes on the radio, while I struggled to understand something Benjamin Rivera said to us moments earlier. I let it slip by almost unnoticed, and even after he repeated himself, I failed to challenge it. We were just pulling into the parking lot when I asked Carlos, "What do you suppose Benny meant when he said of Leona, 'She's like me'?"

"He didn't. What he said was, 'She likes me.'"

"No. That's what I thought, too. But then I had him repeat it. 'She's like me.' That's what he said."

"I don't know, then. Maybe he meant that she was shy like him."

I retreated in thought. Sometimes I read too much into things. It's a curse when that happens. But other times I truly believe I hear things that people only subconsciously want me to hear. Otherwise, they would speak their minds more clearly.

I let Benny's words roll around in my head for a while, and by the time we filtered through security and met up with Spinelli at the workstation, I knew what I had to do.

"Carlos! Detective Marcella! Check this out." Even for Spinelli, his demeanor seemed excited.

"What is it?" I asked.

He held up a piece of paper. "Look what I found in Karen's desk."

"You went through Karen's desk?"

"Yes. I told her supervisor I was working on a theory that Karen was murdered, and asked if I could look through her things."

"You shouldn't have told him that."

“You’re telling me? He asked what evidence I had. When I told him none, he chewed me out up one side and down the other. Said her death was a suicide, and if I wasted one more dollar of the city’s money chasing red herrings that he would bust me down to traffic so fast my head would spin.”

Carlos grabbed his sleeve and latched on like eagle’s talons. “Did you mention I was working with you?”

“Course not.”

He let go and smiled. “That’s my boy.”

“Apparently he still let you look in her desk,” I said.

“Not because of that. After he shot me down, I told him I lent Karen a pen that my grandfather gave me. I said I never got it back.”

“And he bought that?”

“Yup. Told me next time not to make up wild ass excuses. Just go with the truth.”

“Well,” said Carlos. “That’ll teach you. Always go with the truth that you think will work best for you at the time.”

I put my hand out. “So, whaddaya got?”

“It’s a list of names with notes beside each one. There’s Rivera, Dean, Piakowski, Davalos, Lusk, Edwards, and look,” he said, tapping the paper, “a new one, Carol Kessler.”

I took the paper. “Good work, Spinelli.” Carlos shot me a look that almost cut me. I shot one back that said *Missed*. But he really didn’t. I looked Spinelli in the eye and dropped him a wink. “I mean, Dominic.”

Carlos smiled. I saw Spinelli’s chest swell with pride. “Thanks,” he said, and then added hesitantly, “Tony.”

See! My next look told Carlos. *That’s why I didn’t want to do that!*

I reviewed the names and accompanying notes. For the most part, it read like a surveillance log. Her reasons for keeping it weren’t clear to me, but I suspect she thought it might come in handy under unthinkable circumstances.

It documented the days and times that she watched Rivera and Piakowski. The small notes next to the other names were mostly references to ages, occupations and relationships, RR’s girlfriend, for instance, noted next to Courtney’s name. Beside Anna Davalos’ name, Karen had penciled in the number two, perhaps indicating second victim. Next to Carol Kessler’s, the number three with a question mark. Also beside Carol’s name was a time, like an appointment: 4:30 April 7, the afternoon of Karen’s death.

I finished reading the page and handed it to Carlos. “Do we know anything about this Kessler?”

Spinelli replied, “Some. She’s white, Karen’s age, thirty-four: brown hair and eyes, weight one-forty-five, height five-foot-six, last known address is on Lexington Avenue.”

“Good work,” I said. “Did you get all that off the Internet?”

“No. I pulled a copy of her driver’s license. By the way, she’s an organ donor.”

“Niiiiice.”

After reading the paper, Carlos looked up and said, “How do you suppose Carol fits into all of this?”

“That’s what you’re going to find out,” I told him. “In the meantime, I have to go see somebody.” I grabbed my coat and started down the hall. Five steps in I turned and called back, “You coming, Spinelli?”

He tore after me like a greyhound.

Eight

Spinelli drove, guided by my directions, never asking where we were going. He probably assumed I would tell him if I felt he needed to know. The truth was I kept expecting him to ask. Carlos would never have gotten out of the box without prying that information out of me first. I imagined the differences in both their styles would take them far together.

I had Spinelli pull up to the last house on the block, a pleasant little Cape Cod with shiny white vinyl siding, pleasingly trimmed in warm hues of peach and gray pastels. On the front lawn, just as I remembered, tacky little garden gnomes peeped out mischievously from behind miniature plastic windmills placed strategically along the walkway. A thin chill ran up my spine and sent goose bumps sliding down my arms.

Spinelli, witnessing the spontaneous shudder, craned curiously out the window and asked, “Where are we?”

“Hell,” I said, without thinking, then added, “I mean, hell if I know. Let’s go check it out?”

“Wait. Is this Lilith’s place?”

I smiled at his perceptiveness. “How did you know?”

He pointed to a car in the driveway sporting a bumper sticker that read:

FIRES DON'T BURN WITCHES, PEOPLE DO

I laughed at that. “Yeah, she’s got an offbeat sense of humor, doesn’t she? Remember not to say anything about that wart on her nose.”

I started out of the car, when Spinelli stopped me. “I didn’t notice a wart on her nose yesterday.”

“No, of course, not. Yesterday she came to us as a mortal.” I gave him a classic double take. “I thought you studied the occult.”

I stepped out and started up the walk, feeling just a little ashamed for pulling his leg like that. I used to pull Carlos’ leg all the time, too. But he got wise to me after a while. It’s harder now to pull one over on the old Cuban. However, Spinelli is new blood and you have to take advantage of something like that while you can.

About halfway to the door I noticed Spinelli still sitting behind the wheel of the car. “Hey!” I called. “You coming or what?” He got out of the car and met me at the door. I looked at him and frowned. “Man, what took you?”

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I thought maybe you’d want me to wait for you with the motor running.”

I rubbed the top of his head. “Nice try. Now, ring the bell.”

He reached for the doorbell, and as he did I noticed his hand start to tremble. Incredibly, instead of ringing it for him, I found myself fighting an almost uncontrollable urge to poke him in the sides and scream, Gotcha! If he were Carlos, I probably would have. But a fright like that for a rookie can result in gunfire, and frankly I believed we were woefully outgunned already.

Spinelli’s finger pushed the buzzer and a pleasant little chime spilled from a carillon box on the other side of the door. I resolved to stand my ground no matter how unpleasant Lilith got, and if necessary, to throw my body in front of Spinelli’s to protect him from harm, real or imaginary.

The door opened. I smiled, bowed my head respectfully and said, “Hello, Lilith. May we come in?” She rolled her eyes, swung the door open and trotted off. I turned to Spinelli and gestured, “After you.”

He shook his head, took a step back and presented an unobstructed path. “Oh, no, I insist.”

Now, I’m not one to pull rank, and I certainly wouldn’t ask a fellow officer to go where I dared not. But in my day, when a senior officer indicated a preference, extended an opportunity or simply invoked the potential of an aspiring colleague, then one did not decline gratuitously. I pushed past Spinelli, knocking him off balance but not off his feet. I am a professional after all.

“Chicken,” I said.

Spinelli followed.

Lilith’s house is small. There’s no upstairs and just a couple of bedrooms down the hall. For living space, you pretty much just have the kitchen, a dinette area and a tiny living room. We found Lilith in the kitchen, working at the stove.

“I’m making herbal tea, gentlemen. Would you like some?”

“Ah, Lilith” I said, “ever the consummate hostess. We’d love some, thank you.”

“Take a seat at the table then. I’ll have it served up in a sec.”

I looked around, noticing how the place had changed little since my last visit. “You know, Lilith, you served me herbal tea the last time I was here.”

“Oh? And you’re still alive?”

I saw Spinelli swallow hard at that comment.

“I like what you’ve done with the place.”

“I’ve done nothing, Detective.”

“You moved some mirrors around.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“You painted.”

“Uh-uh.”

“New drapes?”

She turned from the stove and brought three herbal teas to the table. “Detective, I’ve changed nothing. Except that I’ve put the place back together after blowing the windows out, thanks to that tantrum you set me on.”

I snapped my fingers. “That’s it! Nice job.”

Using a tiny set of tongs, Lilith plucked a sugar cube from a candy dish and dropped it into her tea. She passed the tongs over to me next. I helped myself to two cubes, but when I handed the tongs to Spinelli, his eyes lit up as though I had just proposed he drink a cup of Jonestown Cool-aid. Lilith, observing his reaction, offered me this: “Have you received the package of dried batwings I sent you, Detective?”

“Yes,” I told her. “They cleared up my lumbago just as you said it would.”

“How nice.”

“Oh, and those newt eggs, I dropped them into my tea just like you said.”

“And?”

“No more erectile dysfunction.”

“Good, then maybe we can pick up where we left off.”

In a calamity of misfortune, Spinelli dropped the sugar tongs by his feet, hit his head on the table when he bent over to retrieve them, and then fell completely out of his chair onto the floor.

I scooted my chair back in haste and inadvertently set the chair leg on top of his hand. He cried out in pain. Lilith stood up quickly, bumping the table, spilling the hot tea, which then dripped off the table onto Spinelli’s head. He screamed again. I screamed. Lilith screamed. Any neighbor walking by the house would have thought a mass murder was in progress. Spinelli, likely, wasn’t so sure there wasn’t.

Eventually, we rescued Spinelli, iced his hand and towed his head. We were happy to evaluate his psychical wounds were purely superficial. His emotional wounds, however, we feared were probably going to scar him for life.

After cleaning him up, we got him back to the table. I apologized for crushing his hand and

Lilith for scalding his head. He said he didn't blame us, that it was his own clumsy fault, and to keep him happy with that, Lilith and I resolved never to tell him we were only kidding about the batwings and newt eyes. It just seemed better that way.

I sipped my tea and Lilith hers, and when our eyes met again, I knew she expected me to get down to business. So before she could say another word, I said, "Look. Here's the thing. I know you know Karen Webber. You guys met at Travis' funeral. I want to run a few other names by you and see what you can tell me about them. Is that okay?"

She looked at me through slotted eyes. "Actually, Detective, I met Karen Webber long before that."

"Yes, I suppose you would have. You and Travis were...fairly close, being that you and he were in Doctor Lieberman's workshop the longest."

"No, you suppose wrong. I knew Karen even before that. But before I give you something, I still want you to give me something."

"The ladder."

"Of course."

"Lilith, I told you. I don't have it. Otherwise I would give it to you. Trust me."

"Detective, normally I would trust you. You've never lied to me, yet. But I know you have it. Leona swears she left it on the nightstand next to the bed. You were the lead detective in the case. None of your people would have touched it without you knowing."

I slapped my hand on the table, not hard, but enough to make Spinelli jump. Lilith's eyes only blinked and her stone-faced expression helped me reel my frustrations back into check right away. I took a deep breath, folded my hands neatly before me, and exhaled slowly.

"Look, Lilith. I'm sorry about the outburst. I'm trying to get to the bottom of something. If you knew Karen Webber as well as you say, then you should know that Carlos, Spinelli and I believe the cause of her death wasn't suicide."

Her expression softened at once. "But the papers said—"

"The papers don't know everything, neither do the cops. Both see things only in black and white. There's enough circumstantial evidence to tie a string of events together, and I believe you can help us tie that string into a knot."

"Interesting choice of words, Detective."

By that, I knew she was referring to the ladder: a string of forty knots, just enough to hang myself with. I suspect my subconscious knowingly played a part in that betrayal. I ignored her comment, though, knowing she knew she got me.

"Lilith, tell me how you knew Karen Webber, if not through her brother, Travis."

She took a sip of tea and gazed across the table at Spinelli. "Are you really that frightened of me, Detective Spinelli?" she asked.

He swallowed hard and cleared his throat. "I'm not afraid of you, Miss Adams."

She thinned her lips. "So, why are you counting the steps to the front door?"

He turned to me, his eyes wide and white. "Oh, didn't I tell you?" I said. "Lilith reads minds. Your best bet is to think of a song and keep it in your head."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and if you picture her in those tight blue jeans she wore yesterday, she'll know."

"Too late," said Lilith. "He's already gone there, and then some."

I saw him look to Lilith, then to me, to Lilith and back again. She sipped her tea slowly, her ebony eyes peering over the top of her cup in tiny slits. I remembered how uncomfortable I felt the first time I learned that she could read my mind, and how relieved I was when she divulged the secret of how to prevent it. I was about to share that knowledge with Spinelli, when he excused himself from the table and headed for the door. I called to him and asked where he was going.

"Out for a smoke."

After the door shut, I turned to Lilith. "Did you chase him out of here on purpose?"

She scoffed. "Please, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. I know you better than that."

"What? The boy said he wanted to go out and have a smoke. What's the big deal?"

"Well, first of all he doesn't smoke."

She set her tea down and leaned in towards me on her elbows. I felt her warm breath on my lips, and the thought of licking them wet made me feel just a little dirty. "Detective," she said, "there's something about that guy."

I controlled the urge and swallowed. "What?"

"That's just it. I don't know, and I'm a pretty good judge of character. That one is hiding something. Trust me."

"Lilith." Our eyes locked. "Spinelli's a good cop. I trust you with matters of witchcraft. I trust him with my life."

I thought she might come back with some clever off-the-cuff remark about him being so young, like who's going to watch your back while he's taking his nap? Or won't his mommy get upset if you keep him out after dark? But she didn't. Instead, she eased back in her chair, tossed her hair back off her shoulder and settled in with arms crossed at her chest.

"You want to know how I knew Karen Webber?" she said. "I'll tell you. Karen and I met in one of the early paranormal workshops."

"Wait a minute. Karen was in a psychic workshop with you?"

"That's right."

"And Travis, too?"

"No. This was before Travis. This was in one of Doctor Lowell's studies."

"I thought the workshops were Doctor Lieberman's projects."

"Uh-uh. They were strictly Doctor Lowell's brainchild. This was before he turned the project over to Doctor Lieberman."

"In the early days, the studies were informal. Those of us that attended had answered an ad in the newspaper. Me being into witchcraft and all, well, naturally I was interested. Doctor Lowell, it turned out, couldn't care less about my interests in witchcraft, but he did recognize that I had a propensity for clairvoyance. What he didn't know, and what Doctor Lieberman later found out, was that witchcraft proved an invaluable tool in developing my skills as a psychic."

"I tell you this, because Karen Webber showed an early interest in witchery and magic, but no real traits of ESP. It was that interest in witchcraft that got us talking, and eventually we became friends. But Karen's heart wasn't in it. She didn't care to fully immerse herself into the craft, and Doctor Lowell soon realized he couldn't validate her claim of paranormal attributes. So, before long, she left the program and we lost touch with each other."

"Except when her brother joined the group."

"Yeah, but even then we didn't keep in touch so much. Soon after Travis joined us, Karen moved to Ipswich and became a cop. I suppose I saw her maybe two or three times after that."

"How about a guy named Benjamin Rivera? Did you know him?"

"Little Benny, yeah, a bit slow, and not much of a conversationalist, if you know what I m..m.mean."

"That's not funny."

"I know. I'm sorry, but I never had the patience for such things. I'm sure Benny's a nice guy and all, but I'm not going to make excuses. I can't deal with...."

"People not as smart as you?"

"I didn't say that. There's plenty of smart people I can't tolerate. Sometimes, Detective, you're one of them."

I smiled at that. "Well, thank you for tolerating me today."

"You're welcome. More tea?" She poured us another round and we both helped ourselves to

the sugar with our fingers. “Why do you ask about Benny Rivera, Detective? Is he tangled up in your little mystery?”

“I don’t know yet. At the very least, I fear he’s in danger.”

“Sorry to hear that. He really wasn’t such a bad kid, and I do mean kid. I never thought Doctor Lowell should have let someone so young into the studies. You put a boy into a group of adults like that and you’re bound to have problems.”

“How so?”

“Well, forget about the rumors of little Benny being someone’s boy toy, but just the way everyone teased him about his stuttering.”

“You mean like you?”

“Please, Detective, give me a little more credit than that. I say what’s on my mind at the expense of grown-ups, but I respect the little people. No, I’m talking about most everyone else. Poor Benny got an earful from people that should have known better. And I include Karen Webber among them.”

“She teased Benny, too?”

“She was the worst. I suppose it was the boredom, really. People think we were rewriting the laws of physics in those early studies. Most of the time we just sat around for hours, as Doctor Lowell worked one-on-one with someone trying to move a pencil across the table with just thought waves. If not that, then we spent days watching someone else sit, guessing what shape ink spot lay on a card face down in a pile of other ink-spotted cards.”

“Sounds exciting.”

“To some, maybe, but I can see how the boredom might lead others into mischief. All that aside, how did you know Benny and I were in Doctor Lowell’s workshop together?”

“Didn’t really. It’s something he said to me. We were talking. Leona’s name came up, and he said he was like her.”

“You mean he likes her.”

“No. That’s what I thought I heard, too. He said that he was like Leona.”

“Benny—like Leona? I don’t see how. The two are about as far apart as fire and water.”

“When he said that, I assumed he meant that he was special like her, and that maybe they met in the workshops. That’s when I thought of coming to you.”

Lilith shook her head. “No, that’s impossible. Benny went to those workshops like eight or nine years ago. Leona came much later. Back then, she was still just a young girl in Honduras or Nicaragua, or whatever the hell banana republic she’s from.”

“So, Benny didn’t attend the workshops for very long?”

“Maybe a month or two. I don’t know how he got into the studies to begin with, but it didn’t take Doctor Lowell long to figure out he wasn’t psychic, just a high-functioning autistic savant with a stuttering problem.”

“He’s not retarded?”

“Please, Detective, tomāto—to`māto, I’m not going to split hairs.”

“Your sensitivity slays me, Lilith.”

“Yeah, but you agree. Deep down you know you do. That’s the only reason we connect. The difference is that I don’t try to hide it.”

I wanted to disagree with her, and fundamentally I did. But what she said about me connecting with her rang bits of truth. In another time and in another world, perhaps, and if decades did not so obviously define our age, then she and I might have found common grounds for more than a platonic relationship. “Lilith,” I said, “let me run another couple of names by you and tell me what you think.”

She sipped her tea and readied herself by pulling her foot up on her chair and sitting on her ankle. “Okay. Shoot.”

“I’ll start in no particular order of importance: Anna Davalos, Ricardo Rivera, Gregory

Piakowski, Bridget Dean, Mallory Edwards, Courtney Lusk. Do these names mean anything to you?”

“Some. Why do you ask?”

“These people all worked for or have a connection to the Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli firm downtown.”

“Is that where Benny Rivera works?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, that figures then. That’s how Benny knows Leona, isn’t it?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because Leona knew Bridget Dean through Karen Webber. Bridget took Leona under her wing after that whole Surgeon Stalker thing. That’s something you would have known had you followed up on the girl’s welfare a little after the headlines died down.”

“Hey, my life didn’t revolve strictly around that case. I had other priorities once it concluded.”

“So good for you. Only it hasn’t really concluded, has it?”

“What’s that supposed to—”

“You know what it means.”

I caught her gaze and held it like a viper’s grip. Of course, I knew what it meant. And I knew she had been in there again, fishing around in my mind, trolling my thoughts like a Great White in search of gobbet and chum.

She had gotten better at it, so much so that I couldn’t know for sure if she were not in there all along. I blinked, and the connection between us broke, or she let go, I don’t know which. I sat back and felt a sense of calm, and I realized then that she owned me since the moment that thin chill ran up my spine outside in the car.

“Are you done?” I asked.

I thought now she would ask me what that was supposed to mean, but she didn’t. She turned her head and wet her lips before taking a shallow sip of tea. Then she set her cup down on the table and folded her hands with interlocking fingers as if peace had found her, too. “Yes,” she answered. “I’m done.”

“Then may I ask you?”

“The other names? Of course. I know Bridget Dean the same way Karen Webber knew Bridget Dean, which is also how we both knew Anna Davalos, Benny Rivera and Carol Kessler. We all attended early versions of Doctor Lowell’s paranormal workshops.”

“I never asked you about Carol Kessler.”

“Come, Detective. Would you rather I hold out until you ask? We could be here all day.”

“Fine. You’ve been in my head. Tell me what else I want to know. Tell me what I want to know even if I don’t know yet that I want to know it. Who don’t I know about that I should? Anyone else from those early workshops I failed to ask about?”

“I don’t know. Let’s see. I remember Stinky Pete something or another. He dropped out after the first week. I don’t think I need to tell you why. Then we had Lucky Lenny from Southie. He had that name even before he won the lottery—three times. Ha, and Doctor L didn’t think he had any psychic abilities.”

“Maybe he was just lucky like his nickname suggests.”

“Yeah, Detective, I’m sure that’s it. And maybe monkeys will fly out of my butt.”

“Anyone else?”

“Well, we can’t forget about Crazy Eddy, now can we?”

“Who’s he?”

“Crazy Eddy? I’m sorry I don’t remember his last name, but as the name implies, the guy was a real whacko. He wasn’t there long, but he made one hell of an impression on us.”

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. Some say he moved away. Others say he died. Wouldn’t surprise me. Between that workshop and Doctor Lieberman’s second phase workshops, nearly everybody’s dead now.”

“And that doesn’t strike you as odd?”

“Should it?”

“Well, you know the reason I’m here asking all these questions is because in addition to Karen Webber’s death this month Bridget Dean and Anna Davalos also committed suicide.”

“I know that. What a shame.”

“You know that?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what if I told you we suspect that Dean and Davalos were murdered, too?”

“Then I’d say you have your hands full.”

“But it doesn’t worry you?”

“Again, should it?”

“I think so. Don’t you see the relevance here? From what you’re telling me, the Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli connection is not the only thread tying these deaths together, but there’s also the Doctors Lowell and Lieberman psychic workshops connection.”

She drew her hand to her mouth in an exaggerated gasp. “Ooh! You mean someone is killing off members of the psychic workshop for no apparent reason?”

“Exactly.”

“Wow, Detective. I bet this is like déjà vu for you, huh? How do you stand it?”

“That’s it!” I threw my hands in the air, kicked my chair out and started for the door. “You know, Lilith, if ever I thought you could take anything serious, I must have been out of my mind.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll let you know when that happens.”

I stormed out of her house and, I’m not proud of this, kicked the shit out of one of her stupid little gnomes peeking out from behind the windmill. He had it coming, though. I swear the little bastard gave me the finger.

Spinelli needed no invitation. He started the car and dropped it into gear even before I climbed in and shut the door. We left rubber halfway down the block and neither of us said a word until we made it back to the box.

Nine

Spinelli and I ran into Carlos in the lobby of the justice center. He had just raided the vending machine of newly stocked Snickers bars and was heading back to his workstation. I called to him to wait up, which he did, but only after stashing his booty of confection in his pockets. We filtered through the tiers of security and assembled around his desk.

“So where did you go?” he asked, directing the question at Spinelli, probably assuming the field trip left him with goose bumps all over.

“To Lilith’s,” I said, after realizing the cat had Spinelli’s tongue.

“Lilith’s. What were you doing there?”

“Getting a whole new perspective on the case. Did you know that Karen Webber once attended Doctor Lowell’s workshops?”

“Sure.” He stuck his hands in his pockets to avoid fidgeting. He does that when he gets nervous. The fidgeting used to give him away. He still hasn’t figured out that putting his hands in his pockets does the same thing.

“Really? And you didn’t think that was pertinent?”

“To what?”

“Geesus, Carlos! After what we went through last year, somebody from one of the workshops dies suspiciously, and you don’t think that’s pertinent to the case?”

“No.”

I shook my head and uttered something totally unprofessional under my breath. I think Carlos and Spinelli heard it, but both knew better than to question it.

“Tony,” Carlos said. “Karen Webber hadn’t gone to one of those workshops since before Doctor Lieberman took over. I’m sorry, but I didn’t see the big deal.” He pulled his hands from his pockets as he spoke, and three Snickers bars jumped out. He gathered them off the floor and held one out for Spinelli and me. “Snickers?”

We each took one, much to his disappointment, I’m sure.

“Carlos, under ordinary circumstances, I don’t suppose it would have been a big deal. But after what we dealt with last year, and seeing that Karen’s brother was one of the Stalker’s victims, you should have said something.”

“I’m sorry.”

I peeled the wrapper off the candy bar and took a small bite. “You’re forgiven,” I said, suddenly realizing why Carlos kept buying so many of them.

“So,” he said, a small piece of nougat stuck to the side of his lip. “Really, what were you guys doing at Lilith’s?”

“Praying she wouldn’t kill us.” Spinelli said.

“Huh?”

“Stop,” I told him. “We went there to check out a hunch.”

“What? That she wouldn’t turn you into an alley cat if you didn’t give her the witch’s ladder?”

“Funny. No, I had a hunch about Benjamin Rivera.”

“You thought he was faking his retardation.”

“Close, but no. He’s not retarded. He’s what you call a high-functioning autistic savant. You remember he told us that he was like Leona Diaz. I suspected he meant that he had paranormal or supernatural attributes. Apparently someone else thought so, too, and enrolled him in one of

Doctor Lowell's workshops."

Carlos popped the last of his candy bar into his mouth, and with his cheeks completely full, sputtered the word, "Interesting." Only it came out, "Inawhusdin."

"Isn't it?" I said. "But get this. That comment Benjamin made got me thinking, and I remembered something Spinelli said about Anna Davalos and Bridget Dean."

"Me?" Spinelli pointed to himself. "What did I tell you?"

"Plenty. About Bridget Dean, you said her boss felt she had a sort of 'sixth sense' that won her cases in court. And in describing Anna Davalos, you said she had a knack for anticipating her customer's needs, and that her coworkers thought it seemed uncanny how she could read them so boldly."

"I remember."

"That got me thinking. I asked Lilith about them and she told me that, indeed, Anna Davalos and Bridget Dean and Benjamin Rivera were all members of Doctor Lowell's workgroup."

"Whaaa?"

"Carlos. Swallow please."

He hurried up chewing and swallowed hard. Spinelli and I waited patiently as we watched his tongue rake across his teeth behind closed mouth. He swallowed again, smacked his lips and took a shallow breath. He didn't really need to say it again, but I wanted to hear it anyway.

"What?"

I smiled. Such sweet victory. "Now you know why I got so upset not knowing about Karen Webber's involvement in Doctor Lowell's studies. We have a new pattern here. Karen Webber, Bridget Dean and Anna Davalos were all members of the workshop, and now they're all dead."

"Maybe coincidence," Spinelli suggested.

"Really? What about Carol Kessler, the fifth Beatle? Is it a coincidence that she also attended Doctor Lowell's workshop with Karen, Bridget, Anna and Benjamin, and now she shows up as a player in our little mystery tour."

Spinelli shook his head clear. "Come again?"

"It's a 60's reference," said Carlos. "Don't worry. You'll get used to it."

I said to Spinelli, "I suppose it's also a coincidence that Karen had an appointment to meet with Kessler on the day she died."

He raised his shoulders and dropped them without debate. I just kept rolling over him. "Coincidence? No, I don't think any of this is coincidence. I think Karen believed Carol Kessler was in immediate danger and wanted to get her out of town."

Carlos pointed to me. "You might have something there, Tony. While you were gone, I followed up on Kessler. I don't know where she is, but I know she got there in a hurry. Her coworkers tell me she left work Friday afternoon around one. Kessler's neighbors reported seeing her at her house shortly thereafter. She packed her car up with some clothes and a few other things and then tore out of there quickly."

"Sounds like she's not buying into the idea of coincidences either."

"Maybe no one mentioned it to her."

"Speaking of mentioning, have I mentioned the names Stinky Pete, Lucky Lenny and Crazy Eddy?"

"Who?"

"They may be the other players in this game. Lilith told me about them. They're all former members of Doctor Lowell's first workshop. If any one of them is involved in this, then boy, have we got troubles."

"So where does that leave us?" Carlos asked. "Do we have another serial killer targeting former members of Doctor Lowell's workshop?"

"Or," said Spinelli, "did Rivera kill these people, not knowing about the connection they all had to one another."

“Maybe it’s exactly what it looks like to everyone else but us,” I said, “and it’s simply a case of three suicides in three weeks.”

Carlos: “So, what can we do?”

Spinelli: “We can haul Ricardo Rivera in for more questioning.”

I shook my head. “Not without cause.”

“How `bout we find one of them guys Lilith told you about and question him?”

“No good. Lilith couldn’t remember any last names. We can’t very well go to E.I.N.I. and type in Stinky Pete, Lucky Lenny or Crazy Eddy.”

“Can we bring Piakowski in?” asked Spinelli. “Chances are we’ll find him in violation of some parole stip or another.”

“Probably would,” I said. “If only we knew where to look. The guy’s a chameleon.”

Carlos: “So, where does one look for a chameleon?”

“Right under one’s nose,” Spinelli joked.

We all laughed at that. “Yeah,” I said, “you can probably bury that idea. Piakowski is the kind of guy you don’t find if he doesn’t want you to.”

“My, God!” cried Carlos.

“What?”

“You said, bury.”

“Yeah, so what?”

“Karen’s funeral is this morning.” He looked at his watch. “We have to leave now.”

Spinelli and I checked the clock on the wall. I don’t know why. We could have bet on Carlos’ punctuality. There are just two things in life that he never misses: meals and funerals. We grabbed our coats and scuttled for the door.

There’s a small cemetery just outside the city, founded back in the days of the American Revolution. New Castle was barely a township when they laid the first soul to rest there: a Mister J. Quincy Stone, of Boston proper. It’s a nice place where the hills roll gently from a high point overlooking the Church steeple and beyond, halfway to Gloucester, down to the creek that feeds the old textile mill and empties into the marsh behind the Minute Man motel. There are many trees there, deciduous mostly: maple, elm, ash and hickory; a lot of them planted by mourners as everlasting tributes to their departed.

There is also a stone wall around two-thirds of the cemetery, knee-high and loosely stacked. The remaining third came down in the 20’s to allow expansion for growing demand. Carlos likes to point out that the cemetery is so popular that people are just dying to get in. I ask him not to tell that old joke at funerals, but inevitably, he does.

It’s in that expanded part of the cemetery where we found the Webber party. Is that what you call it? The word party seems too celebratory if you ask me, although I don’t suppose the Donnor party had much to celebrate either. God, I hate funerals.

When she buried Travis nearly a year ago, Karen reserved a plot right next to him for her own eventual interment. I’m sure she never expected to join him so soon. Had she known, she might have told them just to dig one large hole and wait for her before filling it in. I know that sounds sick, but trust me. I wasn’t the only one there thinking that. Cops can get cynical sometimes, especially at funerals. And there were many at Karen’s.

Carlos, Spinelli and I stood back a ways, under a large elm for shade, the same tree Carlos and I stood beneath to get out of the rain last year. Back then, we kept our distance because the attendees were mostly participants in Doctor Lieberman’s workshop. This time we held back to let the men and women of the First Precinct have front row to honor their own. It’s not that Karen wasn’t one of us, or we one of them. But cops are like family, and as with all families, you have your pecking order.

The service was just winding down, the American flag already folded and presented to Karen’s kin, when Spinelli tapped me on the shoulder.

“What is it?” I asked. His face looked pale white.

“Over there,” he said, pointing.

I looked out at a sea of police uniforms with black suits and dresses peppered within. “Where?”

“There!” he said again, pointing harder, straighter, as though he might reach all the way to his target. The guy wearing the dark sunglasses.”

“Everybody’s wearing dark sunglasses,” I said.

“Yeah, but I’m talking about the guy with the short sleeve shirt and tattoos. Isn’t that Piakowski?”

“It is!” I said. I grabbed Carlos by the arm to tell him, but he had already heard us and picked Piakowski out from the crowd. “Let’s go have a chat with him, shall we?” I motioned in two semi-circles. “Carlos, you go around the left. Spinelli, go right. I’ll come up the middle and flush him out.”

We headed out, just as the crowd began to break up. I spotted Carlos moving fast along the left flank, but lost Spinelli among the taller heads filtering to the right. I felt confident Piakowski had not realized we were on to him, but in his haste to make tracks, he was moving pretty good.

Beyond the break in the stone wall where it fed into the older section of cemetery, I spotted Spinelli. He dashed out ahead of Piakowski and was coming back at him head on. I quickened my pace. Carlos began to slide in from the side. We were putting the squeeze on Piakowski and he never saw it coming.

When I got close enough, I called out to him. “Greg! Gregory Piakowski! You got a minute?”

He turned and looked back over his shoulder. I waved and smiled like we were old friends. “Greg! It’s me. Wait up!”

He hesitated, thought twice about it, and then started away in a trot. This time I called for him to stop. Half a dozen police officers heard the command and drew their weapons. Spinelli charged him head-on, his arms crisscrossed at his chest. The two collided just as Carlos drilled in from the side, knocking both to the ground. I reached them not two seconds later. Already Piakowski had five Glock 9’s pointing at his head.

“All right, thank you, guys. Thank you,” I said, patting backs and shaking hands. “I think we can take it from here. Thanks again.”

The swarm of blue hornets dispersed as quickly as they descended. Carlos and Spinelli pulled Piakowski to his feet, and the three spent the next half-minute brushing grass and dirt from their clothes.

I grabbed Piakowski by the wrist and gave it a twist. “You’re not going to try and run, are you?” I said. “Because if you do, next time I’ll have these fine officers shoot first and ask questions later.”

Piakowski shook his head. “I’m not gonna run.”

“You ran once already.”

“I didn’t know who you were.”

“Who did you think I was? You’re at a funeral for a cop.”

“I dun`no. Reporters maybe?”

“What, newspaper?”

“Ah-huh.”

“Why would you run from a reporter?”

“Don’t know. Thought maybe you found out.”

“Found out what?” said Carlos. He grabbed Piakowski’s other wrist.

“Nothin`. I dun`no nuthin`.”

“Why did you come here?”

“To say goodbye.”

Carlos jerked his wrist and gave it an unnatural twist. “Didn’t you say goodbye to her when

you killed her!”

“Ouuugh! Stop! It hurts!”

I signaled for Carlos to ease up. “So what it hurts? You don’t think Karen Webber hurt when you threw her off that balcony?”

“I didn’t throw nobody off no balcony. I swear. I came here to say goodbye. That’s all.”

“What do you know about the deaths of Anna Davalos and Bridget Dean?”

“Nothin`! I swear!”

“Why were you and Ricardo Rivera together recently at an outdoor café? What were you planning?”

“Nothin`. We was just havin` coffee.”

“Why did you kill Karen Webber?” With that, I motioned for Carlos to turn up the heat again.

“Ouuugh! I didn’t do it! Stop! I swear I didn’t do nothin`. Ya gotta believe me!”

“Tell me what you don’t want the reporters to know.”

“I can’t! Aghh! Please!”

“Tell me!”

“Ouuugh! All right. All right, I’ll tell you. Just please stop!”

I signaled for Carlos to stop, and both he and I released Piakowski’s wrists. He grabbed hold of the one Carlos had twisted and tucked it to his gut.

“All right, Piakowski. Talk. What’s so earth-shattering that you don’t want the papers to know?”

“It’s Karen,” he said. “We had plans that night.”

“What plans?”

“Friday. We were going to get together for dinner at her apartment.” He reached for an inside pocket in the lining of his jacket. Out of reflex, Spinelli drew his weapon, fell into a shooter’s stance and lowered it at Piakowski’s chest. Carlos and I barely flinched. As rookies, instincts might have had us to do the same thing Spinelli did, but experience told us not to. I waved my hand over Spinelli’s Glock. He looked at me and then at Carlos. I could almost see the question mark over his head. Piakowski removed his hand slowly from his jacket and Spinelli holstered his weapon accordingly.

“It’s just a Marlboro,” Piakowski said. I nodded okay and he finished getting the pack from his jacket. His hands were still shaking as he lit the cigarette, but his first two puffs seemed to calm his nerves considerably. I waited until he went for his third drag before stopping his hand halfway to his face.

“Wait. Tell me more.”

“It’s true,” he answered, eyeing his smoke. “We started seeing each other a few weeks ago. I met her downtown where Ricardo works. Karen came there a lot to see Bridget Dean. The two went to lunch together all the time. One day I asked Ricardo to introduce us.”

Carlos crowded Piakowski and nudged him back a step. “That’s a lie! Karen would never date a thug like you. We’ve seen your record.”

He stiffened his back and shoulders. “I know that’s what Ricardo said. He told me she was a cop. But I didn’t care. I wanted to meet her.” He looked at me, and then at his cigarette. “Please?” I let his hand go and watched him suck the life from that cigarette like it was his last. He snuffed the butt out under his heel and continued. “Listen, guys, you gotta believe me. I did my time. I’ve gone straight. I told Karen that. She believed me. She believed *in* me. She gave me a chance.”

Spinelli stepped in. “She would never go out with a murderer. And you’ve been convicted of murder-one.”

“That wasn’t murder. That was self-defense. I got that conviction overturned. If you reviewed my file, you know that.”

“No. Your hot-shot, fast-talking lawyer got that conviction overturned.”

“He couldn’t have done it if the evidence didn’t support it.”

“Forget that,” I said. “What happened the night you were supposed to meet Karen for dinner?”

He looked off into the distance, as if the answer might play out for him somewhere in the trees. “She wanted me over around five,” he said. “I was only runnin’ a couple of minutes late, so I didn’t bother to call.”

I looked at Carlos, remembering that I asked him to check Karen’s phone records for about that time. He gave me a subtle nod. Piakowski continued.

“I was walkin’ like I always do, seeing as I got no driver’s license. From a few blocks away, I hear all these sirens. I think, boy, that’s some fire. Then I turn the corner by her apartment and I see all them fire and police men and whatnot. So I hold up a minute, I mean, cops make me jumpy, you know.

“But then I look down on the sidewalk, and I can’t believe my eyes. They’s throwin’ a sheet over Karen. I started to shake inside and all over. They’s gonna think I done this, I say to myself. Who’s gonna believe I didn’t? So I turned and ran. I already knew about Bridget and that girl from the coffee shop. I told Ricardo I was scared, and he hid me in his guesthouse. I wouldn’t have ever come out, but for Karen’s funeral. I hadda see her and say goodbye. I just hadda. You gotta believe me. That’s the gawd’s honest truth.”

I put my hand out to shake Piakowski’s. He took it reluctantly, and shook it. He probably expected me to slap the cuffs on him and throw him in jail. I saw in Spinelli’s eyes that he wanted me to do it. In Carlos’, I wasn’t so sure. The old Cuban’s getting harder to read these days. Of course, none of what Carlos, Spinelli or I thought mattered. Guilty or not, we hadn’t a shred of evidence to haul Piakowski into jail. But he didn’t need to know that. I still had his hand in mine. I pulled him in close so that he could not mix my words.

“Listen, Piakowski, the department will have you under constant surveillance from now on. If you plan to change your place of residence, you better tell us. And tell Rivera if he tries to help you leave town, we’ll have the bar pull his license for aiding and abetting a felon. You got it?”

“Got it, I got it. Thank you so much. You won’t be sorry, believe me. Thank you.” He turned to Carlos and Spinelli. “Thank you, gentlemen. Thank you.”

He shook hands with Carlos, but Spinelli would have none of it. The three of us watched as Piakowski hurried off through the cemetery, zigzagging and crisscrossing headstones like a bumblebee.

Carlos turned to me and smiled. I knew that look, spontaneous though it was. Spinelli had not yet learned to read all the subtleties and nuances that came with it, though those mostly only hinted at the depth of his impulse. I pulled my wallet from my back pocket and opened the fold.

“Yeah, Carlos, I guess so,” I said. His smile broadened by degrees. “Where is it this time?”

“Where else?” he answered, his hands splayed, palms up.

“The Perk?”

“Turkey Tuesday,” he said. “You gotta love it.”

Turkey Tuesday is everything Meatball Monday is and more. I never knew that a turkey could be baked, broiled, braised, barbecued, poached, seared, stewed, steamed, sautéed, roasted, grilled, deep-fried and fricasseed. And don’t get me going on the multitude of stuffing fixings. They have a plate on the menu they call, Super Turkey Sampler. To date, only Carlos has ever been able to finish one, lock, stock and barrel. He told me this on the way to The Percolator. I thanked him for that information, and seeing that I was paying, made him promise he wouldn’t order one.

“Fine. I’ll have room for dessert,” he said, like that might sway me.

We got to the Perk and placed our orders with Natalie, who graduated from lunch counter to booths and tables for the afternoon. Then after waiting for Carlos to return from the restroom, we settled in for a round of brainstorming over the case and the latest developments concerning

Gregory Piakowski.

Carlos was of the opinion that Piakowski lied about everything: dating Karen Webber, coming up on the calamity at her apartment after her fall, and especially about going straight. He reasoned that an innocent man wouldn't run, and reiterated his belief that Karen would never knowingly date a convicted felon. I pointed out how Piakowski did know about Karen's dinner plans, a detail of the case never released to the public.

"It took place at dinner time," he argued. "He didn't have to know about her plans to guess she eats around then."

"So why did he throw Rivera under the bus? Piakowski didn't have to volunteer where he's been hiding out. He could have said he's been laying low."

"He's a thug, Tony. You put the squeeze on a thug and he'll squeal like a pig. You know that. Why are you sticking up for the guy?"

Natalie showed up. I sat back as she distributed a round of iced teas to the table. She served Spinelli first and then me. When she set Carlos' tea down, I saw them exchange glances and a wink. As soon as she walked away, I hit Carlos on the shoulder.

"What was that?"

He gave me that guilty, eye-blinking routine that's supposed to look like wounded pride. "What?"

"That wink. Don't think we didn't see it. You saw it, Spinelli, didn't you?"

"He shrugged non-committal. 'I don't know. It might have been something in his eye.'"

"It was," said Carlos. "I had something in my eye."

"Yeah, and so did Natalie, right?"

"Sure, probably a lash."

I looked to Spinelli and waved a stern finger at him. "He's corrupting you. You know that, right?"

"You didn't answer me," said Carlos, in his subtle way of changing the subject.

"What?"

"I asked why you were sticking up for Piakowski."

"I'm not sticking up for him. I'm only trying to get you to look at all sides of the puzzle."

"I'm looking at all sides." He took a sip of tea, emptied six packets of sugar into his glass, gave it a stir, and sipped again. "But no matter how I turn it, I still see Piakowski as a liar, a thug and a killer."

"And that's okay if that's how you see it, just so long as you're looking at it through a prism and not a straw." I turned to Spinelli. "How 'bout you, son? What's your gut telling you?"

He rocked his head to one side. "I don't know. After the show Piakowski put on for us at the cemetery, I'm less sure now. I think if Rivera were going to help Piakowski after murdering someone, then instead of hiding him in his guesthouse he would have helped him get out of town altogether."

"Not if they weren't done knocking off people from their hit list," Carlos said.

I agreed. "A reasonable assumption, but to assume that is to suggest that the link the victims share with the workshops conceals another motive, and if so, then someone else from the workshops will die next."

"That still doesn't explain why Piakowski came to Karen's funeral," said Spinelli. "If he had a hand in her death, that's the last place I would expect to see him."

Carlos snapped his fingers and pointed at Spinelli. "Exactly! Piakowski felt comfortable enough to go to the funeral and scope out his next victim because he knew no one would look for him there."

"So the question is if he's going to kill someone, who is it?"

"Who from the old workshop is left?"

"Lilith," I said, "and of course, Benjamin Rivera and Carol Kessler. And we don't know for

sure, but we can't forget the three amigos that dropped out of the workshop early: Stinky, Lucky and Crazy."

Carlos laughed at that. "Sounds like a nightclub act. Maybe they should go out on the road."

"Maybe they already have," said Spinelli.

"What do you mean?"

"Connect the dots. Think about it. Instead of potential victims, maybe one of them is our suspect?"

"We can't rule that out," I said.

"I recommend we concentrate on the victims at hand," said Carlos, "before we focus on future victims."

"All fine and good I suppose, but we still have one very large question to answer. If Piakowski or Rivera or both are culpable in the deaths of those women, then how did they do it?"

That silenced the table. The answer seemed as far away as the moon. I considered that Rivera might have manipulated the security video to wash out visual records of him shooting Bridget Dean and planting a gun in her hand. I also accepted the possibility that he or Piakowski could have forced entry into Anna Davalos' apartment and slashed her wrists while holding her at gunpoint.

But in my wildest dreams, I could not wrap my mind around the idea that one or both somehow broke into Karen Webber's apartment, forced her to jump to her death, and then escaped the apartment undetected. I entertained, but then quickly dismissed, the possibility that the dark force of magic might have somehow played a hand in this evil affair when....

"Mind control!" Spinelli shouted.

Carlos and I jumped so high we nearly fell out of our seats.

"Come again?"

Spinelli lowered his voice. Still, his excitement had the veins on the side of his neck bulging. "Sure, think about it. What if someone got to those women, I mean, got into their heads and made them commit suicide? That would explain how the murders could occur while the women were alone and behind locked doors."

"Could that happen?" I asked.

"Why not? You've seen stranger things," he said. "Carlos told me all about the weird paranormal and supernatural stuff you and he witnessed last year."

"But we never saw total mind control."

"It makes sense though, doesn't it?"

"I guess, but.... Carlos, what do you think?"

"I've seen stranger things, Tony. And you told me about that thought form thing that played out on the window that time. That was strange."

"Yes, but that was a manifestation of energy harnessed by collective thought. It never got *into* anyone's mind."

"What if it wasn't just energy, but a someone?" Spinelli asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about co-possession."

"I don't know what that is."

"I've read theories about it. It's a leap of parapsychical transmigration."

"I still don't follow."

"It's simple. There are a lot of people that can facilitate OBE at will."

"You mean, out-of-body experiences," I said. I knew that one. "Like bilocation."

"Exactly, but now take that one step further. What if the person bilocating could enter another person's body and co-exist there, or co-possess that body? They might, if only momentarily, overpower the body and make it do something it wouldn't otherwise do, like kill

its host. Then the energy of the OBE individual could return to his own body.”

“That could explain the fuzzy image we saw in the reflection on the video,” I said. “If whoever showed up appeared only as an apparition, then none of the other cameras in the building would have picked up on anyone coming or going.”

Carlos: “But who can do that?”

I looked at him and scowled. “Only one person I know bilocates,” and both he and I said together, “Leona Diaz.”

“But that’s impossible,” Carlos said. “Leona wouldn’t hurt a fly. She’s incapable of it.”

“Which one is Leona again?” asked Spinelli.

“She’s the young girl the Surgeon Stalker kidnapped last year.”

“Oh that’s right.”

Carlos leaned forward on the table, nearly spilling his iced tea. “He was gonna get her pregnant so he could eat her baby’s liver.”

“Carlos, Please!” I elbowed him in the side, but he wouldn’t shut up.

“He tied her up in the basement of the research center, but she kept coming to Tony as a spirit form.”

“She wasn’t a spirit,” I said. “Spirits are dead people. Leona came to me while bilocating. She wanted to tell me something.”

Spinelli’s eyes filled with wonder. “Tell you what?”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is what do we do now?”

Carlos eased back in his seat, shaking his head. “We do nothing. Leona didn’t kill those women.”

“You’re probably right,” I told him, “but we still need to make sure. I’m going to go and see her right after lunch. In the meantime, I want you to check out Piakowski’s story about where he’s been staying. Interview Rivera. See if their stories jive.”

“Gottcha.”

“Spinelli, get on your computer and see if you can track down Carol Kessler. We need to talk to her.”

“I’ve been working on that, but I’ll get back on it.”

“Good.”

Natalie showed up moments later with our orders. Spinelli got the turkey burger with chips and a pickle. I got the turkey club and a side of potato salad. Carlos, it turned out, apparently didn’t use the restroom after all. Instead, he had pulled Natalie aside and ordered the damn Super Turkey Sampler.

“That explains the wink you two shared earlier,” I said, pointing at his plate.

He looked at me with all the innocence he could muster. “What wink?”

I rolled my eyes and gave it up. He was still going at it when I left him and Spinelli to go see Leona Diaz.

Ten

Leona Diaz lived in a tiny efficiency on the other side of town. I had visited her there only once, shortly after her release from the hospital days after her rescue.

I believed she came through her ordeal remarkably well, considering the horrors surrounding those circumstances. Through bilocation, she had witnessed crimes of unspeakable savageries. I never pressed her hard for details, though. The paranormal nature in which she witnessed those crimes would have rendered her testimony inadmissible in a court of law, anyway. My primary concern was then, and remains, her mental and physical well-being.

I walked up to Leona's apartment and rang the bell. She seemed confused the first few moments after answering the door, but as soon as she recognized me, she threw her arms around my neck and damn near squeezed the life right out of me.

"Detective Marcella! Dios mio! I do not believe it! Please...." She pulled me in by the hand. "Come in. You must not stand out in the cold."

"It's not cold," I started to say, but by then she had hauled me into her apartment and sat me down on an overstuffed armchair. She took a seat across from me on the sofa, so close that our knees almost met.

"It is so good to see you again, Detective. I am in static!"

I laughed a little. "Leona, you're English is getting better, but I think you mean, ecstatic."

She cupped her hands to her mouth and giggled. "Did I say something much silly?"

I shook my head and dismissed it with a wave. "No, sólo un poquito. Está bien."

"Gracias, Detective. You are too kind."

We smiled at each other, she like a child, excited, her feet tapping on the floor wildly, and me like a proud father, disbelieving that this young flower had grown more beautiful than ever. Nineteen-years-old and she maintained such remarkably delicate features; baby smooth skin like caramel mocha, a smile so bright and innocent. Her long, flowing hair was dark and fine and her eyes like big brown moons.

"You look well," I told her. "Are you doing okay? You working?"

"Sí. I am the optometrist's assistant at Optic-wise Visions Center."

"Are you? How good for you. And you've learned to pronounce optometrist so well."

She drew her hands to her mouth and giggled again. I watched her eyes peek through tiny slits, but never lose their twinkle. "I know, thank you," she said. "I have practiced so hard." She straightened her face and dissolved her smile. "The op·tom·e·trist will see you now, Detective Marcella. Do you like for the op·tom·e·trist to call you tomorrow? The op·tom·e·trist will return in one hour—"

I laughed, which broke her up. Then we both laughed until our cheeks turned red and sore. I would rather have gotten up and left then, remembering Leona that way forever. But the child's eyes had seen adult atrocities before, and if ever I were to break open this case, I had to know if she had seen them yet again. I scooted forward in my chair slightly until our knees touched. I felt the tremble in her legs subside. She folded her hands and placed them neatly on her lap. Her eyes grew wide and round. I watched her take a deep breath, and before letting it out, she stiffened her back and broadened her shoulders. It pained me to start, but I had no choice.

"Leona." My voice cracked. I cleared my throat and tried again. "Leona, do you know why I'm here?"

She nodded, and a thin strand of bangs fell into her eyes. I reached up and gently brushed the

hairs aside. She blinked and smiled, and when she blinked again a small tear rolled from the corner of her eye.

“Leona, last year you told the group in your workshop about the things you used to see when you had out-of-body experiences. You said you were drawn to scenes of murder. Do you remember?”

“Sí, I remember,” she said, her monotone voice nearly void of emotion now. “When I was a little girl in Honduras, I saw such things and I remembered every detail. I remembered the faces and the uniforms of the men who came.” She unclasped her hands and clutched the rosary around her neck. “They came to kill. They always kill.” Her hands slid down the front of her dress and gathered again on her lap. “They came and took people away into the jungle. I saw the color of their eyes from above the bandanas they wore. I saw them clearly, but they could not see me. The innocent could, but not the evil ones.

“Many of the women with their pretty dresses—the men shoot them dead. Blood ran down their dresses in red like crimson wine. I learned to despise that color. Still, I do not wear red. To me, it is the color of death.”

She bowed her head, as the memories came flooding back. Her voice already barely loud enough to hear came back softer as she continued.

“When I became older...” She reached up for the beads around her neck again and clutched them once more. “I slept with the holy rosary so that I would have it with me when I traveled out-of-body. I could do nothing to help the innocent whose murders I witnessed, but when they saw me holding the beads, they would think the Holy Mother sent me. They looked at me and made the sign of the crucifix. I think it gave them peace before...” She trailed off to catch a stifled breath and began anew.

“One night, three years ago, I went away to Puerto Castilla on holiday with my Uncle and his family. I went to sleep, but suddenly found myself in the jungles of nearby Nicaragua. It had been many months since I traveled out-of-body, so I did not sleep with my rosary. I knew right away what I would see there. But I did not expect to see my own papa. They beat him severely and dragged him into the jungle to shoot him. Papa begged for his life. I saw him look at me. I knew he saw me, but his assassins could not.

“When they executed him...” She broke again to catch her breath. “I looked at the men who did it so that I could remember their faces. But for some reason, I could not see them. They were not wearing masks or covering their faces anymore. I simply could not see them. My brain would not allow me to. That was the last time I experienced bilocation in my sleep. That was before I came to study with Doctor Lieberman and his workshop.”

Leona turned her face away from me. Another tear skipped down her cheek. I reached for her hand and held it in mine. “Since all that happened last year, Leona, have you again experienced bilocation?”

“Yes,” she uttered, still looking away.

“Recently? Within the last several weeks?”

She turned her head and our eyes met. “I saw Bridget and Karen.”

“Did you see Anna Davalos, too?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see who did it?” I knew she knew that Karen and the other two women committed suicide in the traditional sense, based on the coroner’s conclusions as supported by the physical evidence. But in the non-traditional sense, as surely as if someone stuck a gun to their heads and told them to do it, she had to believe they were murdered. Her answer appeared to both sadden and discourage her.

“Detective, I am afraid I cannot tell you who influenced their actions. I only know that mortal contact by another did not occur.”

I reached for her other hand and cupped them both tightly. “Leona. This next question is very

hard for me, but I have to ask. When someone has one of these out-of-body experiences, is it ever possible for he or she to enter a consistence with another and coexist with it?"

She hesitated, but then agreed, saying, "I believe that is possible."

"Have you ever entered a consistence with another during OBE?"

"I do not know. Often my experience is a reflection of another's. I see what they see, but from another dimension."

"How do you mean?"

"Like looking into a mirror," she said, and as she did, she peered deeply into my eyes as though the mirror were before her now. "All that goes on appears to happen in a world I can see, but not touch. I do not believe I have influence there, yet by observing, I have influenced it."

"Leona, when you saw Karen, Bridget and Anna commit suicide, were you coexisting with them?"

"I do not know."

"At any time did you possess and control their minds or bodies?"

"I do not...."

"Did you consciously or subconsciously cause or direct those women to commit suicide?"

"I...no! I do not know!"

Leona pulled her hands free from mine and buried her face in her palms. She slumped forward and began sobbing. I leaned in and cradled her head on my shoulder, stilling her tears and softly stroking her hair. "I'm sorry," I told her in a hush, as we rocked back and forth. "I had to.... I had to ask."

I never believed for a moment that Leona could purposely induce or inflict upon the will of those women the desire to commit suicide. However, neither could I rule out the possibility that she could have affected the results on a subconscious level.

In past cases, I had seen latent anxieties caused by repressed emotions manifest into disorders not readily diagnosed. That the three victims were all former participants of Doctor Lowell's initial studies indicated to me the obvious link to their killer.

It seemed conceivable, therefore, that since Doctor Lowell had kidnapped and held Leona, she might subconsciously wish to eliminate all vestiges of his legacy, no matter how relevant to her current predicament.

If paranormal forces had previously beckoned her to witness the deaths of innocents, then it seemed possible those same forces could have contributed to the perverse twisting of her subconscious, commanding her influence upon the deaths of those women.

I waited for Leona to collect herself, and when I felt the time right, I asked her to come with me.

"For a while," I said. "I'll have you back home in no time."

"Where shall we go?"

"I want to take you to see Lilith. Her capacities as a sensitive have developed sharply since just last year. If you've suppressed memories of co-possessing an individual during OBE, then perhaps she may free those memories."

"But I have plans this evening. I have a dinner date in just a short while."

"Where? Here?"

"No. I am to meet him where he works, downtown at the Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli building."

"The Hart.... Leona, I suppose it's none of my business, I know, but is your date with Benjamin Rivera?"

She smiled bashfully. "Yes."

I stood and held out my hand. "Fine, then. I'll ask Lilith to meet us there. I'm sure she won't mind. Will you come with me and help me iron all this out? I really want to set things right for Karen, Bridget and Anna."

She looked up at me, unsure, vulnerable and a little scared. I smiled and gave her a wink that promised everything would be all right. Her eyes thinned to tiny slits again. Then she took my hand and smiled back. "Lilith will go gentle with me?" she asked.

"Of course," I answered. "Didn't I give you my word last year that I would never let anyone hurt you again?"

"You did."

"Then, come, my dear. Your chariot awaits."

Eleven

Lilith's reluctance to meet with Leona and me softened only after I told her I had something she wanted. She arrived at the coffee shop in the Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli building around four o'clock and found the two of us at a table overlooking the duck pond. I spotted her first and rose to pull out a chair for her.

"My, what a gentleman..." she said, her brassy smile only garnish for the moment. She took a seat across from Leona, granting a similar gesture. "Leona. You look well. How've you been?"

"I have been well, thank you. I like your hair. You cut it, yes?"

"Not since we last talked, but thanks." She turned to me. "You have my ladder?"

"That's not why we're here, Lilith."

"That's why I'm here. You said—"

"I said I have something you want. I have a possible answer to what happened to Karen, Bridget and Anna."

Lilith pushed her chair out from the table and snapped to her feet. "Are you serious? You don't get it, do you, Detective? I don't give a rat's ass about what happened to those women. I'm not here to appease you or them. I have an agenda of my own, and my time is running short." She came around the back of her chair and pushed it in under the table. "So, if you'll excuse me, I'm going—"

"Wait! Maybe we can work something out. Please sit down." She eyed me with mistrust. I worked my smile on her until I saw her soften some. "Come." I pulled her chair out and patted the seat. "Sit. Please." I watched her eyes bounce from the chair to me and back again. Reluctance and mistrust notwithstanding, she eventually came around and sat back down.

"What's to work out?"

"Okay. Here's the deal. I need you to see if you can look into Leona's subconscious and gather any details from what she might have seen while bilocating."

"Really?" She looked at Leona and smiled at her, teasingly. "Ooh, you wicked little nanny. Where have you been romping about now, love? Has your morbid alter ego been drumming up corpses in your sleep again?"

"Lilith!"

"Come on, Detective. She's used to it. The girl's seen more dead bodies than Mussolini and Hitler combined."

"Yes, and you're about as sensitive as both. The poor thing is trying to live a normal life."

"Then why torment her? You're the one who wants to dredge up all her repressed memories. If you're so concerned, then why don't you—"

"Stop!" Leona reached across the table and pressed her hand to Lilith's. "Please, Lilith. Detective Marcella is only trying to do his job. I do not ask for God to show me the things he does. Maybe it is His way of offering hope for the souls of those who have met misfortunes in life. And perhaps it is the devil that makes me forget what I see, but if God has given you the ability to see it for me, then you must try."

I sat back in my chair, speechless, wondering if ever I might understand the selfless giving that one person could offer humanity.

Others in Leona's position, plagued by endless visions of real horrors, might seek to end their exposure to them by ending their very lives. But not Leona. In a way, I felt that Leona's experiences only served to make her stronger. Lilith, whom I thought might see things in a

similar light, offered no solidarity. Instead, she patted the hand that Leona extended and offered back only causticity.

“Leona,” she began. “Please spare your apologetics theologies. You may feel your path in life is sound and righteous, and if your Christian doctrine helps you cope with your burdens, then more power to you. I, however, am not a product of your God. Any supernatural being that you believe controls your world, or some aspect of your life, or who you believe is the personification of a force undeniably almighty, is not necessarily my God, too. I don’t prescribe to the belief in one holy deity whose fallen angel is now the Antichrist and sole reservoir of evil and anarchy.

“My Deity is nature. It’s the energy all around us, feeding and nurturing our souls. I believe the energy we surrender, good or evil, returns in equal portions to the one that expels it. If thee harm none, I say, then do as thou wilt, but impress your ism on no one.”

“Lilith!” I said, sharply. “No one is impressing philosophies on you. Leona’s intent, I’m sure, was simply to express upon you a sense of moral obligation to help us get to the bottom of this case. If you ask me, her reference to God was less dogmatic than your tirade.”

“Pah—lease, Detective. You suggest I have a moral obligation to help you in the name of God, and then have the audacity to call *my* response dogmatic? By sheer definition, you are the virtual authority on dogma. You climb into your antiseptic, incorruptible little bubble and pontificate to your kindred tribe the virtues of honesty and integrity, and meanwhile you’re sitting on property that belongs to me and denying you ever saw it.”

“You’re talking about the witch’s ladder.”

“Of course!”

“Are you done?”

She folded her arms to her chest. “For now.”

“All right, then. I’ll tell you what. I’ll ask around and try to find the witch’s ladder for you. I promise. In the meantime, will you help us find out what you can about Leona’s out-of-body experiences?”

“You mean, when she so *conveniently* showed up in time to see Karen, Bridget and Anna kill themselves.”

“Yes.”

“Fine.” She looked at Leona, and in the time it took her to blink, she said to me, “Nothing.”

“What?” I asked, unaware that any mind exploration had taken place at all. “You don’t see anything?”

“No. I mean Leona saw nothing.”

“I don’t understand. She was there, wasn’t she?”

“Oh, she was there, at least for the minutes leading up to the deaths of those women. As for the moments of their deaths, she doesn’t even know how they died.”

I couldn’t believe it. I turned to Leona. “Is that true, Leona? Did you see nothing?”

Her eyes looked glazed and hollowed. “I do not remember. It is what I tried to tell you. I am sorry.”

“That’s all right. We’ll get to the bottom of this somehow.”

As I said that, Carlos rang me on my phone to deliver some incredible news. I like to think I took the call with a poker face and an even tone in my voice. The reality, I imagine, differed.

Both Lilith and Leona waited on the edge of their seats for my call to end with eyes wide open and mouths pinned shut. I thanked Carlos for the news, and I think I might have even hung up on him without saying goodbye. I looked at Lilith first, supposing she could read my thoughts for herself. Then I turned to Leona and said, “Looks like you’re off the hook.”

“Carol Kessler is dead,” said Lilith. “Isn’t she?”

“Yes. She stepped in front of a moving train only moments ago. But I guess you read my mind already?”

“No,” she said, looking insulted. “Give me a little credit, will you? I read it on your face.”

“Oh.”

Leona asked, “Who is Carol Kessler?”

“She *was* one of Doctor Lowell’s girls,” Lilith answered. “Guess that just leaves you and me, cupcake. Ya ain’t scared, are you?”

Leona looked at me, confused. “Scared? Why?”

“You shouldn’t be,” I said. “Don’t listen to her. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Right, Lilith?” I shot her a look that screamed BACK OFF! She stuck her tongue out at me and shot back a look that screamed BITE ME! But then she did the Lilith thing: something she does best.

“That’s right, Leona, you don’t want to listen to me. You know I’m only teasing. Detective Marcella has everything under control. Don’t worry your pretty little Mexican head off.”

“She Honduran,” I said.

“Honduran. Mexican. Whatever. It’s all guacamole to me.”

I reached across the table and took Leona’s hand. It felt cold, but seemed to warm to my touch right away. She looked into my eyes, and I knew she sensed a goodbye coming, and that we might never meet again.

I get that a lot at my age now. Usually I just shrug it off. In fact, most times I really don’t care if we meet again or not. But this was different. This time I was saying goodbye to one of *His* special children. I squeezed her hand tighter and felt her do the same.

“Leona?”

“Yes?”

“You know how I feel about you.”

She thinned her lips and swallowed. “Yes.”

“You know I would never let anything happen to you.”

This time she nodded in a way I shall always remember her, with those loose silky bangs spilling into her eyes. I broke our handhold and removed a ring from my pinky finger. I had worn it since my days as a traffic cop years before she or Lilith were born.

I handed the ring to her, explaining, “I used to wear it on another finger, until they all got too fat.” She coughed a sputtered laugh but sipped it up with her tears. “It’s getting too tight for me now. I want you to have it.” She refused out of politeness, but then accepted it with little more than a gentle insistence from me. “See, it’s got a saying on it: TO SERVE AND PROTECT. I got it when I graduated from the academy. Let it remind you that I will always serve and protect you.”

She slipped the ring over her finger, and when it became obvious that that wouldn’t work, she put it on her thumb. I laughed, grateful that she didn’t need to try it on her big toe next. Then she removed one of her rings and handed it to me, saying, “Please, Detective, take this to remind you of me.”

I wanted to tell her that there was no way I could ever forget her, and I know she knew that. But of course, I took the ring.

A tear or two later and an eye-roll from Lilith, Benjamin Rivera showed up at the table. He seemed out of breath, apologizing to Leona for running late. “I over s..s.slept,” he explained, “s..sorry Leona.”

“That’s o..k..k..kay,” said Lilith. I raised a brow to her and she made a face that essentially said, Sorry, I couldn’t resist. My nostrils flared, as I took a deep breath to keep from choking her. I think she does it to piss me off more than anything.

“Benny,” I said. “Good to see you.”

“Detective Marc..c.cella. Good to s..see you, too.”

“Going out to eat?”

“Yeah, to the P..P.Percolator.”

“How nice.” I nodded toward Lilith. “I think you know Lilith Adams, don’t you?”

He started to tell me that he did, when Lilith kicked in, “Please, let me save us all some time here. Yes, Detective, we know each other. Hello, Benny.”

He smiled awkwardly and only waved. Lilith waved back. He turned to Leona. “Are you r..ready to g..g.go Leona?”

She leaned across the table and kissed me on the cheek before standing. “Thank you, Detective, for everything, and to you, Lilith. Thank you for helping.”

“Hey, don’t sweat it, sweet cheeks,” she replied, dismissing the thanks with a shrug. “All in a day’s work for a witch.”

“Good bye, Leona,” I stood to shake Benjamin’s hand. “Take care of her, Benny.”

We shook. “Bye, Det..t.ective.” He turned to Lilith. “I’ll g..get you later L...Lilith.”

“What?”

“I s..s.said I’ll s..see you later.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Yes. I’ll see you, too.”

Benny and Leona left. I took my seat again and began fidgeting with the ring Leona gave me. “I’m worried about her,” I said. “And to an extent, I’m worried about you and Benny, too.”

“Why’s that, Detective?”

“Because you three are the last of Doctor Lowell’s pupils. With the death of Carol Kessler, I’m afraid none of you are safe.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she said, palming her chest. “I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself. As for Leona...” She unclasped a thin braided chain from around her neck and put her hand out to me. “Let me have that ring.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask. Just give it to me.”

I handed her Leona’s ring and watched her thread the chain through the middle of it. Then she gripped the chain and ring tightly in her hand and brought it to her lips. She closed her eyes, whispered something softly in rhyme and blew into her fist. She opened her eyes again and handed me the charm. “This will ward off unwanted energy. Have Leona wear this. Tell her that whenever she feels threatened she should pull the ring from the chain and all the negative energy around her will dissipate at once.”

“Just pull the ring?”

“Yup. Yank it right off the chain.”

“What, like a hand grenade pin?”

“Yes, Detective, like a hand grenade pin. Why is it everything is always so dramatic with you cops?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand these things.”

“It’s a witch’s ladder. What’s to understand?”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t see how a witch’s ladder will keep someone from co-possessing Leona’s body.”

Lilith reeled back, looking startled, which scared me more than I can tell you. I had never seen her eyes look so surprised. “What did you say?”

At the risk of upsetting her something awful, I started to repeat myself. “I said, I don’t see—”

“I heard what you said! Why did you say that?”

I looked at her, puzzled. “Because that’s what I think is happening. Somebody is co-possessing these women while bilocating, making them commit suicide.”

“And you thought Leona?”

“Yes! Why did you think we came here?”

“I don’t know! But you didn’t tell me that. You said you wanted to find out what Leona knew about the suicides.”

“All right, now you know. Why are you getting so bent out of shape?”

She pinned me to my chair with her stare. “Do you remember when you said Benny told you he was like Leona?”

“Yes, and assumed he meant he was special.”

“Right, well guess what.”

“Don’t tell me he can bilocate.”

She rocked her head. “At will.”

I rolled my eyes. “Lilith, you told me he couldn’t. You said he and Leona were like fire and water. You said—”

“I know what I said. Apparently I was wrong.”

“Apparently?”

“Hey, I’m sorry! But the guy’s autistic. Its’ like reading two different people at once.”

“So, he’s complex. You couldn’t see that earlier?”

“I guess not.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. He’s good at blocking thought penetration. I bet it’s all that stuttering. I mean come on, who has the time to stop and listen? Geeze!”

I took my phone out and started dialing. “Wait!” I said, my finger poised on the SEND button. “What makes you so sure he can bilocate?”

“He practically blurted it out with his slip up.”

“What slip up?”

“A little while ago he said, ‘I’ll see you later,’ only before that he said, ‘I’ll *get* you later.’ How Freudian is that?”

“He did say he’ll get you later, didn’t he?”

“Yes, the little twerp. Who does he think he’s messing with?”

I leaned back in my seat, trying to recall the brief encounter. I remembered the slip in words, but brushed it off after he corrected himself. Then I remembered something else he said when he first arrived at the table. He came to Leona and apologized for being late, explaining that he overslept. I don’t know everything there is to know about out-of-body experiences, or bilocating, but I do know that to do either, one must sleep or submit to hypnosis.

By Carlos’ estimations, Carol Kessler stepped off the platform at New Castle station barely thirty minutes before Benjamin Rivera came running into the coffee shop. I pressed the SEND button and placed the phone to my ear.

“Carlos!” I said, nearly in a scream. “It’s Benny Rivera! He can bilocate at will. He’s with Leona now. We have to stop him. Grab Spinelli and meet me at the Perk as soon as possible.”

I hung up, nervous and excited and definitely not thinking clearly at all. I jumped up, stuffed the phone into my pocket and kissed Lilith right on the forehead.

“Gotta go!” I said, tearing out into the lobby in a sprint. I hadn’t given much thought about the look on her face until I was halfway to the Perk. Then all I could see in my mind was the whites of her eyes, her dropped jaw and her splayed hands attempting to hold me back. Afterwards, I remember her smiling over it.

Carlos and Spinelli were just getting out of their car as I pulled up. I called them into a huddle out front and devised a plan that we hoped wouldn’t cause too great a disturbance.

“I’ll walk in first and find Leona,” I said. “I’ll tell her I need to have a word with her in private.” I tapped Spinelli’s chest. “As soon as I have her safely aside, I want you to walk up to Benny and identify yourself. Explain that you need to see him outside for a minute. If we can keep this out of the diner we’ll make much less of a scene.”

“What do I do?” Carlos asked.

“You wait out here for Spinelli to come out. If Benny gives you any trouble, cuff him.”

“Why don’t I cuff him anyway?”

“Because we don’t really have enough on him to arrest him, but we do have cause for

questioning. If he resists cooperating, then we'll have reasonable grounds for detaining him."

"Makes sense. Then what?"

"Then we'll take him downtown. If I know his type, we'll have a confession out of him in the first hour. Now, you two ready?"

"Ready," said Carlos.

"Ready," Spinelli echoed.

I gave them both a slap on the back. "Then let's roll."

Spinelli and I entered the diner. We spotted Leona and Benny sitting in a booth by the back door. I pressed Spinelli's arm to hold him there, and then I moved in.

Leona noticed me first. Her smile lit up the booth like a candle. When Benny saw the light in her eyes, he turned and waved to me, smiling almost as broadly. I stopped at the booth and apologized for the interruption. Turning to Leona, I said, "There's something very important I forgot to ask you earlier. It's rather sensitive, though. Would you mind? I'd like a word with you in private for just a moment."

Her eyes fluttered, unable to imagine the immensity of the matter. She grabbed her purse and excused herself to Benny. I escorted her into the hallway leading to the kitchen.

Then Spinelli moved in, approaching Benjamin Rivera. I saw him flash his badge. A minute later all hell broke loose. Dishes and glasses crashed to the floor. Benny started over the top of the table and Spinelli took him down behind the booth. A woman at a nearby table screamed. Two guys in the corner stood and started toward them to join in the brawl. That's when Carlos burst in, waving his badge and corralling people back into their seats.

Leona tried pulling away, pleading with me in Spanish to let her go. But I held on to her arm and yanked her back into the hallway until Carlos and Spinelli had cuffed Benny and escorted him out of the building. I would have told her what was happening, but the moment I released her arm, she ran into the women's restroom and locked the door.

I waited as long as I could for Leona to come out before explaining the situation to Natalie. She told me not to worry, but I still didn't like the way the thing went down. I flipped her a couple of twenties, one to give to Leona to cover her taxi ride home, and the other, which came with an apology, to cover her and Benny's tab.

"For the mess of broken dishes and glasses," I told her, "you can bill the department. The arresting officer's name is Carlos Rodriguez."

"But that was Spinelli," she said.

"I know." I handed her another twenty. "Now it's Rodriguez."

She smiled, and I knew we had an understanding.

Twelve

By the time I got back to the justice center, Benny Rivera had already been allowed his one phone call and placed in the interrogation room for questioning. I started to head in there, when Spinelli stopped me outside the door.

“Detective Marcella, I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for the disturbance at the restaurant.”

“Yes, what was all that about? You were supposed to ask him to step outside so you and Carlos could take him in without incident.”

“I know, but after he confessed to the murders, something inside him exploded. He became another person. His face grew pale and his—”

“Wait! He confessed?”

“Yes. I asked him about—”

“Has anyone read him his rights?”

“I did.”

“Does he want council?”

“No, he said he didn’t need it.”

“Does he know what that is?”

Spinelli shrugged.

I patted him on the chest and started into the room. “Make sure you video this interview.”

“Gottcha,” he said, and he disappeared behind an adjacent door.

I stepped into the interrogation room. Benny sat stiffly in a chair with his back to the door, his cuffed hands drumming nervously on the tabletop.

Carlos sat across from him, more relaxed and with arms folded at his chest. He gave me a nod as I walked in, but the look on his face told me he hadn’t gotten far. I walked around the table, patting Benny on the shoulder as I passed. He flinched, turning sharply to see who walked in. After recognizing me, he seemed to loosen up some, but he still didn’t look comfortable.

“Hello again, Benny.” I smiled at him. “Sorry to bring you down here like this, but I think you know why we did. Don’t you?”

He shook his head.

“You don’t?” I pulled a chair up beside Carlos. “Well then, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“W..where is L..Leona?”

“She’s fine. She’s worried about you.”

“C..can I talk to h..her?”

“Not now, Benny. First we need some answers. I believe Detective Rodriguez said that you can have a lawyer present while we question you?”

“My b..brother is a l..lawyer.”

“Yes, I know. Would you like us to get him for you?”

He shook his head. “I’m o...k.kay.”

I looked up in the corner and spotted the red light on the camera blinking. Carlos’ eyes followed. “Benny, yesterday you told me that you were like Leona. Do you remember saying that?”

“Y..yes.”

“Did you mean that you can travel out-of-body? You can bilocate?”

“W..what?”

“Bilocate. That’s what it’s called, isn’t it? When your subconscious self leaves your body.”

“Oh, then, y..yes, I can b..b..bilocate.”

“You’re certain?”

“Ah-huh.”

“Where, Benny? Where do you go when you bilocate?”

He smiled, and his eyes rolled up toward the ceiling. “All over.”

“Do you see people?”

“Yes, I see people. I talk to people from all over, and they talk to me, too.”

I fell back in my chair, my eyes blinking, my mouth unhinged. I turned towards Carlos. He hadn’t missed it either. I looked back at Benny, his eyes still searching the ceiling.

“What did you just say?”

He articulated. “I can go all around the world and meet all sorts of people. They tell me stories and jokes and make me laugh.”

I gave Carlos another high brow, almost afraid to take my eyes off Benny. Carlos straightened up in his seat, and I know we both stole a glance at the camera again to make sure the red light was still blinking.

“Benny. How come you’re not stuttering anymore?”

His eyes darted to mine, blinked a couple of times and then fell into a sleepy-looking droop. “W..What?”

I held my finger up. “Can you give us a moment?” I stood and gave Carlos a tug on his sleeve. “We need to chat in private for a second.”

Out in the hall, Carlos latched onto my arm and nearly yanked it out of its socket. “What the hell was that?”

“You’re asking me?” I said. “What do I look like, Sigmund Freud?”

“He’s faking his stutter!”

“No, I don’t think so. I think he’s got dual personalities. Did you notice the look in his eyes, how it changed when he came back to me?”

“Yeah, and he jumped a little, like he awoke from a sleep in a startle.”

I pointed to the other room. “Go in there and make sure Spinelli doesn’t turn off that camera for a second. Got it?”

“Yeah.”

“And then get on the phone and see if you can reach Ricardo Rivera. I think he should get down here and—”

“Benjamin already tried calling his brother. His phone went to the answering service.”

“Didn’t he want to call anyone else?”

“He said he didn’t.”

“Fine, then, just make sure Spinelli has that camera rolling.”

“Got it.”

He started away.

“Oh, and Carlos? Have Spinelli see what he can find out about what happened down at the train station. I want to know about eyewitnesses, if Carol traveled alone...stuff like that.”

Carlos gave me the thumbs up before joining Spinelli in the observation room. I went back into interrogation and took a seat across from Ben Rivera. He seemed fidgety again, but happy that I returned without Carlos. I started in where we left off.

“Benny, a little while ago you were telling us that you can go places out-of-body. Is that what you did when you went to see those women?”

“W..what wo..women?”

“Karen, Bridget and Anna. You remember going to see them, don’t you?”

He looked at me, confused.

“Before they died,” I said. “You traveled out-of-body to see them just before they died.”

Still confused, he shook his head. “No I d..d.didn’t.”

“Yes, you did. You went there through bilocation. You entered into their bodies and you forced them to commit suicide.”

“No!”

“Yes. You told Detective Spinelli that much already, back in the restaurant. You told him you forced those women to kill themselves.”

“No! I d..d.didn’t!”

I stood up and slammed the heel of my fist on the table. “You told us just moments ago that you can bilocate and that you go anyplace in the world you want.”

“But I d..d.don’t...”

“That’s how you got to the train station this afternoon and killed Carol Kessler. You got into her body and made her walk off the platform right into the path of that train. Then you hurried to the coffee shop and—”

“Stop it this minute!” he shouted. He leaned across the table on his elbows. “Can’t you see this boy has no idea what you’re talking about?”

I fell back in my chair. “Benjamin?”

He palmed the table’s edge and shoved it towards me. “I’m sick and tired of people kicking that kid around like he’s some mangy old dog. Do you understand me?”

“Who are you?”

“Leo,” he said, and he eased back into his chair, folding his arms at his chest.

“No, you’re not. You’re Benjamin.”

“I’m Benny’s better half.”

“You mean alter personality.”

He smirked. “Still, you don’t think I’m the better of his two halves?”

“Is that all he has is two?”

He shrugged. “As far as I know, but sometimes I think there’s a little girl trapped inside him as well.”

I looked up at the camera and back at Leo.

“Don’t worry. It’s still on,” he said. “Your buddies aren’t going to miss anything.”

“I’m not worried about them. I’m worried about you.”

“Oh, right. I suppose you’re going to give that video to some shrink.”

“You don’t think I should?”

“It don’t matter to me. I don’t need no help.”

“What about Benny?”

“What about him?”

“Maybe he could use the help.”

He laughed. “Save it, Dick. Benny’s as good as dead. Soon I’ll be out all the time and he’ll just be a puny memory. Has anybody got a smoke?”

“You smoke?”

“Marlboro, if ya got it.”

I motioned with a tic of my finger toward the observation window. “We’ll see what we can do, Leo.”

“Ya, right.”

“So what’s next? After you bury Benjamin, who will you kill after that?”

“What makes you think I want to kill anyone?”

“You killed four women already, maybe more.”

“Screw you! I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Detective Spinelli said—”

“Spinelli is a putz.”

“He said he got a confession out of Benny at the Percolator.”

“A confession—please. Ask him what Benny really said.”

“I don’t think I need—”

“Ask him. Go on, get him in here!” He turned to the window and whistled loudly. “Spinelli! Get your ass in here, ya putz!”

I looked to the glass and nodded okay. When Spinelli entered, I asked him, “Detective, what exactly did Benjamin say to you at the Percolator this afternoon?”

Spinelli shrugged. “Well,” he pointed at Leo, “I asked him what he did to those women, and he said he made it better for them.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah.”

“That was his confession?”

“It sounded like one to me.”

“Did you make it clear to him what women you were talking about?”

“No, but he knew.”

I shook my head. “Spinelli, Benjamin is a janitor at the coffee shop. He cleans the cafeteria and makes it better for the women that waitress there.”

“What about his bilocating?”

Leo scoffed. “OBE?”

“Yes.”

“Ha! Benny can’t do that.”

“But he said—”

“He’s an idiot! What can I tell you? The guy doesn’t know the difference between a simple dream and a bona fide paranormal out-of-body experience.”

“So, he definitely can’t bilocate?”

“Of course not.”

“But if *you* know that, why doesn’t *he* know that?”

“I told you. He’s an idiot. Is it any wonder I’m winning the battle for total control over his mental faculties?”

“Tell me about Leona.”

“Leona. Whoa, now there’s a hot chick. I’m gonna have fun working Benny’s little weenie into those lacy undies. Which reminds me, where’s that cigarette?”

“You little creep!” I said, and I started across the table when Spinelli grabbed me by the shoulders.

“Detective Marcella!” he pushed me back into my seat. “Don’t! It’s not worth it. He’s only trying to rile you.”

Leo pushed against the back of his chair so hard it came up on two legs and nearly went over. I could see I scared him, and although I wanted to do more than that, I figured Spinelli was right. He wasn’t worth it. I eased back into my seat, mindful that the camera was still on and thankful for Spinelli’s intervention. Leo let his chair come forward again, smirking the whole time like he had gotten something over on me.

“You’re a tough guy,” I said, “ain’t you?”

He hemmed a bit. “Chicks dig tough guys.”

“You think Leona digs tough guys?”

“No. That’s why I let Benny put all the moves on her. Then, when the time is right, the lights are low and he’s ready to go in for the big pay out, it’s bye-bye stutter boy, hello handsome.”

“It won’t go down like that. Leona’s not that kind of girl.”

“They’re all that kind of girl, Detective. They just don’t all know it yet.”

“I know. And I’m going to save you a little time with some advice, and you’d better listen.”

“Advice from an old man? I don’t think so.”

“Oh, I do.” I leaned in on my elbows, way across the table until my face and his were only

inches apart. Then, in a whisper that I knew the camera's audio could not pick up, I said, "If you so much as look at Leona again, you or Benny or any other freak you're hiding inside there, I'll kill you all. Understand?"

I settled back into my chair and smiled at him. At first his expression seemed frozen, a mix of shock and fear. Then his macho ego took over and washed his face in arrogance. "Fine," he said, rocking back in his chair. "I don't need that frigid bitch anyway. There's plenty of other pussy out there."

"You mean at HP&P?"

"Maybe."

"Like who? Courtney?"

"Sure. I could have her if I want. I had Anna Davalos. Why not her?"

"You and Anna Davalos?"

"You're surprised?"

"When did you last see Anna?"

"You mean alive?"

"Of course. Why, have you seen her dead?"

"Well, I don't know," he said, and he laughed pathetically. "The way she lays there when you're fucking her, it's hard to tell."

"Ever do it with Bridget Dean?"

"Bridget? Oh sure, once or twice a week."

"How about Karen Webber?"

"Yeah, Karen was a little crazy, liked it through the back door if you know what I mean."

"You're sick, you know that? You're sick and you're a liar."

"Sick, lucky. It's all in the way you look at it."

"No. There's no other way to look at it. There's no way Karen Webber would ever have sex with you. And I'm sure Bridget Dean and Anna Davalos had better taste in men as well."

I started going off on a righteous lecture about decency and morality when, thank heavens, Carlos came through the door about as excited as I had ever seen him.

"Tony! Tony! You won't believe this!" I saw he had a copy of a police report in his hand. I excused myself and took the conversation out into the hallway.

"Whadaya got?"

"I have a preliminary list of names here of the people standing closest to Carol Kessler when she killed herself. So far, all of them gave a statement to the same effect that Carol deliberately and without assist stepped off the platform in front of that train."

"All right," I said. "I think we expected to find out as much."

"But wait, that's not all. You have to look at the names on the list." He handed it to me. "About halfway down," he said. "Take a look at the name below John and Arleen Padilla."

I took the list and skipped immediately to the name that had Carlos so damn excited. "Gregory Piakowski?" I said. "I don't believe it." I returned to the investigation room and confronted Leo with the list. "Do you know anything about this, Leo?"

He looked at me strangely. "Who is L..L.Leo?"

I considered the possibility that Benjamin was either one hell of a liar or seriously messed up, or both. Regardless, I had no legal cause to hold him any longer. I turned to Spinelli and told him, "Give Benny a ride home." To Carlos I said, "Do we know where to find Piakowski now?"

He shook his head. "That's anyone's guess. After taking statements, the police let people walk away from the scene. He could have gotten into a taxi or simply hopped a bus somewhere."

"All right, then. Spinelli, after you give Benjamin a ride, I want you to go to the Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli building and reexamine their surveillance equipment. Find out if anyone could have manipulated the video to make it look like Bridget Dean worked alone the night she died."

“I did that,” he said.

“Then, do it again. I don’t know why, but the stink of guilt keeps pointing back to Piakowski at every turn. If he was in that building when her gun went off, then I want to know about it.”

“Got it.” He punctuated the air with his fingertip before going to Benjamin and helping him to his feet.

I turned to Carlos. “You go back to Anna Davalos’ apartment and sift through it with a fine tooth comb. If Piakowski found a way into her apartment through some other means, then I want you to find it.”

“What about you?”

“I’m going back to Karen’s place. Piakowski said that he and Karen had a date Friday night, which tells me he’s probably been in her apartment before. I’m betting there’s a way in and out of there that doesn’t involve going through the front door or going over the balcony. In the meantime, we have enough probable cause to haul Piakowski in for questioning. Get dispatch to put out an APB on him. If anyone finds anything, call it in. I want everybody in the loop on this one. Any questions?”

“Just one.”

I looked Carlos in the eye with a squint. “I hope this isn’t about eating.”

“Oh,” he said, and his face grew long. “Then, never mind.”

Thirteen

I got the building super to let me into Karen Webber's apartment. No one had been there since Carlos and I stopped by the day before, but already I thought the place was beginning to get that rummaged through look.

The first thing I did was walk out onto the balcony and look over the railing. Four stories up seemed a lot higher when you imagine yourself falling from such a height.

I saw some young boys gathered out in the street. It was getting dark, but the net they set up under the streetlight made me think they intended on playing street hockey there all night. One of the boys spotted me and hollered up that he would give me a dollar if I jumped. I swung my leg over the railing and they all began howling like Indians. So much for sensitivity, I thought.

I went back into the apartment and started really looking around. I didn't know what I was looking for, other than another possible way in or out. I guess I hoped to find something that might support Greg Piakowski's claim that he and Karen were dating. I wanted to believe he started on a path of straight and narrow.

I think if Karen knew of his past, she would have had to believe he rehabilitated. On the other hand, finding anything to support Piakowski's innocence meant I was barking up the wrong tree and that perhaps Karen did commit suicide after all, something I don't think I could ever have come to grips with.

Off in the corner, opposite the kitchen, was a sofa with a pull out bed. Being that there were no other rooms in the apartment, I assumed that was where Karen slept.

I pulled the bed out and right away noticed something odd. All the corners of the spread were neatly tucked in, but for one. I pulled back the spread and the sheet and found a portable USB storage device.

A quick look around confirmed that Karen had no computer in her apartment. She did, however, have access to several at work. It seemed reasonable to assume that if she'd been working on an unassigned case, she would only want to store documents, pictures or whatever on a removable drive that no one at work could access.

I pocketed the device and continued looking.

When Carlos and I were there the day before, I noticed a small closet by the front door. Neither of us bothered to look inside it, if for no other reason than because we expected the investigating officers already did so. Still, what they were looking for then, differed from what I hoped to find now. I opened the closet door and stuck my head inside.

The first thing I noticed was the smell: nice, I mean. Karen owned some very fine leather jackets and a pair of leather cowboy boots that would have kicked up a storm on a rowdy night of line dancing.

I thumbed through the pockets of her jackets, shook out her boots and felt along the top shelf above the hangers. Nothing seemed out of place or unusual.

I almost closed it up again when something caught my eye. Above all the boxes piled high on the shelf, was a door or access cover, I guessed to an attic. Pushing up on it revealed a crawlspace among the ceiling trusses.

I phoned Carlos at once. He was working Anna Davalos' apartment and told me that he was about to give up hope of finding anything significant.

"You found nothing at all?" I said.

"Nothing that's not already in the report. It's an old building, Tony, with no way in or out

except for through the front door.”

“Listen to me, Carlos. Is Anna’s apartment on the top floor of her building?”

“Yeah, but it’s only three flights up.”

“That’s not the point. Do you see anything on the ceilings that looks like an access panel to the attic?”

“I don’t know. I—”

“Look! Walk around. Check in the closets.”

I heard the phone go static a few times as he walked the apartment, reporting his negative findings room-by-room until finally, “Hey, wait! What’s this?”

“Do you see a panel?”

“Yes, in the bedroom up in the corner. It looks like an access panel.”

Great!” I said, pumping my fist in the air. “Can you lift up on it and see where it goes?”

“Yes, wait. Let me find something. Here’s a broomstick. Just let me.... That’s it! Yes, it’s quite large up there, plenty of room for someone to move about.”

“Can you get your head up there to look around?”

“It’ll take a minute. I’ll have to stack some furniture up or something. Let me get back with you.”

“All right, do that. I’ll wait for your call.”

After hanging up, I called Spinelli. I hadn’t expected him to have near as much luck as Carlos and me, but I wanted to keep him in the loop.

“Detective Marcella,” he said. “Glad you called. I was just about to phone you.”

“Why, are you having some luck?”

“Maybe. I’m here talking with Jake. He’s the security guru here at HP&P. This guy knows the security equipment here like the back of his hand.”

“So, what can he tell you?”

I heard a little side talk and then Spinelli came back to the phone. “Right. Jake tells me that if someone knew what he was doing, then he could easily change the time and date stamp on a video.”

“How could someone do that? Isn’t it electronically stamped onto the image?”

“It works a little different with digital, Detective. But with the proper access, the easiest thing one might do is reset the time and date on the equipment before taping a new sequence of video. That way if anyone looked to see if the video had been tampered with, it would look like it wasn’t.”

“Amazing,” I said, partly because the concept intrigued me, and partly because I actually understood what he said. “Spinelli, listen. If someone provided the police with new video shot after Bridget Dean’s death, then that means the original recordings might still exist somewhere. See if Jake can find it. In the meantime, Carlos and I are working another lead. I want you to drop what you’re doing and meet me here at Karen Webber’s place right away. Oh, and bring a flashlight.”

“Got it,” he said. “I’ll see you soon.”

I hung up the phone and immediately Carlos called back.

“Tony. I’m up in the attic now. It’s plenty large enough for a grown man to move around up here. I see more access panels leading to other apartments on the third floor. Anyone could easily come up through one of them to gain entry into Anna’s apartment and then slipped out the same way.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s what I’m thinking might have happened here, too. I’ve got Spinelli coming over now. I’ll have him scoot up there and check it out.”

“Do you want me to look around some more while I’m here?”

“No. I think we need to send forensics up there to look for evidence linking Piakowski to the scene. The less hair, prints and fibers you leave behind, the better. Why don’t you come meet me

here at Karen's? I have a feeling we're going to Rivera's together after this."

"Got it, Tony. On my way."

Spinelli arrived at Karen Webber's place about ten minutes after I hung up with Carlos. I gave him a ten-finger boost up into the attic and then tossed him the flashlight.

"What do you see?" I asked.

"Someone's been here. There's fresh cigarette butts crushed out on the planks."

"What brand?"

"Marlboros."

That set off bells in my head. "Hey, isn't that the brand—"

"Piakowski smokes? Yes."

"Nice. Do you see another way in or out?"

"Wait a minute, yes, I think I see a small door. Let me check it out."

I stood outside the closet with my head craned through the doorway looking up towards the hole. After a while of not hearing from Spinelli, I began to wonder what he was doing up there. I called his name repeatedly, but he wouldn't answer. Worried, I took my phone out and dialed his number. He answered on the second ring.

"Spinelli! Where the hell are you? I've been calling your name. What did you do, fall through the ceiling into another apartment?"

"No, I'm right here." I turned around and there he was, standing right behind me. "I found a door," he said. "It leads out onto a fire escape and to an unlocked window down the hall."

"Nice work." I patted him on the shoulder. "This changes everything. Now we have a means for the killer to have gained access into the apartment. I talked to Carlos a few minutes ago, and he's found a similar way in and out of Anna's place, as well."

"So, what does this prove?"

"By itself, not a lot. But it shows that Piakowski could have gained access to Karen Webber and Anna Davalos right up to the times of their deaths."

"And to Bridget Dean, too, if someone with a key to the building let him in."

"Someone like Ricardo Rivera?"

"Exactly."

"That's what I'm thinking."

"So, what do we do now?"

"We don't do anything," I said. "Carlos—"

"Someone call?"

Carlos poked his head through the door, smelling suspiciously of burger and fries.

I looked at my watch. "Where were you? You should have been here ten minutes ago."

"I stopped for gas."

"Gas?"

His eyes darted between Spinelli's and mine. "Yeah."

I decided not to call him on it. Besides, I've ridden with him after he's had a burger and fries from one of those quickie McDrive-thrus. He wasn't lying. It does give him gas.

"Carlos and I are going to pay a little visit to Ricardo Rivera," I told Spinelli. "Maybe we'll get lucky and find Piakowski there. In the meantime..." I dug into my pocket and handed him the flash drive I found tucked among Karen's bed sheets. "Take this."

He took the device and examined it closely. "It's a four-gig flash drive. Where did you get it?"

"That's not important. Take it back to the box and see what you can learn. I suspect it holds all of Karen's notes and maybe some more pictures. Give me a call if you find something." Spinelli pocketed the device and headed out. I turned to Carlos. "You ready?"

"Sure, let's hit it."

"You want to stop on the way and get a bite to eat somewhere?"

I saw his eyes bulge, as though an eruption deep inside his belly had swelled to the top of his throat and then settled back down. “Ah, no, I’m good,” he said, thumping his chest with his fist. “Maybe later.”

“Ah-huh. That’s what I thought.”

On the way to Rivera’s I asked Carlos if he could take a little detour first so that I could get something off my chest.

“No problem,” he said. “Where to?”

“Just drive. I’ll give you directions.”

I didn’t want to tell him where we were going, not right away. If I had, I knew he would want to know why. That would have been a tough one to answer because, frankly, I didn’t know myself.

Carlos is a funny guy sometimes, sharp about some things, a little dim about others. I couldn’t recall if I had ever taken him to Lilith’s with me before. My few visits there still spark memories too dramatic to include such details.

Yet, I believe I shall never forget his reaction when we pulled up in front of her house this time. After pulling into the driveway, he took one look over the steering wheel and said to me, “Tony, that gnome behind the windmill, he just gave me the finger.”

“So?” I said.

He answered back seriously, “Tell Lilith to expect his resignation in the morning, because I’m going to kick his little green ass from here to Ipswich.”

“Carlos.” I grabbed his wrist and squeezed it until I forced his eyes off it. “That gnome is smaller than you, but trust me, you don’t want to do it. Now, maybe you ought to wait out here for me. I’ll run in and have a chat with Lilith while you sit here and…”

“Guard the car?”

“Yeah, that’s it. You keep an eye on the car. I’ll be right back.”

I walked up the pathway to the front door, tripping over a stepping stone that maybe, just maybe, that rat bastard gnome had caused to lurch upward just as I approached it. For now, however, I’ll say that it was my fault.

I knocked on the door, hesitantly, as I had never been to Lilith’s at night before. A full moon over my shoulder cast a shadow on the door, a shadow of me, though its moves seemed almost independent of my own. A faint light quivered through the window, which I recognized as candlelight. But for that dim luminance, no others shined within the house.

Lilith opened the door, cloaked in a long black robe with cords of black beads draped loosely around her neck. She carried in her cupped hands a single candle. Its orange light danced like a gypsy ghost upon her face. Her eyes, sunken in artificial sockets cast by faltered shadows, gleamed with brilliance and beguiled my senses.

“Lilith?”

“Detective.”

“What do you…have something going on here? Am I interrupting?”

“If you must know, I’m conducting a ceremony.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, alone. But if you’re here because you brought my witch’s ladder with you, that’s good. I can use it now.”

“Oh, it’s a witchcraft thing. No, sorry. I don’t have it. What kind of ceremony are you conducting?”

“Detective, I really could use that witch’s ladder.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m working on it. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that I am initiating a rite of passage, a sort of self-dedication thing. It’s very important and very personal. The ladder was supposed to be an integral constituent of the dedication. Unfortunately, this affair is time sensitive and I can’t put it off any longer. Thanks to

you, I'll have to conduct the ceremony without it."

"Why don't you just make another one? Hell, a year ago you made so many, you have thought they grew on trees."

Sometimes you have to watch what you say to Lilith, and more importantly, how you say it. I've always found that to be a bit of a contradiction with her. For someone who lives by the sharpened tongue, she doesn't take it as well as she dishes it out.

I watched her eyes squint keenly, and I swear, for just a second I saw fire in them. Anyone else, I suppose, might have felt her wrath and found himself leaving her place on four legs with his tail pinched between them.

But for our special kinship, or perhaps just because of my age, she spared me the sparks and spells and refrained from turning me into anything that could lick himself in places God never meant man to lick.

"This is not about making witch's ladders, Detective," she said, coldly. "This dedication is something for which I've been preparing for years. It's most serious I assure you. After tonight, I'll have renewed myself, accepting the ways of witchcraft in the eyes of my ancestors and embracing the secrets they hold. To do this, I must atone and commit myself completely. That ladder, which regrettably connects me to Doctor Lowell through Leona, is the last relic associated with that dark part of my past. Tonight the stars align. It's been a year and a day since I constructed that ladder, and in so doing, forever tied its energy to the circumstances surrounding the events of that unfortunate episode in my life."

"Unfortunate episode?"

She shook her head. "Forget it. Listen. I really need to get started. So, if you don't mind."

"Lilith, please. Before you shut me out, may I have just a minute more?"

"A minute? Can you make it quicker?"

"Oh, sure. I'll make it quick." I stole a peek over her shoulder and pointed inside. "Do you think we could, ahh...."

She threw the door open the rest of the way. "Fine. Come in, but you've got one minute."

I followed her inside, where I noticed more candles burning than what I could see from out on her stoop. She didn't offer to turn on the lights. I supposed she wanted to stay in the mood for whatever voodoo thing she had planned.

She pointed to the kitchen table and uttered, "Sit," which I did. Then she pulled up a chair opposite me and said, "This has nothing to do with voodoo, Detective."

I remembered then, all the little secrets I lost to her in the past. "No, of course, not," I said. "I know that witchcraft and voodoo are two separate things. I don't want you to think for a minute that I—"

"Spill it, Marcella. Why have you come?"

"Fine." I pulled the wrinkles from my jacket and folded my hands neatly on the table. "You told me earlier that you had a hard time reading Benjamin Rivera, that you felt like he was two different people."

"That's right."

"Did you know he suffers from MPD?"

"Multiple Personality Disorder?"

"Yes."

"I didn't, but it makes sense now."

"How so?"

"Well, a part of him believes he can bilocate. That's the Benny side. Another part, a somewhat weaker though darker side, tells me he can't. I guess the Benny side was in control when I read him. That's why I told you he could. Why? Have you found out now that he cannot?"

"No, that is to say I haven't found out either way, although his subordinate, who may soon

become the dominant personality, insists he can't."

"Leo?"

"He calls himself Le.... How did you know that?"

She reared a guilty grin. "Sorry."

I scolded her with a glare. "Yes, he calls himself, Leo, and unlike Benny, he doesn't stutter. In fact, he's as articulate as you or me. And nasty? Shoot, this guy's a regular Attila the Hun."

"Leo is the sign of the lion."

"Yeah, go figure."

"So, what do you think?"

"I'm not sure. After learning about Carol Kessler stepping in front of that train, I felt certain Benny was behind it. Then the other shoe hit the floor."

"Greg Piakowski?"

"Gregory Pia.... Lilith! Stop that!"

She covered her mouth, so that I might believe she merely slipped. But I knew then that she was really starting to enjoy it. "Forgive me," she insisted. "Please, go on."

I no longer bothered to give her the scowling brow, figuring it would only encourage her further. "Yes, Piakowski. We learned not long ago that he was at the train station when Carol stepped off the...well, when she stepped off."

"You think he did it."

"Yes. No. I don't know."

"Detective...."

I leaned my head back in resignation and let it thump against the backrest of the chair. Shadows on the ceiling thrash in twisted shades of black and gray, fleeting like the wind and as impossible to grasp as the doubts that fueled my indecisiveness.

"Lilith," I said, though I fear it came out more as a cry. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm filled with hostility and indecision. Everywhere I turn, I'm making mistakes."

"Welcome to the human side of life, Detective."

"No, it's more than that. I mean it. I can't seem to pull things together like I used to. I feel like...like my life has no meaning, no direction."

She reached across the table and patted my folded hands. "You're adjusting to retirement. That's all."

"No. It's more. Ever since the Stalker case last year I...."

As I spoke, a warm sensation radiated through my hands and up my arms. It startled me at first, but then it sort of melted into the rest of my body and dissipated like a fog. I pulled my hands away gently and sat up straight in my chair.

"Oh, hell, will you listen to me?" I said, feeling suddenly embarrassed. "I must sound like a silly old coot. I'm sorry I bothered you. I know you're in the middle of something. I just wanted to ask you about Benjamin and his personality thing. I'll let you get on with your...ceremony, or whatever."

"Wait," she said, and she sprang from her chair and hurried across the room to one of the kitchen cupboards. Opening it, she reached up and removed a small wooden box from the top shelf. She then set it on the counter, fingering through its contents briefly before returning to the table. I looked at her curiously, as she held out her hand and presented me with a dark colored diamond-shaped object.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's the eye of the witch," she said. "It's made of obsidian, but more important is the spell cast upon it. Simply by possessing this, one reaps the benefits of its incantation."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that merely by carrying it on your person you will master the insight and discretion of a witch much wiser than your years could otherwise allow."

“You want me to have it?”

She smiled proudly. “You’ve earned it, Detective. I of course, don’t need it, therefore yes, I would like you to have it. Let it serve you well.”

I took it from her, my hand trembling like a child’s. “Lilith, I don’t know what to say.”

She folded her arms at her chest, and through the pleating in her robe I could see her weight shifting onto one hip. “You can start by saying good bye.”

I stood, resisting the urge to hug the shit out of her. “No. I can start by thanking you, which I will. Thank you, Lilith. Thank you for everything.”

I started for the door, clutching my newfound confidence with humility. I could feel her presence following me closely and stopping just a split second before I did. I turned to her and asked, “Do I have to do anything to make it work?”

She laughed. “No, Detective. It works all by itself. You just slip it into your pocket and forget about it.”

“Great. I can’t think of how to thank you enough.”

She opened the door and showed me out. “Oh, you will,” she said, and before I could give that any thought, she shut the door on my heels.

I skimmed down her walkway on a strip of air, feeling suddenly invincible and ready to take on the world. Carlos had gotten out of the car to take up a defensive position against the enemy gnome, whom almost certainly had crafted an ingenious plan of attack and was about to launch it as I came out the door. I tapped Carlos on the shoulder and pointed to the car.

“You getting in or should I ask the gnome to drive?” I saw him shake his fist at the little puck before climbing in behind the wheel.

“So, how’s Lilith?” he asked.

“Fine,” I said, “up to her old witchcraft stuff.”

“Oh?” He started the car and pulled out of the drive.

“Yeah, she asked me for the witch’s ladder again. Said it’s been a year and a day since she made it, and now she needs it back for some rite of passage thing.”

“A rite?”

“Oh, she’s got candles and incenses burning all over the house for some big ceremonial shindig or something tonight.”

“You mean, like a party?”

I laughed. “Right, a party at Lilith’s. That’ll be the day.”

“What? She seems like a fun girl. Maybe you just have to get to know her.”

“Get to know Lilith? That’s an oxymoron. If you looked up enigmatic perplexity in the dictionary it would probably say, see Lilith.”

“You’re being harsh.”

“Am I? You think you know her better than I do?”

“No, I’m only saying, I bet when she lets her hair down that she’s a real gas at parties.”

I sat back and thought about it as he drove. I had seen Lilith smile once or twice—even laugh on an occasion, I think. But a real gas at parties? Maybe if she drank. Although it seemed to me that a drunken Lilith could pose some big problems if she ever got really pissed at a party. I looked to Carlos and asked him, “Would you ever go to a party with Lilith if she were drinking?”

“Hell, yes!” he said, and the smile on his face told me he had thought about it before. “Are you kidding me?”

I knew then exactly what it was that set him and me apart. In this world, there are two kinds of people: those who take the bull by the horns and ride it wild, and those who stand on the sidelines and watch. All my life I thought that I was the bull rider, solving crimes, taking down felons and thugs and making the world a better place for everyone, street-by-street.

But at that moment, I realized the truth: that I had spent my entire career in the shadows of

the man I wished I was, and that I wasn't some take-charge daredevil knight in shining armor. I had exhausted my potential, steering from the backseat of faded aspirations.

It's the reason I never became Captain. I realized then that I wasn't the bull rider at all, and worse, that I had only lived my life vicariously through bull riders like Lilith and Carlos.

I closed my eyes and a river of memories flooded my brain. I wondered, had I not reaped a lifetime of gratification from those memories regardless? That I had nothing more to show for my life's work didn't make it any less rewarding. Did it?

I slipped my hand into my pocket and felt the obsidian. Upon its touch, I made a wish that I might start my life over, that I might know then what I know now. I prayed that the powers of witchcraft bestowed on the granitic glass through Lilith's spell might somehow bend to my will if only I believed hard enough. However, when I opened my eyes again, I was still just an old man with a heavy heart, filled with the regrets of a bystander watching the bull riders take on the world.

Fourteen

The drive across town, for the most part, fell silent. Carlos tried to pry some chitchat from me, but I wasn't much of a conversationalist. He probably assumed my thoughts were wrapped in contemplation. I get quiet sometimes when I'm working the details of a case out in my mind. His courtesy in that respect lent me time to shelf my self-pity, if only long enough to focus again on our business at hand.

We headed for Rivera's home by way of the HP&P building. I hoped to see the lights still burning up on the fourteenth floor. I thought if we could catch Ricardo working late at his office, then he'd have a harder time closing the door on our faces. Unfortunately, our luck ran sour and we saw only security and hallway lights keeping the place lit. I instructed Carlos to turn south on Lexington. That's when Spinelli rang me on the cell.

"Detective, I have good news and bad news," he said.

"Let's hear it."

"This flash drive you found at Karen Webber's?"

"Yes."

"It's got tons of information stored on it."

"Okay. I'm guessing that's the good news."

"It is."

"What's the bad news?"

"It's all encrypted."

"Can you decode it?"

He hesitated, which made me think I asked a silly question. "Sir, the program uses an encryption key length of 128-bits. If I could decode it, do you think I would have any bad news?"

Nice, I thought, I'm talking to a little Carlos Rodriguez now. "Spinelli, we have to know what's on that flash drive. Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Maybe," he said, and I thought I heard a glimmer of hope in his voice. "Karen did use the encryption program here at the office. If you had any clue as to what password she might have used, then..."

"What kind of password?"

I could almost see him shrug. "I don't know, anything: a series of numbers or letters or a combination of numbers and letters. It could even be a string of Wingdings."

Okay, now I thought he was putting me on. Carlos started mumbling something about the way the guy ahead of us was driving. I switched the phone to my left ear to block him out. That's when I set my right hand down on my lap and felt the obsidian stone in my pocket. At once, the eye of the witch inspired me. "Spinelli," I said. "Did you try all the names she might have used?"

He answered, "Yes, I already tried that. It's not Karen or Webber or Karen Webber or..."

"Did you try Travis?"

"Shit! No."

"Try it."

I heard the tapping of a keyboard and then, "That's it! I'm in! Wow, look at all this stuff. Detective, this is going to take some time to sift through. How 'bout I call you back when I find something worthwhile?"

“You do that,” I said, and hung up. I turned to Carlos. “You know, that kid has promise.”

Carlos smiled. “I did hand pick him.”

“Did you?” I said, teasing. “That’s funny, because Spinelli told me he picked you.”

He winced. “Same thing.”

I laughed at that. He signaled right onto Roosevelt and settled into the left lane. I kept my hand over the obsidian in my pocket and gazed out the window, encouraged by our apparent turn of fortunes.

We arrived at Rivera’s place about fifteen minutes later. Gone was the element of surprise when we realized that Rivera would have to buzz us in at the gate before we could drive up to the house.

Assuming his involvement in the case extended beyond simple association, I expected him to turn us away without argument. However, by detaining his younger brother for questioning earlier, we had struck a custodial nerve in him, one he could not easily dismiss. So, not only did he buzz us in at the gate unchallenged, but he also came out and stood on the front steps with arms folded at his chest, waiting for us to roll up the drive.

Carlos and I barely stepped out of the car when he started in about Benjamin, letting us have it with both barrels. I held my hand up and shut him down in mid-sentence.

“We’ll get to your questions soon enough,” I told him, “but first we need a few answers of our own. Now, we can stand out here all night so your neighbors can hear all about it, or we can go inside and discuss this rationally.”

Carlos nudged me with his elbow and threw a subtle gaze out over our shoulders. I knew he meant for me to see that Rivera had no neighbors, but by then Rivera had turned and started indoors. We followed without invitation.

Inside, we passed through the formal foyer and beyond that, the grand staircase that led to the second floor by way of a mid-landing, which split off into two directions, one for each wing of the house. We gathered in the library, which featured a gothic-looking fireplace on one wall and three large mullioned framed windows overlooking a garden on the other. Rivera pointed to two of four leathered chairs grouped in a semi-circle by the fire.

“Sit,” he said, and almost as an afterthought so that it didn’t sound like an order, he added, “Please.”

We did, and as he joined us I asked him, “Where were you, Mister Rivera, around four-thirty this afternoon?”

“In my office, working,” he replied.

“Your brother called you from the police station. Your answering service took the call.”

“So, I stepped out.”

“I bet you did. You went to the train station to pick up Gregory Piakowski, didn’t you?”

“No.”

“I think you did. And may I remind you, as a lawyer I’m sure you’re aware that obstructing an active police investigation is a serious offence, punishable by law.”

“You’re not an active duty police officer.”

“But I am,” said Carlos. “And I’m just about a half-step away from hauling you in.”

Rivera’s face remained unchanged. His courtroom expressions varied little from the moment he let us into his home until then. But I knew from the tiny beads of sweat forming over his upper lip that he was lying. I leaned forward in my chair, hands folded, elbows flat against my knees.

“Mister Rivera. If you have something to hide, then I don’t blame you for lying, in fact, I would recommend that you ask us to leave your home this minute.”

“What, you’re giving *me* legal advice now?”

“Not at all. What I’m saying is that if you have nothing to hide and have broken no laws, then I suggest you tell us what we want to know. After all, I can only imagine how a prolonged, over-

sensationalized murder trial might play out in the press, and what that might do to your chances of making full partnership at the firm.”

“Murder?” he said, as if he hadn’t heard that one before. “You just try and drag me through that dog and pony show, Detective. I’ll have the State Attorney’s office and Internal Affairs on your ass so fast you won’t be able to sit without first needing to fill out a request form and submitting it in triplicates.”

“Is that right?”

“Believe me.”

“Very well, then.” I stood up and motioned for Carlos to do the same. “I guess we’ll get out of your hair now. When the DA’s office phones you....”

“Wait,” he said, and I knew I had called his bluff. “Just a minute.” He pointed to the chairs. “Let’s start over. I have nothing to hide.”

I looked at Carlos and gave him the nod. We reclaimed our seats. “Mister Rivera. How about the truth, now?”

He took a deep breath and let it out skyward. “Yes. It’s simple, really. I don’t know why everything gets blown out of proportion so easily. So, okay, fine. I went to the train station to pick up Gregory. He called me in a panic, said he was standing next to some woman on the platform, talking to her, and the next thing he knew, she stepped off the edge right into the path of the oncoming train.

“The scene was horrific, as you might imagine, people screaming, running helter-skelter. A cop working the platform at the time moved in quickly and sealed off the stairwell to the street. Within minutes, more cops arrived and began taking statements. Greg was worried because he gave his real name. Naturally, the trains stopped running, so he called me and asked me to give him a ride to the bus station.”

“Where did he go from there?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Mister Rivera....”

“I swear he didn’t. I guess he figured it best if I didn’t know.”

“But you figure he left town.”

“Detective, he got on a bus. What do you think?”

I looked at Carlos and delivered the old high brow. He smiled back, as if to say, *he’s got you there*. I said to Rivera, “You know, innocent men don’t run. At this point, things don’t look so good for your boy, Piakowski.”

He shrugged. “Maybe not, but Greg is innocent. That woman at the train station, she killed herself. You have fifty people who will testify to that.”

“Forty-nine,” I said, “without Piakowski here to tell his side.” I reached across the coffee table and picked up a pack of smokes lying there. “These yours?”

He nodded.

“You smoke Marlboros?”

He reached over and took them from me. “Is that so strange?”

“We found Marlboro butts up in the attic over Karen Webber’s apartment. It looked like someone had been hanging out up there for a while, and not so long ago.”

He pulled a smoke from the pack and lit it with a cigarette lighter that looked so much like a real gun that Carlos went for his shoulder weapon. Rivera took a drag, coughed a little and then forced another to show that he could do it. A white-blue fog steamed through his nostrils like chimney smoke and hung in a cloud around his face before dissipating thinly over his head.

“I see,” he said, nearly choking. “So, because I smoke Marlboros, now I killed Karen Webber. Is that it?”

“Did you?”

“Detective, the last time we talked, you accused me of killing Bridget Dean and Anna

Davalos. Did you find Marlboro butts in their attics, too?"

I laughed. "No, but we did learn that it's possible those women were not alone when they died."

"Bridget Dean was alone. You've seen the video, no doubt."

"We saw *a* video, yes, but it still remains unproven whether or not the time and date stamp on it had been altered."

Rivera snuffed his smoke out in an ashtray before slanting against the back of his chair. "Detective, help me understand something. You came here this evening with questions about Greg Piakowski. I'm assuming it's because you think he had something to do with that woman's death at the train station. He told me how you harassed him at the cemetery and that you think he also played a role in Karen Webber's death."

"We're looking into all possibilities," I said.

"Yes, but now you're insinuating I had a part in Karen Webber's death, as well. Do you think we both killed her?"

"I think that's possible."

"Do you?"

"Mister Rivera, let me paint a picture for you that I believe a jury might find interesting."

He waved his hand graciously, as if presenting an open floor. "Please."

"The picture starts with you fuming over Bridget Dean's promotion. You were resentful over her relationship with Mister Petruzelli, and maybe you were angry over other things as well, the likes of which my associate here suggested earlier in your office. It's conceivable that any one or all of those things drove you to kill Bridget Dean."

"That is fanciful, Detective. Your imagination astounds me."

"Does it?"

"Yes, because if you check the records, you'll see that I was in Boston attending a conference with Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli at the time of Bridget Dean's death. So, for me to have killed her would take the talents of a magician. Would it not?"

"Perhaps, or maybe just the help of an old friend."

"Piakowski?"

"Of course. If you wanted Bridget Dean dead, then Piakowski might offer his help only too gladly."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because he owed you big for getting his life sentence in a murder conviction overturned."

Rivera laughed. "That's rich, Detective. You should write a book."

"You know I might. And in it, I'll tell how you were so proud of your accomplishment that you went and bragged about it to Courtney Lusk."

"A simple waitress?"

"Waitress, lover, we won't split hairs. Maybe you had a little too much to drink one night, got a bit too chatty during a pillow talk session. Maybe she even helped you set the thing up. It doesn't matter, but it's likely that she knew. And, of course, Courtney is no slouch. She knows how to take advantage of life's little opportunities when they come along. So what does she do?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me."

"Ms. Courtney, not being one for dealing lightly with her competition, blackmails you into killing her rival, Anna Davalos."

Rivera pressed forward in his chair. "That's crazy. Why would I kill Anna? If Courtney held a secret like that over my head, then why wouldn't I kill her, instead?"

"Because she's Piakowski's sister?" I said. Rivera faded back into his seat like a shadow. "Right, you didn't know I knew that. So, here's where it gets interesting. While all of this is going on, Karen Webber begins investigating Bridget's and Anna's alleged suicides. She starts asking all the right questions and poking around in all the right places. So, what's a hot-shot

lawyer do about that?"

Rivera rolled his eyes with convincing disdain. "Let me guess. Kill her?"

I pointed at him and smiled. "Hey, you're getting good at this. But to get close enough to kill her, you had to bait her with a handsome love interest first. So, you introduced her to Gregory Piakowski."

"That was his idea. He only wanted to date her. That's all."

I shrugged indifferently. "The jury won't care. What they will care about are the cigarette butts we found in the crawlspace of her attic with his DNA on them." I pointed to the pack of smokes on the coffee table. "Or your DNA, either way, once the method is established, it's a short step to explaining how Anna Davalos really died."

Rivera clapped his hands slowly in mock applause. "Wonderful, Detective, simply inspiring. You know, a closing argument like that could actually win a good prosecutor his case in court."

"I don't doubt it," I said.

"Except that it would take one hell of a good prosecutor to convince a jury it happened that way when all he's got for evidence is a few cigarette butts and...oh, wait. That's right. That's all he's got is a few cigarette butts. You'll need to do better than that."

"We only need to show reasonable guilt," I said.

"Not in a murder case, Colombo. With murder, the substantial burden is on you. To get an acquittal, all I need to show is reasonable doubt, and your medical examiner has already provided that."

"We'll see."

"Yes, we will," he snipped. "But now let me ask you something."

I granted acceptance with a simple gesture.

"If you're so hell bent of pinning these supposed murders on Greg and me, then why did you haul my little brother downtown and harass him like a common thug?"

"We didn't haul him down to harass him. We had a misunderstanding."

"What, his stuttering too difficult to decipher?"

"No. One of our detectives interpreted a comment he made as a confession, which, under the circumstances, seemed justifiable."

"Under what circumstances, intimidation and hot lights? Did he have legal council present?"

"He waived council after calling you and finding that you were busy helping a fugitive escape justice."

"You should have assigned council for him. You knew of his special circumstances."

"Yes, which brings us to something else. Did you know that your brother suffers from MPD?"

"No, he doesn't. He might have an imaginary friend, but—"

"We've seen it." I turned to Carlos, who nodded in agreement. "He has a dual personality, an alter-ego named Leo."

"Leo?" Rivera laughed in that condescending way of his that I learned to hate. "Detective, Leo is Benny's twin brother who passed away when they were just kids."

"Twin?"

"Yes, identical. He died years ago. They were only boys when it happened."

"When what happened?"

Rivera leaned back into the leather folds of his chair, crossing his legs and arms at the same time. I saw his eyes drift off into the corner of the room as his hand stroked against the whiskered shadow below his chin.

"We don't know what happened, exactly," he said. "I have to tell you that from birth, Benny was always a little...special. During his delivery, there were complications. Benny came out first, and while the doctor was busy delivering Leo, Benny stopped breathing. Someone noticed it eventually, but it had been a few minutes, and by the time they got him breathing again,

well....” He trailed off briefly.

“But he did okay,” he returned, “and Leo was a good brother, looking out for Benny, helping him in situations where brothers can help, you know.

“Then things began to change around the time the boys turned seven. Leo became disorderly, over-rambunctious. I guess that today you’d call it Attention Deficit Disorder. Only Leo had it bad, and you didn’t dope kids up for things like that back then. It seemed he loved to get into trouble, and worse, he loved getting Benny in trouble, too. He knew that Benny was slow and would do anything he told him to do. So, it came as no surprise one day when Leo decided that he and Benny should climb to the top of the water tower downtown and throw stones down onto parked cars.”

“Wait. This happened when they were only seven?” I asked.

“No, no. This occurred when they were nine. Leo had been bullying his brother for awhile by then.”

“I see.”

“So on that day, the two boys climbed the tower and began pitching stones over the side. What happened next is unclear. The only witness was a homeless man that lived in a cardboard box under the Lexington Street Bridge. He told police he saw the boys fighting on top of the tower, and that it looked like one of them tried to toss the other over the edge. Naturally, we figured they were foolishly engaged in horseplay. Either way, Benny would never speak of it, and in short time we decided it was best for his sake not to press him about it.”

I edged up to the front of my seat, captivated by Rivera’s story. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Carlos on the edge of his seat, too, taking notes on his notepad. I said to Rivera, “You’re telling us that Leo went over the side of the tower?”

“They were on top,” he said. “You have to picture it. The water tower is dome-shaped. When Leo fell, he didn’t just go sailing over the side. He fell and slid down the dome a ways until he snagged onto a rivet or something, which caught his fall. But he slipped far enough down the curvature of the dome that Benny couldn’t reach him.”

“So, he was safe,” I said, “relatively speaking.”

“If he held on, yes.”

“He couldn’t?”

“Couldn’t, or wouldn’t,” Rivera answered. “According to the homeless man, Benny got down on his belly and tried to pull Leo back up, but his reach wasn’t long enough. Then, and this is what the homeless man said, there’s no other account of it, something strange happened.”

“What?” Carlos and I said at once.

Rivera glanced alternately into Carlos’ eyes and mine. “Benny stood up, looked down at his brother and spread his arms wide. Then Leo raised his hand, pointed and then shot Benny in the chest.”

“With what?”

“His finger.”

“That makes no sense.”

“I know. It’s the account of a drunken homeless man. What do you want? But that’s what he said happened. He said Leo pointed his finger at Benny, and a white light shot out, hitting him in the chest. Benny fell back, landing on his butt and then Leo.... Leo just sort of slipped off the side of the tower, as though he had fallen asleep.”

“You mean he gave up?”

“I mean he simply eased off the side without a fight. He didn’t try grabbing at anything. He didn’t flag his arms, or scream or nothing. He just slid off the tower like dead weight.”

Carlos dropped his pen and notepad to the floor and uttered, “OBE.” The same thought crossed my mind, but I managed to suppress the urge to gasp it aloud.

Rivera said to him, “Excuse me?”

“What happened then?” I asked. “Did Benjamin start acting strange after that?”

“Strange? Detective, the kid had just lost his brother right before his eyes. What behavior do you consider strange after a thing like that?”

I acknowledge the validity of his question with a nod. “Let me rephrase that. Did strange things begin happening after that?”

“Do you mean is that when Ben starting talking to his imaginary friend?”

“Yes, something like that.”

“Detective, in my mind, Benny has always been strange. When he was eleven, he told me he could tickle people from the inside. Now what the hell is that supposed to mean? Around that same time my father brought him to an institute where they studied supposed paranormal attributes and other anomalies of the human psyche in people.”

“Was that in Doctor Lowell’s studies?”

“Yes. Do you believe it? They thought my brother was some kind of freak.”

“Mister Rivera,” I said. “The participants in those studies were not freaks.”

“I know one who was.”

“Are you talking about Bridget Dean?”

“No. Why? Was she in Benny’s group?”

“Yes, and so was Ana Davalos and Karen Webber.”

“What?”

“You didn’t know?”

“No.”

“Really? It’s funny Benjamin never mentioned it. Kind of puts a whole new spin on things, doesn’t it?”

He shook his head. “Makes no difference to me. As far as I’m concerned, it’s just coincidence.”

“Coincidence? Do you suppose it’s also a coincidence that the woman who stepped off the train platform today was also in Benjamin’s group?”

Rivera’s face fell into a droop. It was difficult to tell if the look he gave was genuine or not. He seemed truly surprised by the news and not just a little upset. But a good actor can pull that off, and I had seen my share of good actors in this business. I looked at Carlos to gauge his reaction to Rivera’s performance, and he, too, seemed nearly convinced. Rivera collected his thoughts and sorted them out before us, as methodically as anyone possibly could under the circumstances.

“Detective Marcella,” he said, unfolding his arms and uncrossing his legs. “What you’re telling me doesn’t make sense. The implications here are more than suggestive. They’re downright overwhelming.”

“Excuse me?”

“Come on! You haven’t a case against me, and you know it. The very fact that all four of those women were associated with Doctor Lowell’s studies casts not a reasonable doubt, but an overwhelming doubt that Piakowski or I had anything to do with their deaths at all.”

“Not so,” I countered. “That they were all associated with the studies at one time doesn’t take away from the fact that you and Piakowski, together, had a motive, means and opportunity to kill three of the four women. And that Piakowski stood right next to the fourth victim when she died, regardless of her associations to the other three, makes him suspect by proximity. I trust that if I dig further I’ll find a valid connection between Carol Kessler and one or all three of the other women that does not concern Doctor Lowell’s institute.”

“Do you want to bet?” he said, almost daring me.

“I’m willing,” I replied, quickly. “Are you?”

He stood up and settled a look upon me like my welcome had worn thin. I reached over and tapped Carlos on the knee. We stood up and I extended my hand out of respect. Rivera shook it

loosely. It felt cold and wet from perspiration. I saw Carlos began to reach as he rose, but seeing me wipe my hand discreetly on my trousers, he feathered the move to make it look like he lost his balance and was merely regaining his footing. Afterward, he preoccupied his hands by patting down his pockets in search of his car keys while finding just the right place to stash his notepad and pen. Rivera's impatience quickly dismissed him. He turned and ushered us to the door on heavy heels.

"I'm growing tired of your visits, Detective," Rivera said, as we stepped outside. "Your manners of illations are crude and transparent. Should you feel it necessary to interrogate me again on this or any other matter, I suggest you stop by a judge's chamber and secure a warrant for my arrest first."

I looked him in the eye and smiled coldly. "I can arrange that."

His smile came back, colder. "Do, and I'll slap a lawsuit on you and this city so fast it will make your jaw drop." He leaned around me to steal a glimpse at Carlos. "You got that shinny new justice center paid for yet, Rodriquez?"

I looked over my shoulder at Carlos, knowing inside that all he could think about was the precinct's budget for the DNA lab next year, and how a frivolous false-arrest lawsuit might jeopardize that. But Carlos maintained a level head. He stepped partially around me and kept his voice low and deliberate.

"Don't you worry about that, Rivera," he said, jabbing his finger in the air to make a point. "When we come to get you, we won't need a damn warrant, and you'll see then how that new justice center will pay for its self."

"Yes," Rivera replied, almost under his breath. "We'll see." He returned to the house with no valedictions. After the door shut I tapped Carlos on the chest and grinned at him proudly.

"Nice comeback with that justice center remark. Did you learn that from me?"

"Nah, just the part where I said, damn."

"Damn?"

"Yeah."

"All those years we worked together, and that's all you learned from me?"

"Ah-huh, that and how to eat on the fly because you never want to stop for a bite."

"You mean like that hamburger and fries you had earlier tonight?"

"Yeah, that's right. Hey, how did you—"

"Forget it. Look, why don't we move the car over there, out of sight, and watch the house for a while?"

"Watch for what?"

"Piakowski. I think he's still here."

"Because of the cigarettes?"

"You noticed, too?"

"That Rivera is obviously not a smoker? Yes."

"They're Piakowski's brand."

"They're also Benjamin's brand...or is it Leo's?"

"Doesn't matter. Come on."

We moved the car around the bend in the driveway, which put it just out of sight from the house. Then we got out and took up positions on the garden side of the house, outside the library's three large windows. From there, we could see Rivera on the phone, having what looked like a heated discussion involving lots of hand gestures and arm waving. On occasions, both Carlos and I heard Greg's name used, which we took to mean Piakowski, though whether talking to him or about him, we couldn't say definitively.

I tapped Carlos on the shoulder and said in a whisper, "What do you make of it?"

"My gut says he's talking to Piakowski."

"Yeah, mine, too."

“So, he lied to us.”

“Not necessarily,” I said, and then ducked when I thought I saw Rivera look toward the window. “We asked him if he knew where Piakowski went, not if he knew how to get a hold of him.”

Carlos shook his head. “Dirty stinking lawyers.”

“Uh-ah, Carlos. Not all lawyers are bad.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Some are dead.”

I ignored the comment, though I wanted to remind him that some of our best friends were lawyers. “Carlos, what do you think about the story Rivera told us?”

“About Benjamin and his twin brother?”

“Yes.”

“Freaky, ain’t it?”

“I heard you say, OBE when you dropped your pen and notepad. Do you think that’s what happened?”

He smiled slyly, as though I had asked him a trick question. “Think what happened?”

“You know. Do you think—”

We both jumped when my phone rang. I yanked it from my pocket on the second ring and answered it, thankful and amazed that Rivera had not heard it. Carlos blinked at me with owl’s eyes, too surprised to hit me for the oversight that would have undoubtedly cost him a shot to the arm if it happened to him.

“Yes,” I said, in a whisper. “What is it?”

“Detective Marcella? Is that you? It’s Dominic.”

“I know that, Spinelli. What do you have?”

“Lots. It’s almost too much to sift through in one night. But I wanted to call you with what I found so far.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“First off, there are lots of pictures. Most of them are of Rivera and Piakowski, but some here are of Benjamin and Courtney, too.”

“You mean, together?”

“Yes, together, and close.”

“Romantically close?”

“Yeah, if you call hugging and kissing with hands on each other’s rear ends close.”

I pulled the phone away from my ear and whispered the details to Carlos. His jaw dropped like a trap door and stayed that way until I gave him his next update.

“Nice work, Spinelli. What else you got?”

“More pictures,” he said, “and you’ll never guess who.”

I took a stab at it. “Lilith?”

“No. Leona Diaz.”

“Leona? Why her?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is Benjamin in the photos with her?”

“Some, all innocuous, though, and the rest are of her alone.”

“Interesting,” I said, and with that, Carlos perked up, demanding to know what I heard. I pulled the phone from my ear and covered the mouthpiece again. “Spinelli’s got pictures of Leona and Benjamin making out in the coffee shop,” I told him. It was all I could do not to laugh. He settled back with those owl’s eyes and gated mouth. I put the phone back to my ear and heard Spinelli rambling on about documents and research papers and whatnot. “Whoa, Spinelli. I’m sorry. I didn’t catch that. Carlos distracted me. Start over.”

“The bulk of the documents,” he said, “are mostly research papers about out-of-body experiences and episodes of spontaneous bilocation. They suggest that autistic savants possess

the ability to control the metaphysical disposition of the soul at will.”

I shook my head at that, leaving Carlos to believe I heard more of the juicy dirt on Leona. “Spinelli, in English. What does all that mean in English?”

“It means that Karen Webber must have given real credence to the possibility that Bridget Dean and Ana Davalos met their deaths through supernatural manifestations.”

“You saying she believed that a non-psychical entity directly influenced the actions of those women, forcing them to commit suicide?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“It certainly supports the idea we’ve been kicking around about OBE.”

“Except that Karen’s surveillance pictures suggest she didn’t just narrow her list of OBE candidates down to Benjamin. Because of Leona’s ability to bilocate, it earned her a spot on that list, too.”

“I know, but I don’t for a minute believe Leona had anything to do with it.”

“Regardless, it’s a theory Karen considered strong enough to follow to the end.”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t rule out the more obvious explanations altogether. Karen had no other way of looking at it. She didn’t know about the attic access to Ana’s room, or the possible video tampering of the Dean tapes. She may have been looking at this case through only a peephole.”

“It does make you think.”

“Sure does. So, what else you got?”

“That’s it for now, except that Karen did a ton of research on nearly everyone in the HP&P circle. I’ve already pored over documents that suggest the principals, Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli had no involvement in this mess whatsoever—if that helps.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” I said. “We already have so many players in this game, I need a scorecard to keep track.”

“I’ll let you know if I find anything else.”

“Wait, Spinelli, let me ask you something. You’re an expert in the supernatural, right?”

“I wouldn’t say expert...aficionado maybe.”

“Close enough. Look, have you ever heard of one person co-possessing the body of another?” He paused so long I thought I lost the phone connection. “Spinelli? You there?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“What do you think?”

“Excuse me, Detective, but I thought that’s the theory we were working on. Maybe I don’t understand your question.”

“It’s not that far of a stretch. I mean, we’re working on a theory that someone momentarily influenced Karen and the others through a non-psychical state of being. But I’m talking about permanent cohabitation: two souls actively occupying and directing the actions of a single individual alternately.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Is it possible?”

“I suppose, if one believes in bilocation then, as you say, it’s not such a stretch from there to a permanent metaphysical co-possession.”

“That’s what I think.”

“Is this about Benjamin Rivera?”

“Yes.”

“I thought he was suffering from Multiple Personality Disorder.”

“He may be, but I’m looking at it from another angle. Did you know that Benjamin had a twin brother who died when they were only nine?”

“No.”

“Neither did we until a few minutes ago. But Ricardo Rivera told us that Benjamin’s twin brother, Leo, died in a fall from a water tower. An eyewitness told police he saw something

strange take place between Benjamin and Leo moments before the accident. What he described, in my mind, sounds like Leo's spirit moving into his brother's body. Only now that I've talked to you, I suspect the opposite is true. I think that Benjamin fell from the tower, but before going over, he hijacked Leo's body through spontaneous bilocation."

"So, Benjamin is really Leo?"

"No. Benjamin is Benjamin. He just shares Leo's body."

"And what we saw today in the interrogation room, was that Leo trying to regain dominance over his own body?"

"That's what I'm thinking."

I heard him sigh. "That poor bastard."

"Hold your pity," I told him. "From what I hear, if it's Benjamin who's killing these women, then it's Leo telling him to do it."

"Wow. That's heavy. Okay, I suppose I should get back on this computer and see what else I can find out for you."

"Please," I said. "This case could use a break about now. Call me if you learn anything."

I hung up and pocketed the phone. Carlos already had me by the coat sleeve, eager for more details. I hated to burst his bubble, but for Leona's good name, I had to tell him the truth.

"Carlos, before you start, let me tell you that Spinelli doesn't have pictures of Leona and Benjamin making out at the coffee shop."

He let go of my arm and backed away a half step. I could see by the expression on his face that he wanted me to believe I insulted him, but I know Carlos, and no matter how hard he tries, he can't hide his disappointment from me.

"That's not what I was going to ask you," he said.

"But Spinelli did say the photos of Benjamin and Courtney making out were hot."

"Really?" His expression lightened considerably. "How hot?"

"Scorching."

"Did he print them out?"

"Carlos!"

"For evidence, Tony, evidence."

"Sure."

"So, what did he say when you asked him about that two guys in a body thing?"

"He calls it permanent metaphysical co-possession, and he believes it's possible."

"Me, too. I think that's what happened. The good twin took over the bad twin's body, but now the bad twin is making the good twin do bad things. Right?"

"You're asking me?"

"Well, you always have all the answers. That's why I called you."

I reeled back in dismay. He did expect me to have all the answers. Only now it seemed like all I had was questions. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the obsidian charm. "Here." I handed it to Carlos. "Tell me what you think."

He took it and held it to the dim light spilling through the library window. "What is it?"

"It's the eye of the witch. Lilith gave it to me. She promised it would provide me with the insight and discretion of a witch much wiser than my years."

"Does it work?"

"I'm not sure. I think I'm getting mixed results. It helped me come up with a password for Spinelli to use on that flash drive, but as for the big question, I don't know. One minute I feel certain that Rivera and Piakowski are responsible for the deaths of those women, and the next, I'm inclined to believe that Benjamin is the culprit."

"Don't you mean, Benjamin and Leo?"

"I suppose."

"Or Benjalo?"

“Funny.”

“Benlo.”

“Whatever.”

“Ben-a-le-o-le-o.”

“Carlos!”

“Sorry.”

“Tell me what you think when you hold the charm and concentrate.”

“On what?”

“I don’t know, on anything. Open your mind.”

He closed his eyes and clenched the obsidian tightly in his fist. At first, nothing much happened, but then he rocked his head back and began to sway from side-to-side. His nostrils flared and a slight hissing sound parted his lips.

Nothing like that happened to me in the short time I possessed the charm, but then I hadn’t employed it in the same way Carlos did. I believed that whatever was happening to him could easily get out of hand, given where we were standing at the time. So, I resolved to slap him out of it if he went any further than simple swaying and hissing. About the time I really began to worry, however, Carlos snapped to and opened his eyes fully.

“What?” I said, holding his arm steady. “What did you see?”

He looked at me uncertain, and for a moment, I suspected he didn’t even know who I was. Then a breath of confidence washed over him and he smiled broadly. “Lilith,” he said.

I shook him. “What about Lilith?”

“That’s what I saw.”

“You saw Lilith?”

“Yup.”

“What was she doing?”

His expression fell into one of deep concentration. “You know, I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Think! What was she doing?”

His expression deepened. I could tell he was trying. God love him for that, but he just couldn’t plug the lamp into the socket. He looked at me sheepishly, his big brown eyes hooded below anguished brows. “I’m Sorry, Tony,” and I believed he was. “That’s all I got.”

I grabbed his wrist and snatched the obsidian from his hand. “Forget it. You tried.” I pointed up at the window. Rivera left the room sometime during our conversation. Not that it mattered anymore. We only hung around in hopes of catching Piakowski there. If Rivera had been talking to Piakowski on the phone, then it seemed safe to say that our stakeout was pointless. “We’re wasting our time here, I told him. “What do you say we get rolling?”

Fifteen

We left Rivera's place and were heading back to the justice center when my phone rang again.

"Spinelli," I said. "Tell me you have something."

He answered, "I might. How does this fit into your facts-for-fun book?"

"Wait a minute. Let me put you on speaker." I held the phone up to the map light and pressed the speaker button so that Carlos could listen, too. "All right. Let's hear it."

We heard nothing.

"Spinelli? You there? Spin—"

The phone rang again. I pushed the answer button and heard Spinelli say, "Don't hang up."

"I didn't hang up on you. You hung up on me."

I looked at Carlos, who tried hard not to laugh at something that obviously wasn't funny. "Just say you did," he told Spinelli. "Remember what we talked about."

"What?" I asked. "What did you two talk about?"

Spinelli came back. "Sorry 'bout that, Detective. I must have hit the wrong button."

"Are you patronizing me?"

"Dominic," said Carlos. "What have you got?"

I thought I heard Spinelli cover the phone and laugh. It took him a few seconds to come back with a voice that sounded suspiciously tweaked. "Right. I have an interesting tidbit. It seems that Karen made notes regarding the exact ages of the victims at the time of their deaths. For instance, she noted that Bridget Dean died exactly four months and a day from her last birthday. Ana Davalos, three months and a day."

"Coincidence," I said.

"Is it? Well, how about this? Carol Kessler died today at the train station exactly one month and a day from her last birthday."

"Probably another coincidence. Four, three and one month plus a day. The chain is broken. Now, if you were to tell me that Karen Webber's death fell two months and a day past her birthday, then...."

Spinelli remained quiet. I looked at Carlos, a little uneasy. A bead of ice ran through my veins. I held the phone closer. "Spinelli?"

He came back, somber. "There's a definite pattern here, Detective. And the scary thing is that Karen saw it, too, but she didn't seek anyone's help."

"Who would have listened? Before her death, there were only two others, by themselves, not all that coincidental. Take Thomas Jefferson and John Adams for instance: two former presidents, both died on July 4th 1826, exactly fifty years to the day after both signed The Declaration of Independence."

"Yes, but at least there weren't two more dead presidents only a week after those two croaked."

"Still, we shouldn't jump to conclusions," I said. "Not unless the numbers add up funny for anyone else."

"You mean, like Leona?"

"What about Leona?"

"Leona's birthday was yesterday."

I dropped the phone on my lap, inadvertently hanging up on Spinelli. I tried dialing him back in the dim light, but gave up when I realized my fingers were trembling too badly to hit just one

number at a time. Carlos noticed me fumbling with the phone and reached across the seat to stop me.

“Tony, don’t worry about it. Dom will call back.”

“Did you hear what he said?”

“Yes, he said Leona’s birthday was yesterday.”

“Do you know what that means?”

“I know what you’re thinking. Bridget died four months and a day after her birthday, Davalos, three and one: Webber, two and one, and Kessler one and one. Based on that pattern, Leona has none plus one, and then she’s dead.”

“Right. And none plus one is today!”

Carlos shook his head no. “But Leona didn’t attend the workshops with those other women. There’s no reason to believe she’s on that list.”

“Can you say that for sure?”

“No. I can’t even say for sure that there is a list. And if there is, who’s to say the list isn’t hers?”

“It’s not hers!”

“Do you know that for sure?”

Of course, I didn’t, but I wanted to believe I did. I knew that if bilocation was a factor in the deaths of those women, then hardly anyone other than Leona or Benjamin could have committed the crimes. The problem was that I still hadn’t convinced myself that bilocation was a factor.

I turned to Carlos, his eyes gleamed sharp and focused on the road. He didn’t know Leona as I knew her: soft, shy and timid. He knew her only as another student of the vilified Lieberman workshop. Her ability to bilocate made her a suspect in the murders we investigated then. That ability, at least in his mind, cast shadows of suspicion on her still.

“Carlos, let me ask you. Given this new information, who do you think killed those women?”

“I don’t know,” he said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. “If not a case of multiple suicides —”

“Which seems highly improbable.”

“Yes, which seems highly improbable, then I think Benja-Leo did it.”

“You do?”

“Yes. You?”

I took a breath and shook my head, uncommitted. “You know me. I usually go with my gut feelings.”

“But you’re not feeling it, are you?”

“Not with Benjamin. I don’t know why. I know we’ve both seen enough of the paranormal and supernatural to make a connection when we see it. But I keep finding myself coming back to Rivera and Piakowski on this one.”

Carlos gestured a nod, but kept his eyes on the road ahead. Ah-huh, and why do you suppose that is, Tony?”

“Motive,” I said, almost without thinking. “Rivera had it. Benjamin didn’t.”

“Not that you know.”

“How do you mean?”

“Tony, come on. Benny’s got a connection with the women going back almost ten years. There’s no telling what took place back then that might have set him or Leo off. Maybe he hasn’t had the ability to do anything about it until now.”

I found myself surprisingly persuaded by his argument, and once again doubting my own instincts. “You know, you may have something. Ordinarily, I would have to agree that if Rivera killed the women for reasons we discussed earlier, then the staggered timing of their deaths in relation to their birthdays would seem merely coincidental, at best. However, if you add the paranormal element into the mix, then perhaps you do introduce an entirely plausible scenario

that I shouldn't so easily overlook."

"That's what I'm saying. But now are you ready for my other theory?"

"You have another?"

"Yes."

"Let's hear it."

"Well, think about that timing thing again. You notice how the decrements not only diminish by one month at a time, but always by a month and a day?"

"Okay?"

"You remember from the Surgeon Stalker case that the murders relating to the law of contagion occurred on predetermined intervals."

"Based on the lunar cycle, I know. But what do you base the unusual timing on now?"

He looked at me, almost too worried to answer. "You're not going to like this?"

"That's all right. Let's hear it."

I saw him grip the steering wheel and wring his hands around it tightly. "Earlier at Lilith's... what did she say to you about her ceremony tonight?"

"That it was some sort of self-dedication thing, a rite of passage, I think she called it."

"No. I mean, about the witch's ladder. She told you she needed it for her ceremony, but do you remember what she said about it?"

I thought for only a moment, when it hit me. "She said she made it exactly a year and a day ago."

"Ah-huh, a year and a day, and the witch's ladder she needs for that ceremony belonged to Leona?"

"That's right."

"Okay, I'm not saying this is what I think, or anything. But do you suppose that maybe Lilith's ceremony tonight is really about Leona?"

There have been times in prior investigations when I believed I had delineated my case accurately, only to discover later that I had seriously misjudged the scope and intricacies of its details. With Carlos' words, I staggered in the horror of realizing that I had, possibly, not only underestimated the perimeters of the case, but also the bedrock on which the case stood.

"Damn it, Carlos!" I said, tightening my fists in frustration. "Why did you have to go and complicate matters so? I barely had my mind wrapped around things as it was, and now you go and drag Lilith into it."

"Drag Lilith?" he said, his voice pitched high. "Tony, if this is about Lilith, it's not because I dragged her into it. If anything, she dragged us into it."

He looked at me, and I could see his concern for my disposition outlined on his face. I took a deep breath and relaxed my clenched fists, only then realizing how hard I had pierced the skin of my palms. "I know that, Carlos," I said, apologetically. "I don't mean to sound angry with you. I'm angry with myself for not putting the pieces together."

I rubbed my hand on my knee and over the obsidian stone, wondering why that damned eye of the witch wasn't working, why it hadn't let me see things more clearly. That's when it occurred to me. Maybe it was. Maybe Lilith's eye of the witch was working exactly as she intended it to work: to confuse me and throw me off track. I looked out the window and noticed us heading toward town.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Back to the box. Why?"

I shook my head. "No. Take us back to Lilith's. We're not done with her yet."

"You got it."

He hit the brakes and swung the car around. Inside of fifteen minutes we were back in front of Lilith's house, only this time parked at the curb. When asked why he didn't pull up to the house, Carlos explained, "The car has a slight oil leak. I don't want to make a mess on her

driveway.”

I gave him a look as though I believed him. “How considerate.” I opened the door and got out, adding, “I’m sure that old gnome will appreciate it, too.”

I shut the door, and as the dome light blinked out, I heard him declare, “He don’t scare me!”

The walk up to Lilith’s door dogged me like a Trojan mile. I couldn’t accept the thought of her culpability in the murders of Karen and the others, but Carlos’ theory could not go unchallenged. If he was right, and a small part of me deep inside suspected he could be, then Leona had maybe just a few hours left to live.

I planted my heels in front of the door, rolled up my sleeve and gave it a knock. It took Lilith a bit longer to answer this time. I thought perhaps that I had interrupted her in meditation. She was dressed still in the robe she wore earlier, only now she seemed more relaxed, almost detached in spirit from the Lilith I spoke with barely an hour before. She stared at me blankly, as wax from her candle dripped freely down the back of her hand.

“Lilith,” I said, “it’s me, Detective Marcella.”

Her eyes narrowed, and I swear I saw the light of presence fill them like a phantom breeze. A wave of dread struck me nearly off my feet. I staggered back, grabbing onto the doorjamb, praying I hadn’t arrived too late to save Leona.

“I know it’s you,” she snapped, in that usual sarcastic tone. “You think I didn’t see your gumshoe partner pull up in front of my house?”

“We weren’t trying to sneak up on you or anything. Detective Rodriquez felt —”

“Afraid?”

“No. He felt that you wouldn’t appreciate it if he dripped oil on your driveway.”

“Sure, well, you can tell him not to worry. He doesn’t bite.”

“Who?”

She pointed at the gnome out on the front lawn. “Jerome.”

“Oh,” I said, and that was enough of that. “Look, Lilith, do you mind if I have another word with you?”

She rolled her eyes and sighed audibly. “Detective, I’ve already told you that tonight is not good for—”

“I’ll make it quick. I promise. Please. It’s very important.”

Judging from her expression, I expected she would slam the door in my face without further discussion. Instead, she inhaled deeply, and I saw her lips clearly counting to three as she slowly exhaled, though she did not speak the words. When she finished counting, her expression softened considerably. She opened the door fully and stepped aside.

“Come in.”

Knowing the procedure, I walked straight to the kitchen table and sat down. She closed the door and followed, taking a seat directly across from me. I watched her as she tilted a candle, permitting a small puddle of wax to collect on the tabletop. She then planted the butt end of the candle into the wax, allowing it to stand upright.

“Okay, Detective, what is it that couldn’t wait until tomorrow?”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the obsidian charm. “First off, let me give this back to you, because it either doesn’t work, or it works too well. And secondly, I need to ask you this straight out: is there anything you’re not telling me about Karen Webber or the other three women whose deaths I’m investigating?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, Lilith, but I have to know.”

“All right. I see where you’re coming from. Frankly, Detective, I thought we moved past our mistrust issues a long time ago. Apparently, I was wrong.” She reached across the table and snatched the obsidian from my hand. “So, you want the truth?”

“Lilith, don’t play it like that.”

“I’m not playing anything. You asked for it.”

“I asked because I need to know.”

“And you shall.” She got up from the table and walked to the kitchen sink. Above it, a strange looking pincushion doll dangled from a string. I had seen it there before, though with all the unusual knick-knacks laying about the house, I hardly paid it any notice. Appropriate for Lilith, I suppose, the doll looked like your stereotypical old hag witch, sporting a pointy black hat, a long crooked nose and riding a straggly-ended broomstick. She grabbed the witch and snapped it off its string with a clean jerk. She presented it to me by thrusting it nearly in my face.

“Thiss,” she said, over-accentuating the word so that it sounded like a hissing snake, “is my kitchen witch. And thiss,” she held the obsidian stone up, “is the eye of the witch.” She planted the stone on the witch’s face where its eye should have been, but wasn’t. “It’s her eye.”

“I see that,” I said.

“It fell off one day. I kept meaning to glue it back on, but I just never got around to it.”

“So, what? You cast a spell on it and stuck it in a box for a rainy day?”

“No. I just stuck it in a box.”

I laughed, partly at the insanity of the charade and partly because...well, because I really did find it funny. “You set me up. Was that to throw me off track?”

“What? No! I gave you the obsidian because I wanted you to go away, number one, and because I believed it might really help you.”

“How so, if you never cast a spell on it?”

She pitched the kitchen witch over her shoulder and into the sink without looking. “Detective, you of all people should know the power that the mind commands if one simply believes. You came to me because you lacked confidence. You let your self-doubt stand in the way of sound decision making. All I did was try to un-cloud your mind so that you could make reasonable judgments. And from what I saw, it was working when you left here. What happened?”

“Spinelli happened,” I said, “and then Carlos added to it by suggesting that you may have had something to do with the timing of Karen’s death, and of the other women, as well.”

“Carlos?”

“Yes.”

“And Spinelli?”

“Yes.”

She shook her head and took a seat across from me again. “My, my,” she said softly, and I suddenly felt very small. “Man, you’ve got it bad. I never thought I would see the day when the likes of Carlos and Spinelli...” She shook her head again, but trailed off without finishing the thought.

“Lilith, it’s not like that. They’re not leading me through this investigation. Based on the information that has presented itself, I would have come here regardless.”

“And what, accuse me of murder? Detective, I told you this evening how I planned on atoning for my past misdeeds. What would I gain from killing little Miss Guatemala?”

“She’s Honduran. And I don’t know what you or anyone else might gain from killing her. But I have four dead women on my hands and the timing of their deaths suggests that not only might Leona die next, but that her death will likely happen sometime before this night is through.”

She slammed her hand down on the table. “Then why are you wasting your time here?”

I slammed my hand down next to hers, only much harder, causing the candle to sputter hot wax onto both of us. “Because of what you told me!” I answered, nearly shouting. “Why tonight, Lilith?”

“Why what?”

“This!” I swung my arm in a broad sweep across the room. “These candles, your robe, that bizarre incense you’re burning, why? You told me you wanted that witch’s ladder because you

created it a year and a day ago.”

“Yes, so?”

“So, why a day? Why not a year and two days ago, or a year and a week, or a month ago?”

“I don’t know!” Now she was yelling, too. “I don’t make the rules! I only follow them. The coven decrees it and tradition demands it! I have but one opportunity in this cycle to declare myself in the eyes of the ancestral assembly, and tonight, a year and a day from the spell on that witch’s ladder, with or without it, I shall atone, submit and accept the covenants of the order.”

“And you don’t see it. Do you?”

“See what?”

“An hour in a room with all the parties concerned, that’s it, just one hour, and you might tell me what I need to know. But will you? Noooo. Your self-dedication is testimony to your selfishness. You profess your religion as holistic with nature and free of ambivalence, one omnidimensional spiritless bounty of returning energy entwined in the subconscious, beckoning the will to release it.

“But you know what, Lilith? We don’t all subscribe to that theology. For some of us it’s important, regardless of eventuality, to believe in some sort of continuance when we die, and not just that our energy will evaporate into a collective reservoir of kinetic athleticism awaiting recycle in the vacuum of space.”

“Are you done, Detective?”

“No!” I leaned back in my chair, determined to add just one more point, but the momentum escaped me. “Yes. I’m done.”

“Very well.”

She stood, and for a moment I thought she might let me have it, a fork-tongued caustic rebuttal complete with sparks and smoke and maybe even some ground tremors thrown in for good show. She had done that before. Only this time, her response came carefully measured. I suspect it’s because of all the lit candles in the house. A nasty three-alarm fire would have probably put the squelch on any ceremony she planned.

Instead, she carried herself to the door on a thread of air, opened it with a wish and pointed the way so that I might not get lost while leaving.

I got up from my seat, thrilled that I still had two human legs on which to stand, skirted passed her, smiling all the while, and tip-toed out onto the steps. I turned to say goodbye, when the door slammed on my face, the doorknocker bouncing up and hitting my nose for added insult.

As I hoofed it back to the car, minding Jerome from the corner of my eye, Spinelli rang me. Carlos also heard the ring, as well as my side of the brief conversation.

“Yeah, Spinelli, what have you got? Really? Ah-huh. Interesting. Nice work, kid. Thanks.”

I climbed into the car to find Carlos practically in my face. “What did he say? Did he find something else? What’s so interesting?”

“Easy! Down, boy.” I pushed against his chest until he settled back in behind the wheel. “Yes, he found something, all right: on that flash drive. And you’re not going to believe it, but I think Karen was just hours away from busting this case wide open herself.”

“Really? What did he find?”

“He found a list of names identifying all of the attendees from Doctor Lowell’s workshop that first year.”

“Is that so significant?”

“It is.”

“Why?”

“Because, on that list is the last name of someone we have been unable to pin down since this investigation began.”

“Stinky Pete?”

“No. Crazy Eddy.”

“Oh? So, what is his real name?”

I smiled at him teasingly. “You’re not going to believe this.”

Sixteen

The first thing we did after leaving Lilith's was go back to Ricardo Rivera's place. We phoned ahead requesting that he have the gate opened for us when we arrived. Naturally, he resisted, but when I told him we had information concerning his brother, and that his failure to cooperate could endanger his life, he reluctantly obliged.

Carlos pulled up under the canopy at the front entry where Rivera stood waiting with his phone in hand. We barely stepped from the car when he approached us, clearly agitated and probably a little drunk.

"I'm telling you now, Detective," he warned, waving his phone in broad sweeps. "I have Joseph Petruzelli on speed dial, and he knows people in high places. If you continue to harass me—"

"Calm down, Rivera. Nobody's harassing you. All we want is some quick answers and then we'll get out of your hair once and for all."

"You said over the phone you have some information concerning Benjamin."

"We do, and we'll share that with you if you cooperate."

"And then you'll leave here once and for all?"

"Yes, but first we need to know something from you."

He dropped his hands and relaxed his guard. "What do you want?"

"I want you to tell me about Eddy."

"Eddy who?"

"I think you know. He attended Doctor Lowell's workshops with Benjamin."

"Oh, that Eddy."

"Yes, that Eddy. Tell me, why do you keep his secret? What does he have on you that keeps you from telling even your own brother who he is?"

"Detective, I don't see what all this has to do with your investigation."

"You don't. Then let me ask you about Mallory Edwards. Yesterday at your office, you let us know how much you detest her, how you hate the fact that she has a thing for Benjamin. Why is that?"

"It's personal."

"Is it? Or is it because Crazy Edward Mallory and Mallory Edwards are really one and the same?"

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"I think I do. Benjamin attended Doctor Lowell's workshops with Edward Mallory. Since then, Edward has undergone a sex change operation and legally changed his name to Mallory Edwards. Isn't that true?"

"I don't know that."

"Yes you do, because you conducted the mandatory background search on Mallory when Petruzelli hired her. Didn't you?"

Rivera kicked at the gravel by his feet. "All right. So what? I knew about Mallory. Fine, and that's why I hate her. I think she's a disgrace to humanity, a disgusting, vile and repugnant excuse for a living being. I don't like her. I don't like what she stands for and I especially don't like it that she has a thing for my little brother."

"So, why don't you tell your brother who she is?"

"Because he wouldn't understand it, Detective. He needs sheltering from the real world."

“Then why don’t you do something to get Mallory fired from Hartman, Pierce and Petruzelli? You have all the clout you need to make it happen. Unless....” I held my finger up to accentuate the pause.

“Unless what?”

“Oh, I see now. Carlos, are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Carlos smiled. “Yeah. I see. Ricardo and Mallory must have their own little thing going on.”

Rivera confronted Carlos, breasting him toe-to-toe. “That’s a lie! How dare you?”

“Easy,” I said, pushing Rivera back. “You don’t want to get Carlos angry. Trust me.”

“Then tell him to take it back. The only thing Mallory and I have going between us is a mutual hatred for one another.”

“All right. Carlos takes it back.”

“I didn’t hear him say it.”

“He’s the quiet type. Cut him some slack. In the meantime, why don’t you tell us about Benjamin’s money?”

That got his attention. Rivera stepped back and looked at me as though I had just sucker punched him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about Benjamin’s inheritance. You forged documents relating to your father’s will, and then you changed Benjamin’s name as the sole beneficiary to your own.”

“That’s absurd!”

“No, it only sounds absurd if no one else knows about it, which no one does. Oh, but wait. Hey, maybe that’s why you don’t try having Mallory Edwards fired. Maybe Mallory knows because the only person in the world you told was Bridget Dean, and she went and told Mallory.”

“You’re crazy,” said Rivera, “as crazy as that transgender pervert.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then, I take that as a compliment. Seeing that Mallory is crazy enough to keep her job and extort a healthy contribution from you in the process.” I turned to Carlos and said, “Don’t you think so, Carlos? Isn’t that a compliment?”

“That it is,” he said. “Because that Mallory, she’s crazy like a fox.”

I laughed. “Yes, like a fox, or maybe a wolf. After all, she’s just a dog in sheep’s clothing. What else would you call someone who knows a secret about her boss and uses that knowledge for personal gain?”

“A blackmailer?” Carlos offered.

“Yes. That’s a good one.”

“Look, Marcella. You can never prove anything regarding my father’s will, and neither can Mallory. But...” he softened his aggression. “You’re right about one thing. I don’t get her fired because I don’t want her telling Benny something else that she’s found out. He gets confused easily, and I don’t want his feelings getting hurt.”

“That’s understandable,” I said. “But why don’t you tell us the truth. What’s she got on you?”

He looked down at the ground and kicked at the gravel some more. “All right, it’s like this. Benny is not my brother. He’s my son.”

“Oh?”

“I was sixteen, in high school and wild as a boar. I had a girlfriend and we liked to party and drink and...well, you know the drill. Anyway, the girl got pregnant and had twins. I thought our lives were ruined. But my father stepped in and agreed to help us. He said he would raise the boys if we both finished school and went on to college, which we did. We went to college and studied law and then we both became lawyers.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “Bridget Dean is Benny’s mother.”

He nodded. “Yes, and she’s wanted nothing to do with him since the day he was born. All

she's ever wanted in life was money and power.”

“And you resented that.”

“Of course!”

“Enough to kill her?”

“No! Absolutely not! I didn't kill her. She was my son's mother, for Christ's sake.”

“Is that why you got so defensive when Carlos asked you if she aborted your child?”

“What do you think? But in a way, she has, hasn't she?”

Carlos and I shared a glance of apathy. “How does Mallory fit into all of this?”

“You mean, Ed, the pervert? He went to Doctor Lowell's class for psychics, along with Benny, Ana, Karen and the whole lot.”

“And Bridget, too.”

“Yes, Bridget, too. She's the one that got Benny into the classes. I believe she may have even slept with the good doctor to make it happen.”

“So, you knew about the ties everyone had to Lowell and the workshops all along?”

“Of course.”

“You know how that will look to a jury.”

“Forget it, Marcella. A jury will never hear it.”

“We'll see.”

I turned to Carlos again to see if he was taking any notes on our conversation, and was glad to see he was. I came back to Rivera and asked, “If Bridget didn't want anything to do with Benny, then why did she want him to attend the workshops with her?”

He laughed. “To piss me off, why else? She knew I didn't like the idea one bit. But you see, at the time, she still stood in the good graces of my father. As far as he was concerned, she was the responsible one, not me.”

“So, what about Eddy? You still haven't explained why you're behold to him.”

“I'll tell you. Now, keep in mind that Benny was just a kid, like eleven or twelve maybe. Mallory wasn't there a month when he touched Benny in an inappropriate manner. These days there'd be a Spanish inquisition over the matter, but back then the simplest thing to do was to remove Benny from class, declaring that he had no special attributes or paranormal abilities and sweep everything under the rug.”

“You're saying he made a sexual advance towards Benny?”

“Detective, Edward Mallory was crazy about Benny. We just didn't know how badly until after he left town and someone found a notepad full of love letters he wrote to him, letters he'd written, but never sent.”

I reeled back in utter disbelief. If what Rivera said was true, and if, as I believed, he was capable of murder, then I couldn't imagine why he hadn't already killed Mallory Edwards for what she did to Benny. I turned to Rivera with reservations and said, “All that being what it may, it still doesn't explain why you hired Mallory and continue—”

“I know,” he interrupted. “Why I hired her and continue paying extortion money. I told you, it's because Bridget told her that Benny is my son. Can you believe it? Benny's own mother. She's the one that put her up to it. Bridget told Mallory about Benny, and even suggested she blackmail me into paying her so she wouldn't tell him.”

“But why?” said Carlos, his voice high pitched.

“To distract me. Bridget figured that if I had a big enough distraction going on in my life, I would start screwing up at work, I would lose my concentration in court cases and derail my chances for that promotion.”

“Guess it worked,” I said.

He looked at me coldly. “I guess so.”

Carlos tapped me on the shoulder and asked, “So, what now?”

“I don't know,” I answered, and to Rivera I said, “but you should go downtown and talk to

the police about Mallory Edwards blackmailing you.”

He scoffed. “Sure, then Benny will find out everything. I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

I shook my head. “Oh, trust me. Benny has greater issues to deal with right now. Maybe the truth will help him sort things out.”

“And maybe not. I know my son. He’ll do fine if you just let me handle this my own way.”

I looked again to Carlos. He shrugged and gave me a look like it was none of our business. He was probably right, but still, I felt uneasy about the whole affair. If Benny wasn’t our killer, then he certainly had the potential of causing trouble later on with an alter ego like Leo fighting for dominance. His need for professional help seemed clear and immediate. But for the more pressing issues before us, I bowed to Carlos’ inclinations and gave in to Rivera’s request.

“Okay, fair enough,” I said. “If you feel you know what’s best for Benny, then we’ll let you work it out your way. Your secret shall remain safe with us—for now.”

He smiled back modestly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“So now, what do you need from me?”

“Tell us where to find Mallory Edwards.”

He pulled back some. “I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you?”

“Should I?”

Carlos said, “Her last known address on her driver’s license is listed here.”

“At my house?”

“Yes.”

“Ha. Detectives, I assure you, Mallory Edwards doesn’t now, nor has she ever lived here in this house. I’m sure that’s just a pipe dream of hers.”

“So, you don’t know where she lives?”

“I’m not sure. Last I heard she was staying at the Rue Valley apartments on Concord.”

“Do you know where Benjamin is now?”

“No. I thought he was upstairs, but I looked a few minutes ago. He’s gone.”

“I see.”

“Great,” said Carlos. “What do we do now?”

I glanced at my watch. It was nearing ten-thirty. “We have to go to Leona’s.”

“She’s probably in bed sleeping by now.”

“Let’s hope so.” I turned to Rivera. “If you hear from Benjamin, will you give us a call right away?”

“Why? Do you think he’s in trouble?”

“I still don’t know yet, but I think we’ll know by the end of tonight.”

Carlos and I got back in the car and headed out, our tires spitting gravel all the way to the gate. I called Spinelli on the way and told him to have an officer meet us at Leona’s place for backup. Then I asked him to send somebody back to Rivera’s to watch for Benny or Piakowski to show up. I believed I could count on Ricardo to tell me if Benjamin returned, but he owed me no favors regarding Piakowski.

“And while you’re at it,” I told Spinelli, “check the damn phone book and verify Mallory Edwards address.”

He told me to hang on, and within a minute came back. “Yeah, looks like she lives down on Concord.”

“Yes, I know. Can we get someone over there to talk to her?”

He hesitated. “Not right now. We have all available resources committed elsewhere.”

I shook my head. “Fine. Just make sure someone gets down to Leona’s then, okay?”

“You got it.”

I turned to Carlos. “See what all your high-tech toys got us?”

I could tell he wanted to say something in defense of the new justice center, but he knew I didn't really want to hear it. Lucky for me. The silence it bought us allowed for a nice quiet ride across town where I could think things through, something no fancy computer could provide. It helped me to connect the dots more clearly, establishing and prioritizing the possible motives the key players may have had.

The only problem was that there were still too many people with way too many motives, to come up with a definitive conclusion on anything.

Seventeen

Officer Burke arrived at Leona's place ahead of us. When we arrived, he explained that he observed the apartment for about ten minutes prior. "I've seen her silhouette pass by the window shade a few times," he said, "so I know she's home. But I haven't seen anyone come or go since I got here."

"And you won't," I said. "But that doesn't mean she hasn't got a visitor already." I turned to Carlos. "You ready?"

He blinked a surprised expression. "For what?"

"For whatever." I slapped his chest with the back of my hand. "I thought you were a Boy Scout."

"I was."

"Then let's go."

He slapped Burke on the chest in a similar fashion. "You heard the man. Let's roll."

We went up to the door and knocked. As we waited for Leona to answer, I said to Carlos and Burke, "We don't want to scare her. After she lets us in, I'll try to get her to sit on the couch and talk to me. Burke, you start checking out the other rooms, make sure no one's gotten in without her noticing. Scope out under the bed, in the closets, that sort of thing. Carlos, you stand guard by the door. Keep your ears out for Burke's call in case he needs you. Got it?"

"Got it," they both said, just as Leona opened the door. She seemed surprised to see us, understandably, and even gasped a little before she recognized me as the ringleader. I tried smiling to defuse the sudden impact of her seeing three large men the first thing after opening the door. But Leona probably hadn't seen me smile much in the past, and I suppose I'd have done her better by maintaining my usual stone-faced expression. Regardless, she did recognize me, and that shaped a smile on her face more authentic than any I could muster.

"Detective Marcella? What for are you doing here?"

"Hola, Leona. We need to talk. May we come in?"

She opened the door wide. "Of course. Mi casa es su casa."

I crossed the threshold and stepped aside, allowing Carlos to pass upon entry. "You remember my associate, Detective Rodriguez, yes?"

"Sí! Detective Carlos, ¿Cómo está?"

Carlos and Leona hugged. "Bien, y tú?"

"Muy bien, gracias. Que bueno verte otra vez."

Next, I introduced Burke, explaining that I hoped she wouldn't mind if he checked out her apartment to assure it was safe.

"Yes, officer," she said, though now she appeared worried. "Please, look around." She turned to me. "Is everything not all right? Do you believe someone to come to mí apartamento?"

I pointed to the sofa. "Have a seat, Leona."

She sat at the end of the sofa closest to the door. I came around the coffee table and sat down beside her. She reached for my hand. Instinctively, I took it and held it tight.

"Leona, you don't need to worry about a thing," I told her. "The reason I'm here with Carlos and Officer Burke is because we believe that someone might want to get in here tonight, and we're here to prevent that."

Her eyes widened. "Do you mean like a bugler?"

I tried not to laugh, but it slipped out anyway. "It's burglar, but no, not a burglar. Do you

remember earlier when I asked you about your out-of-body experiences?”

“Sí. You wanted to know if I killed Miss Webber, Miss Dean and Miss Davalos.”

“Right,” I said, wincing, and feeling just a bit uncomfortable with that. The girl had an uncanny gift for bluntly stating the obvious without really meaning to. I lost eye contact for just a moment, but found it again when I felt her give my hand another squeeze.

“Well...I hoped you wouldn’t remember it like that, exactly,” I said, “but anyway, we still think someone may have influenced the actions of those women through paranormal channels. It’s just one of several ideas we’re tossing around, and I want you to know that even though we suspect bilocation as a factor, I don’t consider you a suspect in the slightest.”

She smiled, forgivingly. “It is okay if you do, Detective. I understand. I do not hold you for resentment. I believe you are a good man and you are only doing your job how you must.”

I smiled back, humbled. “And I believe that you’re a remarkable young woman.”

She blushed and turned away. Burke emerged from the bedroom, shaking his head and giving the all’s clear thumbs up sign. I gave him a nod for him to join Carlos by the front door and then turned to Leona again. Her cheeks had regained some of their mocha color, but her eyes still cut away shyly. I waited for her to look back at me before continuing. When she did, only her eyes moved my way and my heart damn near melted. I touched the bottom of her chin with just my fingertips and gently steered her face toward mine. “Are you okay?”

She smiled thinly, “Sí.”

“Good. As I was saying, we have come to a crossroad of possibilities regarding the deaths of Karen and the others. At this moment, we’re following the most promising lead, which brings me to your birthday. I hear you celebrated one yesterday?”

“It is true,” she nodded, “though I did not celebrate so much. I stayed in mí apartamento and dreamed of home.”

“Back in Honduras?”

“Sí.”

“You miss it, don’t you?”

Her eyes trailed off to the corner of the room where they found a place to anchor. From there, I imagined she could see her homeland in vivid color, the spectacle of blue sky and green mountains flowing from Tegucigalpa to the beaches of Puerto Cortés y La Ceiba. “I miss my old home,” she said, coming back to me on a whisper. “But I love my new home more. I can go to Honduras in my dreams any time. That is enough for me.”

“Someday,” I said, “if you like, I’ll go back with you for real, maybe spend a week there. You can show me the sights.”

“Ooh, sí, I would very much like that.”

“Then you got it.” I tapped her on the knee. “Before I forget.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the charm that Lilith gave me at the coffee shop. “I want you to wear this for a while.”

She took it from me and held it up by the chain, allowing the ring to dangle freely. “This is my ring,” she said, puzzled. “I wanted you to have it.”

“Yes, and I do want it. I’ll keep it and cherish it always. For now though, I want you to have it back. That chain it’s on, Lilith made it. It’s a sort of witch’s ladder. She made it to protect you.”

“I do not understand.”

“I know you don’t, but you see, Carlos and I fear you may be in danger. We don’t know if it has to do with your associations with Karen and Bridget, or whether your previous involvement in Doctor Lowell’s workshop has anything to do with it. But that you had a birthday yesterday may contribute to the problem. This charm will to protect you. Here, let me help you with it.”

I took the charm and slipped it over her head. She seemed frightened at first, and I doubt she would have let me help her put it on if not for her absolute trust in me. She reached up, pressing

her palm to the base of her neck, and she ran her fingers along the length of the braided chain down to the ring. Then she clasped the ring in her hand and squeezed it tightly, as if embracing its powers.

“This will protect me?”

“That’s what Lilith tells me, and I believe her. The way it works is simple. If you feel like someone or something is trying to make you act against your will, then you must pull the ring from the chain.”

“Like this?” She slipped her finger into the ring and motioned a tug, as to pull the ring free.

“Yes,” I said, touching her hand to assure she would not yet do it. “When you’re sure. Snap it off.”

“Then what do I do?”

I looked up at Carlos, who shrugged. “Then don’t do whatever it is that someone is trying to make you do.” It sounded simple enough. I only hoped it was. “After that, I want you to call me right away. Understand?”

“Sí, I understand. You do not want me to kill myself. Do not worry. I will do my best.”

“I know you will. So, I won’t worry. Now then, do you remember Officer Brittany Olsen from the research center?”

“Sí. She was most kind and gentle with me.”

“Yes. She’s a wonderful person. Is it okay if I call her and ask her to stay here with you tonight?”

“To stay here in mí apartamento?”

“Yes, to watch out for you.”

Leona shook her head delicately. “No, please, Detective. I do not wish to let this make a deal so big for me.”

“But Leona, this is a big deal. You may be in grave danger tonight.”

“No. I am fine.” She smiled politely. “You have given to me this charm, no?”

“Yes, but that may not be enough. If you let—”

“Please, Detective.” She shook her head again, more defiantly this time. “I wish no one to stay here tonight. I am fine. You will see.”

I eased back in my chair. “Okay,” I said with a sigh. “But I’ll ask Officer Burke here to wait outside your apartment tonight. He’ll be down in his squad car if you need him. All right?”

She looked up at Burke and smiled. He smiled back. “Sí. That will be fine. You are most kind to worry for me so much.”

“Leona. I will always worry about you.”

I stood and offered her my hand to help her up. She accepted, and when our hands joined, I felt warmth in her touch beyond mere tepidness. I realized at once that the ring had radiated its energy through her. I didn’t know if that meant it was working to protect her, or if something more ominous had begun to manifest paranormally.

A flash of paranoia ran through my mind. Had Lilith played me? For a moment, I imagined that Lilith had tricked me into giving Leona the charm so that she might control her actions through witchcraft. I looked to Carlos, remembering when he held the obsidian stone for himself and said that the only thing he saw was Lilith. ‘Doing what?’ I had asked him. He didn’t know.

“Leona,” I said, “are you feeling okay?”

“I am fine,” she answered. “Why do you ask?”

“You’re not dizzy or disoriented?”

“No. I am hungry a little bit.”

“Hungry? Oh, right.” I felt suddenly flush with guilt. “Hey, about that. Listen, I’m sorry for spoiling your dinner date with Benjamin earlier. We didn’t—”

“No. Detective, do not apologize. For to tell the truth, he made my feelings uncomfortable.”

“Oh? Did he touch you inappropriately?”

She shook her head emphatically. “He did not. But he said something bad to make me think I did not know him as I believed I did.”

“Leo, that bastard,” I said under my breath.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing. Tell me, Leona. What did he say to you?”

She turned away in a blush. “A woman does not repeat such things, Detective. I will say only that you did me a favor when you came to the restaurant as you did.”

“Okay, fair enough.”

I had no need of knowing what Benjamin or Leo might have said to her. That he said anything offensive at all seemed enough to peel away the facade that masked his true intentions. I thought that if Benjamin co-possessed his victims for the purpose of killing them, then at least he would not gain Leona’s confidence by first appearing before her as a benign apparition. After everything that had happened, I hoped she would act quickly and pull the ring the moment he or anyone else materialized in a specter state.

I let go of Leona’s hand and said, “Aside from a little hunger, are you sure you’re well?”

She tugged at my sleeve to turn me around. “Sí, Detective, I am very well.” I felt her petite fingers drilling into the small of my back, as she pushed me toward the door. “Now go and let me fix supper so I can go to bed and make sleep and wake up and go to my job with the op-tom-e-trist.”

A mouthful, yes, but she said it laughing, and even pronounced optometrist like a pro—but then, she had been practicing. I opened the door and waited for Carlos and Burke to step out first before turning to Leona again. “You remember what I said, now? The moment you feel something, you pull the ring from that chain and give me a call. You have my number?”

“Sí, I have your number still in mí speedy dial. It is the same, yes?”

“It’s the same number. Yes. It hasn’t changed.”

“Then you see I will call if trouble becomes to me. So, do not worry. Adiós?”

I leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “Adiós, señorita. Stay well.”

“Y tú, señor. Bye-bye.”

We left her apartment and gathered in the parking lot out front. I told Burke to go grab himself a cup of coffee down at the corner. “Looks like it might be a long night,” I told him.

“Okay, thanks,” he answered. “I’ll be right back.”

As we watched him pull out, Carlos said, “So, what do we do now?”

“I hate to say this, but I think as soon as Burke returns, we should go back to Lilith’s.”

“Why there?”

“It’s a bad feeling I got while up in Leona’s apartment. I’m probably wrong, and I hope I am, but the charm that Lilith gave me to give to her, I’m questioning its purpose now.”

“You don’t think it’s to protect Leona?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what to think anymore. That’s been my problem all along. My gut feelings are polarized. I used to go with my hunch and rely on instincts, but now I can’t decide which is which.”

“What did your gut tell you up in the apartment?”

“Up there, it told me that Leona’s new charm is an instrument of conduction that might possibly allow Lilith to manipulate Leona’s actions through witchcraft.”

“But there’s a problem with that.”

“You see it, too?”

“Sure. If Lilith needs an instrument of conduction to manifest her will through witchcraft, then how—”

“How the hell did she manifest her will on Karen and the others?”

“Right. They didn’t all have a spirited charm around their necks.”

“No, but what is a charm? She could have cast a spell on anything and then made sure her

victims received it, anonymously or otherwise.”

On that point, Carlos agreed, but by then I had all but talked myself out of blaming Lilith again. I was about to suggest we head back to the box, when I noticed something strange about Leona’s apartment. Carlos saw me looking up and trained his eyes that way.

“What’s wrong?”

I pointed. “That’s Leona’s kitchen window, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“The light’s off.”

He hemmed a little. “So?”

“Didn’t she say she planned on making something to eat before turning in for the night?”

“Yes.”

“So, why isn’t she in the kitchen?”

Carlos checked his watch. “It’s getting late. Maybe she changed her mind.”

I shook my head. “Do you change your mind about eating when you’re hungry?”

That hit home. He started toward the stairs. “We better check on her. You with me?”

“With you?” I pushed him aside as I came around him. “I’m all over you, pal.”

We trampled up the steps and began beating on the door. When she did not answer within the first ten seconds, I gave Carlos permission to break the door down.

“Me?” he said, his eyes batting.

“Yes! You!”

“Why don’t you do it?”

“You’re younger.”

“We’ll do it together.”

“Fine.”

On the count of three, we broke it in, but not without Carlos and me tumbling to the floor like a couple of wet sacks. I got up onto my elbows and saw Leona standing over me with a twelve-inch butcher knife. My first thought was that she wanted to stab me with it, but when I looked into her eyes I saw a wild, disconnect spirit. I knew then that she planned to plunge the blade into her own belly.

Carlos rolled over on his back and realized right away what was happening. He grabbed Leona’s ankles and yanked her feet out from under her, spilling her to the carpet on her butt.

“The knife!” I hollered. “Get the knife!”

He reached for the blade, and as he did, she slashed at his hand and cut it open above the wrist. Carlos pulled his hand back. Leona’s knife came around a second time, missing his forearm by only inches. She dug at him again, and he rolled off to his left, just out of reach.

“Leona!” I cried, diverting her attention for a critical moment. I lunged forward, landing on top of her, knocking her flat on her back. Her hand came up over her head, exposing the blade to the gleam of the living room lights. I grabbed her wrist and forced it to the floor, squeezing as hard as I could to get her to drop it. She screamed, and for a second, I wanted to let her go for fear of hurting her.

Carlos, perhaps reading my mind, shouted for me to hold on. He came up from behind us on his knees and successfully wrestled the knife from her hand. At that moment, I grabbed the ring from the chain around her neck and pulled it free with a quick, clean jerk.

“No!” I heard someone cry, but it came from neither Carlos nor Leona. At once, a mantle of grayish fog engulfed us at floor level. It hissed and swirled like a swarm of bees and then rose in a vertical column.

I looked at Leona. It appeared to come from inside her. I saw her eyes stitched wide with pain. Her jaw unhinged. She screamed, yet made no sound.

I grabbed her shoulders and shook her hard. She gasped, as if surfacing from under water and taking in a much-needed breath of air. I noticed then that untamed spirit I’d seen in her only

moments before had gone. I rolled off her and sat up. Carlos helped us both to our feet.

“What is that, Tony?” he asked, pointing at the cloud, which had since taken on nearly human form. It swirled and meandered lazily around the room, confused, if that was possible, bumping into things, though not affecting their physical dispositions at all. “Is that Benjamin?”

“No,” said Leona, and she seemed sure about it. “Benjamin has not so much hate in him.”

“Then who?”

“It’s Crazy Eddy,” I said, as certain as Leona was about it not being Benny.

With that, the vaporous apparition condensed to an almost solidified state, manifesting in portions undisputedly recognizable as Mallory Edwards. It looked around the room and seemed to grow cognizant of its surroundings, even as it grew more defined in physiological properties.

There came a moment when the form, which we had come to accept as the life force of Mallory Edwards, seemed to recognize Leona again. It swelled in size like a sinister cloud, morphing into shapes as grotesque as the mind could envision.

I looked to Carlos and Leona, whose eyes scudded and pierced the shadowed specter as differently as any two people could. I believed then that we were all interpreting the experience in our own way and undoubtedly witnessing the phenomena from unique perspectives. It appeared as though its control on our psyche, though diluted, remained intact and continued to strengthen, influencing our perception and our ability to react decisively.

In the back of my mind, I could see Karen Webber and the others, their cognitive process hijacked and compromised, unable to override the dominance that Mallory held over them. I imagined that they likely knew and understood what their psychical bodies were doing, killing themselves, as their mental control lay hostage to the fiendish resolve of its captor.

I set my sight upon the life force once more and noticed it moving toward Leona. Its energy seemed stronger now, intensifying in color and size, its swirling mass blistering with spikes and snapping with angry electric jabs.

Leona stood motionless, and beside her, Carlos, both captivated by its hypnotic grasp. I stepped forward, toward the cloud, hoping to disrupt its flow. But a sudden force pushed me back into the wall like a cannon blast.

The next thing I knew, Leona’s apartment descended into chaos. The burst of energy expelled from the mass erupted in a virtual cyclone and ripped through the room, tossing furniture about like plastic toys.

It was then I looked down and felt Leona’s ring burning a hole in the palm of my hand. Remembering the incident with the witch’s ladder in the woods the year before, I took the ring and pitched it as hard as I could into the heart of the swirling black mass. The cloud swallowed the ring, allowing it to pass, yet it never hit the wall on the other side.

At that moment, the room ignited in a flash as bright as lightning. A sound like crackling fire popped and hissed until we thought our eardrums would burst.

And then nothing.

In an instant, it was gone. The room fell calm. I looked at Carlos and Leona. Their hair stood on twisted ends. The expression on their faces told me they hadn’t a clue as to what just happened. Processing the moment, I don’t think I had much of a clue myself.

“What the hell happened?” asked Burke.

We turned and found him crouched in a shooters stance at the front door.

“It’s okay,” I said, gesturing a wave for him to stand down. “Everything’s under control.

I hurried to Leona and grabbed her arms at the cups of her shoulders. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes melted into mine, and I knew then she was all right. She started to smile, but waited, as if maybe it were not yet okay to do so. Then a tickle from inside her seemed to coax a giggle from her lips and she smiled wide and bright. “Sí, Detective, I am fine.”

I turned to Carlos. “You?”

“Never better,” he said, and he twitched as if jolted by a residue electrical shock.

My heart jumped. “What was that?”

He smiled his boyish grin. “Just kidding.” He pointed to a white spot on the carpet by the door. “Is that Mallory?”

I walked over to the spot, got down on one knee and felt the carpet. I don’t know what I expected, but I definitely didn’t expect it to feel so hot. I pulled my hand away sharply, and looked back at Carlos. “It’s like molten lava.”

“What does it mean?”

“I don’t know.” I turned to Leona.

She backed away slowly, her fingertips steepled below her chin. “It is El Diablo. He has taken her away.”

“The devil?”

“Sí. The devil.” She leaned over and stole a glimpse behind me. Carlos and I turned around to see what caught her eye. The full moon shone bright outside her window, and from that vantage, its light cast down directly on the spot that Mallory’s spirit form left on the carpet. I considered it a coincidence, but then remembered Lilith’s words when she said to me once that coincidence was just another way of explaining the unexplainable. How true, I thought.

I took out my phone and called Spinelli. He seemed distracted upon answering, and I got the feeling he was no longer at the justice center. I heard noises in the background, people talking and lots of static. He would say something to me, stop in mid-sentence and then finish it only after obvious interruptions. I was about to hang up on him, when he came back and filled me in on the news.

“Unbelievable!” he said. “You just simply won’t believe it, Detective.”

“I might,” I said, “if you tell me. Where the hell are you, and what’s going on there?”

“I’m at Rivera’s house with about twenty other cops and some ambulances. It’s nuts here! Rivera is dead! Piakowski is dead!”

“What!” I held the phone away from my ear and put it on speaker so that Carlos could hear.

“Yes. I came here to watch the place like you asked me to...”

“I didn’t ask you to go there,” I said. “I told you to send someone.”

“I got bored.”

I looked at Carlos and shook my head. “He’s your boy, Carlos.” Carlos only shrugged. “Spinelli, what happened?”

“No, take it outside,” he said, his voice distant. I assumed he was speaking to one of the cops on the scene again. He came back on the phone louder than before and slightly out of breath. “Okay, right after I got here, I mean like two seconds later, I heard two men arguing. It was Rivera and Piakowski. From outside the window, I heard one tell the other that he would kill him first before he ever let him tell Benjamin the truth. I figured that was Rivera talking, to which Piakowski replied, ‘Then give me forty thousand dollars and I’ll disappear for good.’”

“So, what happened?”

“He shot him!” said Spinelli. “Rivera pulled out a handgun and shot Piakowski dead!”

Carlos and I gasped. “You saw him do it?”

“Yes, through the window, and so I came around the house to the front door and broke in. I drew my weapon on Rivera, identified myself as police and ordered him to drop his weapon. He heard my order. I know he did, but he turned and took aim at me anyway. I had no choice, Tony. I had to...” His voice started breaking up, but I knew it wasn’t the connection. “I had to...” he said again, and then the phone went silent.

I looked at Carlos, who looked at me, and we both looked at Leona. She seemed uncertain about what happened at Rivera’s, but Carlos and I knew well, and we thought it better that Spinelli couldn’t finish what he tried to tell us. I pulled Carlos aside and instructed him to have Leona brought to the station for debriefing.

“Have them get her some coffee and something to eat,” I told him. “Maybe see if maybe

officer Olson wouldn't mind spending some time with her."

"Brittany?"

"Yeah, she helped Leona a lot after we rescued her from—"

"Right. I remember," he said, saving me from having to say it. "I'll see if she's available."

"Thanks, and oh, you better send a unit to Mallory Edwards' apartment. Send an ambulance, too, just in case."

"You got it, Tony. In the meantime, what are you going to do? You going back to Rivera's?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I have to take care of something first. I'll catch up with you later, okay?"

"Sure." He reached for my hand and shook it as if it were goodbye forever. I told him that wasn't good enough, and I gave him a hug in case it was. Then I went to Leona and hugged her, too. She wrapped her arms around my waist and squeezed me harder than I thought a girl her size could.

"Goodbye, Detective Marcella," she said. Her eyes were glossy but her cheeks were still dry. "I will miss you much."

"Ooh," I said, and it came out jagged, as if stuck in my throat. "We'll see each other again." Though I knew I couldn't say with certainty if and when. "In the meantime, you do what Detective Rodriguez tells you. He'll see to it that you get taken care of, get you anything you want."

She rocked her head back and smiled up at me. "Will he get you if I ask him?"

I kissed her forehead and then left before my tears had time to show.

Eighteen

Carlos let me take the car without asking why I needed it, though I think inside he knew. For the last year I had yearned for a reason to return to New Castle, not to help him solve crimes, but to address an even bigger issue, one I couldn't resolve unless I met it head on.

I pulled up in front of Lilith's house and shut the motor off. For a long time, I sat there. I knew the pretext I would use to explain my presence if asked. I just wasn't sure if I was ready to admit to myself that my need for mannered intervention is what drove me there to begin with.

I thought of everything that happened since I closed the Surgeon Stalker case so many months earlier. I thought about the uncertainties that plague nearly all my decisions, the insecurities, inadequacies, lack of satisfaction; the insomnia, mood swings, loss of appetite, feelings of remorse and regret, all of which follow brief but euphoric episodes of self-righteousness and false grandeur for a stellar career gone uncelebrated.

I almost turned the key and started the engine up again. The urge to drive away from there and keep on going seemed overwhelming. If not for the thought that I might just drive myself off the end of the pier at Suffolk's Walk and drown a chilly death, then I might have done it. Instead, I let go of the key, got out of the car and walked up to Lilith's door.

The night grew cooler and the moon higher in the starry sky. I took a deep breath, knocked on the door and waited for Lilith to answer. I didn't think I would have to wait long. Somehow, I knew she expected me.

When the door opened, I stepped inside. I didn't say hello. I didn't comment on the candles burning in little saucers and dishes throughout the house, and I didn't even wipe my feet. I simply shut the door, took my coat off and sat down at the kitchen table. Lilith still had on her black robe, long cords of black beads still adorned her neck. She sat at the table across from me, her eyes like diamonds, shimmering in the candlelight, unblinking and cold.

"You have it?" she asked.

She knew I did. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the witch's ladder that I had taken from Leona's room the night we rescued her from Doctor Lowell's basement prison. I passed it across the table to her. "I'm sorry I didn't—"

"Say no more." She took the beads and placed them around her neck. "Is she's dead?"

"Mallory?" I said, but then realized I didn't really have to ask her that. Lilith and I had made a connection: a connection we always had. "Yes, she's dead. It happened a little while ago. I gathered some details from the chatter over the police radio on my way here. We sent a unit across town to check out her apartment. They found her body. The coroner will likely rule her death natural, heart attack or something, but...."

Lilith nodded, knowingly. I watched her play with the candle setting on the table, running her fingers over the flame slowly, but without burning herself. I took that as a metaphor of our relationship, realizing that the same would not hold true for me, should I decide to play with the fires she offered.

"The ring did it," I said. "Didn't it?"

Without looking up, she replied, "I told you it would work."

"You never said it would kill her."

"It wouldn't have killed her if it wasn't supposed to. The spell exercises only to the degree it must to work."

"You should have told me."

“Why? Would you have done anything differently?”

She knew I wouldn't. To save Leona, I would have jumped out a window and landed on my head in the middle of the street.

I watched Lilith pinch the candle's flame and remove it from the wick. Still it burned with indifference between her fingers.

“Tell me,” she said. “At what point did you know that Mallory was the one co-possessing her victims through bilocation?”

“At what point did you know?” I returned.

She smiled, rolling the flame across her hand the way a magician rolls a silver dollar between his fingers. “Have you figured out why she did it?”

“Revenge, I guess. I think she wanted to get back at everyone that ever teased Benny or made fun of him in Doctor Lowell's workshops. She loved him, you know. I suppose, in her own twisted mind, it was the least she could do for him after molesting him.”

“So, the rumors were true?”

“You knew?”

“I heard things.”

“Lilith, then why didn't you tell me about that earlier? It could have helped me in my investigation.”

She lifted her hand and blew on the flame percolating from her fingertips. It seemed to go out at first, but then ignited again like a trick candle on a birthday cake. She smiled at that, and I could not help but to smile, too.

“I didn't tell you because I didn't know it as fact. I'm not one to perpetuate rumors.”

“Still...” I said, and I left it at that.

She looked up at me above the flame. “Why do you think she went after Leona?”

“Jealously. It's the oldest motive in the book. Mallory knew that Benny liked Leona. She was the last thing standing in her way.”

“So, Ricardo is dead, too, yes?” That she asked meant she already knew, although I couldn't imagine how she figured that one out.

“Spinelli shot him.” I said. Funny, but it came out so easily. In a way, I guessed it made me feel like he had earned his rank in doing so. It didn't make sense, though. I had been a detective fifteen years before I ever had to shoot a man, and Carlos never has.

“It's still too early to say for sure,” I told her. “But the working theory with the boys downtown is that Piakowski tried to extort hush money from Rivera to keep silent about Benjamin's real relationship to Ricardo.”

“His real relationship?”

“Ricardo Rivera was Benny's father. It's complicated, but—”

“Never mind. I get it.”

“Anyway, things got out of hand, Rivera shot Piakowski and then...” I stopped there, finding it harder to say the words than to let her finish saying them for me.

“And then your boy, Spinelli, tied up the score. How tidy.”

“It was self-defense. He had to shoot him.”

Lilith pinched the flame back onto the candle's wick. “Oh, I'm sure the DA will clear him.”

“Why shouldn't he? It was justified.”

“He reminds you of yourself, doesn't he, Detective?”

“Spinelli? No. If anything he reminds me of a younger Carlos.”

She looked up over the candle. “I told you to watch that one, didn't I? He's impetuous. That scene he caused at the restaurant is typical of his over-zealousness.”

“He'll do fine,” I said, feeling a little agitated. But then, Lilith always had a way of pushing my buttons like that. I leaned back in my seat and straightened my shoulders. “Look, Lilith, I didn't come here to—”

“Wait,” she said, holding her finger in the air. She tilted her head to one side in anticipation of it, and before I could ask why, the old grandfather clock by the door struck midnight. As the chimes rang, she stood and offered me her hand.

“What?” I said, admittedly confused.

She broke into a giddy laugh. “Come on, Anthony. It’s why you came here tonight, isn’t it?”

It was, I thought, or I guessed. I had come for a reason. I just didn’t know exactly what.

I took her hand and followed her to the living room. She pointed to a spot on the floor by the sofa and I understood that to mean I should stand there and just watch.

She crossed the room, stopped at a bookcase and removed a large book from the top shelf. It looked to me like an old bible, but of course, I knew that wasn’t the case. Still, she handled it with all the reverence befitting a sacred scripture, dusting the cover with the brush of her hand before gently blowing over the top.

She cradled it across the room, setting it on a podium of sorts, before opening it carefully to a section previously book-marked with a black ribbon.

The podium stood only inches from me, so close that I might have read from the text, had it not been written in script unknown to mortal men. I looked up from the book and found Lilith looking at me. Her eyes appeared cat-like, big and round with pupils shaped like long thin diamonds.

“This is the grimoire,” she told me, “a book of witchcraft used for invoking spells and spirits. It’s a text of ages, written by my ancestors and passed down through generations. Some people call it the book of shadows, but that’s a misnomer, as is the case with most things associated with witchcraft. The perversion of this religion exists only within those who don’t understand it. Tonight you will come to understand it for yourself.”

Her words struck me like a blow to the chest. I felt my heart flatten and the wind in my lungs compress to a shriveled wedge of air. I swallow back the lump in my throat and smiled at her thinly, knowing thirty years earlier I would have run from that place as fast as I could.

She looked down at the book and ran her index finger over a single line, mouthing the passage to herself as she had, no doubt, recited a dozen times before. I felt uneasy watching her, yet I also felt filled with anticipation, the likes I hadn’t known in years.

After reading the passage several times, she closed the grimoire and then glided on a thread of air back to the bookcase. This time she retrieved a brown canvas pouch and returned it to the center of the room.

Untying its drawstrings, she began spilling the contents of the pouch onto the floor. I thought it looked like sand at first, for it poured out fine and dry, though it sparkled like glitter and smelled like mulberry. She poured the substance in a circle, maybe the size of a large round table top, her body positioned directly in the middle.

“Are you wearing any metals?” she asked, but before I could answer, she added, “If so, remove all of it now.”

At once, I emptied my pockets of all my loose change, my keys and my cell phone. I removed my rings and a gold chain from around my neck, and even my belt.

“Done,” I said, suddenly feeling a little naked and just a bit foolish.

She pointed at my shoes. “Those, too.”

“My shoes?”

“They’ve got heels, don’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Are they glued or nailed?”

I kicked them off without further discussion. She continued pouring out sand within the circle, this time drawing two points connected by opposing arced lines that formed what looked like a cat’s eye. That done, she stood erect, the fringes of her robe barely brushing the highest peaks of the sand piles.

I noticed then how the candles she placed around the room, if connected by lines, would have also resembled that cat's eye pattern. She smiled at me upon that discovery.

"Earlier tonight," she said, "I gave you a charm and told you it was the eye of the witch. I thought you might find strength in its symbolism. I was wrong." She splayed her arms to encompass the design she had drawn on the floor with the sand. "This, Detective, is the *real* eye of the witch. Focus with me, your thoughts and energy, as I summons the four guardians of nature into the circle."

What happened next still astonishes me as I think about it. Lilith closed her eyes, tilted her head back and echoed the words from the grimoire that she practiced earlier.

Nearly at once, four tiny white lights appeared like fireflies, buzzing about the room in spirited play, darting and zigzagging until finally descending to the floor by Lilith's feet. They gamboled there in rhythmic tempos within the circle, tripping from point-to-point along the arced lines and around the outer edges in no particular order.

More words spilled from her lips, and a bluish white light formed only inches above her head. It hovered there nervously, filled with static heat like an electric halo.

She drew a line with her hands down the center of her body from the bridge of her nose all the way to the floor. As she did this, a light from that halo followed the path of her hands, entering the circle of sand and lighting it up in a glow of white-hot energy.

Next, she motioned with her right hand to her left shoulder, and then with her left hand to her right shoulder. That gesture directed the path of energy along the arced lines to the end points of the sculpture, thus completing the Eye of the Witch.

"A year and a day ago," said Lilith, grasping the witch's ladder around her neck. "I cast a spell upon these beads and committed my involvement to a cause unbecoming my convictions. In the vein of returning energy, I submit and relinquish this object to the coven, my ancestral guardians and keepers of the Witch's Lineage."

With those words, the ring of energy surrounding her body exploded in a flash as bright as day. I started to back away, but as my eyes readjusted to the relative dim of candlelight, I saw Lilith motioning for me to step into the circle with her.

I don't think I felt a moment's hesitation after that. I only remember wanting to join her, and wanting to do it quickly before she changed her mind, or before the power of the eye subsided.

I moved to the edge of the circle and reached for her. Our hands joined, and I immediately felt a sense of comfort like slipping into a warm pool on a chilly morning.

She pulled me fully into the circle, removed the beaded witch's ladder from around her neck and draped it over my head. I think, at that point, I started to say something, but she held her finger and thumb to my mouth and pinched my lips closed. Then she squeezed both my hands and recited this:

"Banish weaker mortal souls, we summons thee of witch's role. Through hexing slight of wizard's slant, invoke thy magick, and essence grant. By Rite of Passage this night begun, bestow upon thy soul plus one."

I'm not sure what I expected next. But I was surprised when nothing at all happened right away. I looked into Lilith's eyes. The normal human-like features returned. Gone were the cat's eyes with thin diamond-shaped pupils. Though with Lilith, they still presented a haunting ebony gaze that one dares not stare into too long. I watched them narrow with her growing smile, which tipped me off that she wasn't at all done.

A tickle in my stomach filled me with the sensation one gets when poised at the top of a roller coaster that's about to plunge over the first hill. I smiled back at her in anticipation of something greater to come.

That's when she leaned in close and blew a puff of air into my face. I felt her grip against my hands tighten and then all hell broke loose.

The ring of sand at our feet ignited in a vertical shower of rushing wind, light and sound, a

noise so loud I could not hear myself think.

The ground shook. The walls of the house rocked and the ceiling opened up completely, exposing us to the moon and stars and a cascading column of energy unlike anything I'd ever witnessed before.

I let out a holler full of rapture and bliss, consumed by the power unleashed barely within my touch. Furniture filled my peripheral view in colorful blurs flying skyward and beyond. I imagined myself standing in the plume of a fiery rocket, a sublime display of the supernatural invading the world of mediocrity.

It astounded and frightened me, knowing that if I stepped outside the circle even a bit that the blast from that plume would propel me into orbit like a tiny speck of dust.

In a moment of euphoria and awakening, I pulled Lilith in closer and I held her tightly. I meant no implications about it, but that the kinship I felt went beyond the temporal sense to a boundless sphere. And in the middle of absolute commotion, with chaos churning all around us, I found a sense of love and belonging when she wrapped her arms around me and locked her fingers behind my back.

"Lilith!" I screamed, my voice hoarse from shouting above the noise of the rushing wind. "If anything happens to us, I want you to know—"

"Can it!" she hollered back. "Something is happening to us! So, shut up and let it happen!"

She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek to my chest.

Now, I don't want to say that she was snuggling, but I did feel her arms around my waist tighten some. I covered the other side of her face with my hand to protect her from possible flying debris, but I think she knew that was only an excuse for me to hug, rather than hold her. I closed my eyes and set my chin atop her head.

Sometime later, I can't say when, but I felt a hand upon my shoulder. I got the strangest feeling that I had somehow drifted off to sleep. The night fell silent. A distant hiss from a broken gas line filled the air with the smell of sulfur.

Lilith was still in my arms, both her hands still locked around my waist. I pulled back to look at her, almost believing that she had fallen asleep, too. I brushed her cheek, and like a budding flower, she peeled back and gazed up into my eyes.

"Hey," I said. "You all right?"

She smiled softly, her chin riding the rise of my chest as I breathed. "Yeah. You?"

"Yeah."

The hand on my shoulder shook me, and a voice accompanying it said, "Are you two all right? That must have been some weird tornado."

I looked around. The house was gone, the walls, the furnishings, all of it—gone. Lilith unclasped her hands and took a single step back. She slapped her palm against my chest and smiled teasingly, the way girls do sometimes when you work that tickle spot under their arm.

"What?" I said. "Why are you smiling?"

"Look at you," she said, running the back of her hand up and down my cheek. Her eyes sparkled curiously, as if seeing me for the first time. "You're very handsome. You know that?"

I turned away bashfully. "So are you...I mean, you're beautiful."

"Look," said the man behind me, and only then did I realize he was a police officer. "You kids look like you're doing fine. Just so you know, the ambulance and fire trucks are on their way."

I turned to say something to him, but he had already started away.

"What's with him?" I said, hiking my thumb up over my shoulder. "He's not so old he should get away with calling me kid."

That's when I saw it. I looked deeper into her eyes. Something remarkable happened. I couldn't say for sure, but if I had to guess, I would have said that Lilith looked seven or eight years younger, a noticeable difference for a twenty-something year-old.

I cupped her face in my hands and steadied it to the moonlight spilling over my shoulder. “Lilith? What was that spell you cast?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You look younger.”

She pulled back some, so I let her go. “Detective, do you know how old I am?” Her smile seemed prettier than I had ever noticed before.

“I don’t know. I suppose you’re about twenty-five, six...something like that?”

“No. I’m much older.”

“Thirty? You can’t be older than thirty, because you look seventeen.”

“I’m over one hundred.”

“A hundred what?”

“Years, Detective! Over one hundred years! In fact, I’m a hundred and seventy-two.”

“That’s impossible.”

She planted her hands on her hips the way I had seen her do, say—oh, maybe a hundred and seventy-two times before. “Come here,” she said, leading me by the hand to the part of the slab that used to be her bathroom. She picked up a piece of broken mirror and handed it to me. “Careful. It’s sharp.” I took the mirror and held it to her face. “No!” she scolded, slapping my hand away. “It’s not for me. It’s for you. Look.”

If I live another hundred and seventy-two years, which I might, I’ll never get over the initial shock of seeing my face in that broken piece of glass.

In my wildest dreams, I never could have imagined it. As I held the mirror to my face, the person I saw staring back was a version of me that I hadn’t seen in over forty years.

“My, God!” I cried. “How is this possible? How....” I patted myself down from head to toe. I looked at the palms of my hands and then at the backs of them. I peeled my socks off and looked at my feet. I pulled my shirt up and marveled at my washboard abs. Every part of me looked young, smooth and tight. I turned to Lilith, unable to speak. She reached up and closed my opened mouth.

“You’re not upset, are you?”

“Upset? No! Of course not.”

“Oh, it’s just that some old fogies can’t wait to die. I didn’t think you were one of them.”

“Are you saying I’ll never die?”

She laughed robustly, even snorted. “No, you’ll die...someday, just not as soon as you thought. Unless I kill you, that is.”

I knew she was kidding, but still, I let the comment go unchallenged, considering her questionable past with the Lieberman workshop. “So, what now? Where do I go from here?”

She stepped toward me. “Where do you want to go?”

I put my arms around her and pulled her in closer. “I want to go where ever you go.” I leaned in to kiss her.

“Wait,” she said, and pulled away. “This is not why I did this. I included you in my rite of passage because I thought you had lost yourself. I wanted to help.”

“And you have. I truly was lost. If not for you, I don’t know what I would have done.”

“But it’s different now. You know that.”

“Yes. I see. We’re nearly the same age now.”

“Hardly,” she said, in her typical sarcastic breath. “I’m still thrice your age.”

“Funny, you don’t look a day over twenty.”

The lights and sirens coming around the corner let us know that the ambulance and fire trucks were almost there. Lilith took me by the hand and led me off to the side of the yard where we melted into the crowd of onlookers that had spilled out of neighboring homes.

Behind the fire trucks and ambulance came more police cars, one of which carried Carlos and Spinelli to the scene. We faded back further behind the crowd, took a seat on a rock wall

partitioning her yard from the neighbor's, and disappeared into the shadows.

"I'll have to tell them," I said. "They'll think we died in the tornado if I don't."

She shook her head. "Tell them what you will about yourself, but leave me out of it."

"But, why?"

"Because, don't you see? Every once in a while I have to make it look like I died. How else can I explain my age?"

"You mean you've done this before?"

She raised her right shoulder to her ear and dropped it. "Eh, a few times."

"How many?"

"Well, you have to figure that witches only age about a year to every three that mortals age. After ten or fifteen years, people start asking questions. You can't just go around telling them you look so damn great because you eat right and exercise. Why do you think we used to get burned at the stake so often? People back in those days looked like shit at thirty. At least now it's getting so that a careful witch can wait a decade or two before she renews her rite of passage."

"So, you have to renew it from time-to-time?"

"I don't have to," she scoffed. "Not if I want to become an old hag like my grandmother."

"Is she a witch, too?"

"Detective, all the women in my family are witches. We came over on the Mayflower."

"Huh." I looked out over the crowd of people that ventured closer to the spot where Lilith's home once stood. The police did little to keep them away, seeing there wasn't much more than a slab left for them to look at.

I turned to Lilith, who didn't seem the least bit concerned about losing her house. I asked her, "How does that work again? The ceremony, I mean. I look forty years younger, while you, forgive me for saying, have changed little, relatively speaking."

She laughed, which made me feel silly for asking. But it really didn't make sense to me. "It's your prime," she said, and I nodded as if I knew what she was talking about. "The rite of passage restores the body to its biological prime. For women, that's usually about age twenty, for men, about twenty-five, regardless of where you start.

"I last renewed my rite of passage eighteen years ago. That reset my clock back to what you see now. If you knew me then you would have expected to see me as a thirty-eight-year-old last night. And you saw me. I mean, let's face it. Did I look pretty damn good for thirty-eight, or what?"

"Shah! You looked smokin'."

"I know."

"Right, then. I see what you mean. Another couple of years and someone would have started asking questions."

"Exactly."

"But you could help yourself look older if you wanted to. You could do something funky with your hair, baggy up on the pants...."

"What. And deny an ass like this?" She hopped off the wall and modeled her rear end for me. "No way!"

"All right. I get it," I said. She did have a fine ass, witchcraft notwithstanding; the girl had earned the bragging rights and then some.

"Besides," she added, and I thought she sounded a little disappointed. "There's been a major shift in the celestial alignment that facilitates the passage. I won't have the opportunity to renew my vows again for another ninety-nine years. I'll be two hundred and seventy one by then. Even for a witch, that's old. If I couldn't have completed the ceremony tonight, I don't think I would have made it to another one."

"Really?" I said, and my mind drifted off somewhere, wondering what might happen to me in

the meantime. If my biological clock slowed to the pace of hers, then ninety-nine years might only add thirty-three to my now twenty-five. In that case, I'd still look only fifty-eight. Perhaps then, she and I could renew the vows again.

I leaned back on the wall and nearly fell off it. Lilith laughed, but it brought home her point. Nothing she or I did anymore could ever seem so simple. How does one keep reinventing one's self in the face of near immortality? How does one carry on a normal life? I turned to her, hoping to find answers in the subtleties of her mood.

"Lilith? May I ask you a question?"

"No."

"No, what? I can't ask you a question?"

"No. That's the answer to the question you were going to ask. Actually, your question was a two-part question. Wasn't it?"

I hated that she could still do that. "Yes."

"Then the answer is the same for both."

"I see." I sat on the wall, stewing over the matter, unsure if I shouldn't ask her anyway just to clarify things. When I couldn't take it any longer, I turned to her again and said, "So, you were never married?"

She kept her gaze straight ahead. For all the people and equipment picking around at the tornado site, it seemed remarkably quiet. "No, I never married."

I nodded. "Yeah, me neither. And no children?"

"Uh-uh."

"Right. Same here." I reached out and took her hand. "So do you—"

"No, Tony, I don't. So, don't ask."

"Okay. I won't ask." I let go of her hand. She turned around to face the crowd again, but then stepped back, settling against the wall between my knees. I pulled her in closer, wrapping my arms around her waist and setting my chin upon her shoulder. Her hair smelled so very fine and her cheek so smooth against mine.

I know she wanted me to think I knew that she knew what I wanted to ask her, but I'm banking on the hope that she didn't. After all, Lilith is a complicated woman. She knows what she wants, and I'm sure she gets what she wants when she wants it.

Me, I'm not so complicated, and I'm a patient guy. Add to that the real possibility that I may have another hundred or so years to get what I want.

Earlier, I set my hand upon the obsidian in my pocket and made a wish that I might start my life over, that I might know then what I know now. I prayed that the powers of witchcraft bestowed on the granitic glass through Lilith's spell might somehow bend to my will, if only I believed hard enough.

She later told me that the obsidian wasn't the true eye of the witch, but at the time, I didn't know that. I cannot say with certainty whether or not the obsidian had anything to do with what took place that night, or if the evening's events were all part of Lilith's original grand scheme. Either way, I believe that any given circumstance comes with its own built-in variables.

I listened to the words of Lilith's rite of passage ceremony. She invoked the powers of the coven, '*...Invoke thy magick, and essence grant,*' she said. I know I heard it. Towards the end, she added, '*...by Rite of Passage this night begun, bestow upon thy soul plus one.*'

Now, I'm no expert on the ways of witchcraft, but seeing that I'm now some forty years younger, I'm thinking that '*plus one*' means that I, like Lilith, had been granted the secrets and essence of magick.

I still have a way to go before I catch up with her. I mean, I won't be casting spells anytime soon, but I can wait. Besides, I think it will be worth it. And it should be fun, too. After all, Lilith's not the only one who can stare into the Eye of the Witch without blinking.

About the author

Dana E. Donovan grew up in New England where folklore and superstitions can mold a town's history as much as its people. As a boy, he loved reading Sherlock Holmes mysteries and tales of adventure by Mark Twain. Later, he became a big fan of Stephen King, and when he started writing his own mysteries, influences from all his literary heroes began echoing in his writings. In his blended style, Dana exploits small town phenomena, perpetuating the enigma of its people and the belief in all that dies is not dead.

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