The Burning Time

By
JG Faherty

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"JG Faherty has delivered a fantastic novel that will delight fans of dark fiction. Horror drips from every page, and his mastery of folklore and the Cthulhu mythos adds an air of reality to The Burning Time that's impossible to ignore. I highly recommend it." – Brett J. Talley, author of the Bram Stoker Award®-nominated *That Which Should Not Be*.

"Faherty's best tale to date…A rip-roaring supernatural horror tale…A grand adventure…a good old-fashioned good versus evil supernatural tale that moves along at break-neck speed. You will find yourself staying up late into the night as you get lost in the town of Hastings Mills and all the frightening things that are happening there." – Peter Schwotzer, book reviewer, Famous Monsters of Filmland, HorrorNews.net, and LiteraryMayhem.com.

"This dude is twisted! JG Faherty really knows his stuff!" – Ray Billingsley, creator of the best-selling nationally-syndicated comic strip, CURTIS.

"Faherty's tale is a classic, compelling and gripping tale of good versus evil...Faherty's knowledge of the paranormal is spooky in its own right, cementing his position in formidable, spell binding horror." – Dave Gammon, HorrorNews.net

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Finally, this book is dedicated to my Dad, who left us too soon, and to my faithful companions Harley and Buffy, who never left my side until their very last seconds. They're all reunited now on the other side of that rainbow bridge, and they still watch over me, I'm sure.

Part I

He brings the snakeskin in his hands,
He makes the river call the lovers,
He calls the howling of the dogs,
When the Stranger comes to town.

- The Stranger, undated Southern folk myth

Chapter 1

The worst heat wave anyone could remember gripped the upstate New York town of Hastings Mills in a humid, heavy fist that had tempers flaring faster than beer and lemonade could douse them. Everyone agreed it was just a matter of time before either the sky opened up and finally gave them some much-needed rain or someone grabbed a gun and started shooting from the school roof, the way that fellow from the college did back in '87.

Had they known what was coming, more than a few would have packed their things and headed out for a long vacation. Most folks would have stayed, though.

That's just the way things are in small towns.

* * *

Christa Jennings closed her eyes, spread her arms wide, and listened. The warm night breeze carried the sounds of summer: frogs and crickets chirping, night birds calling softly. The distant sound of a car horn.

Thirty feet below the bridge, something splashed in the river – a fish perhaps, or maybe a frog.

Christa ignored the sounds and waited for the Voice, the one that had called her from bed and told her to go to the bridge.

The breeze washed over her naked body, tickling her nipples into tiny, hard peaks. She shivered. Her entire being tingled, like the time she'd let Jimmy Rollins put his hand down her pants. He'd gotten mad when she refused to let him go further, and the next day he'd broken up with her before first period.

That's right, Christa, the Voice said. *He left you because you weren't good enough for him. But now he wants you back. You still want him, don't you?*

A tear rolled down her cheek. She did. Not a night went by that she didn't think about him.

What should I do?

Look down, my child. He's waiting for you. Just jump into his arms.

Christa smiled and stepped off the bridge.

Below the dark waters of the Alleghany River, deeper than the river bottom itself, something gnashed its teeth in hungry anticipation, its eternal craving for blood and flesh unquenchable.

Marla Jennings sat up in bed, her mouth open in a silent scream. Cold sweat beaded on her forehead and between her ample breasts. *A nightmare. Something about her daughter. So horrible....*

"Christa?" she whispered.

In the backyard, Max, their Golden retriever, let loose a terrible howl.

Marla burst into tears.

* * *

The man in the black shirt with the white and black collar jumped from the cab of the eighteen-wheel truck and turned to grab his battered suitcase from the footwell. The hard, rough scales of the snakeskin leather reflected rainbow colors in the yellow afternoon sun.

"Here you go, Father," the driver called down to him. "Sure you don't want me to take you all the way into town? It's hotter than Hell...heck out there."

The man with the suitcase shook his head. He had straight, raven-black hair that seemed too long for a man of the cloth, at least in the truck driver's mind. *These young priests today ain't nothin' like the ones I grew up listening to on Sunday mornings. Too full of liberal horseshit.*

"Thank you, but it won't be necessary. My legs can use the exercise."

"Well, you have a good day, Father. Glad I could help."

"Bless you, and have a good day as well."

He thought about telling the driver to make a last call home, because before nightfall he'd be dead, crushed in the cab of his overturned truck somewhere on Route 16.

Instead, he shut the door and waved as the long-haul rig pulled back onto the highway, the amplified goose-call of the air horn trailing behind as the driver headed toward his rendezvous with death.

He waited until the truck disappeared into the hazy heat waves rising from the asphalt before turning north toward Hastings Mills.

A short walk brought him to a bridge that crossed the Alleghany River. To his right was Riverside Park, where a few children were tossing a baseball. To his left, acres and acres of corn, the stalks already five feet high, extended as far as the eye could see.

Rather than crossing the bridge, he made his way down the sloping hillside to the river itself. He climbed over the chest-high levee and down to the water. Overhead, a sudden gathering of dark clouds slid across the sky, dimming the afternoon light to gray. Kneeling on a wide stone so as not to muddy his pants, he dipped his hands into the water. Warmed from days of sun and lack of rain, the water barely cooled his skin as he dug his fingers into the mud, grinding the soil and grit in his fists.

"My Lords and Gods, hear my prayer. Help me bring your Words to these people, so they too may follow your path."

The calm water reflected his face as he spoke. Against his pale skin, his coal-black eyes were bottomless wells. The image staring at him was that of a man about forty, with a thin, angular face and a long neck. Yet somehow it conveyed a feeling of great age, of knowledge well beyond his physical years. He spread his lips and then frowned at the yellowish, crooked teeth his smile exposed. It wasn't the appearance he'd have chosen for himself if given the opportunity.

No matter. Time to begin.

Iridescent suitcase in hand, he climbed back up the hill with great ease, his long, thin limbs and body moving with the deliberate, silent movements of a praying mantis climbing a tree.

Fifteen minutes of walking brought him to the gates of Perpetual Hope Cemetery. The wide, neatly-groomed lawns, the ground gently rolling in a series of slight hills, extended all the way to the back lawn of the Our Lady of Perpetual Hope church.

The Reverend ran a hand along the wrought-iron fence as he walked down Main Street, treading on sidewalk now that he'd entered the city limits. When he reached the intersection of Main and State Street, the other main road in town, he turned left. Another hundred feet brought him to the entrance of the church. The wide staircase, twenty-five cement steps tall, showed its age in thin cracks and mossy patches.

On the large sign by the sidewalk, someone had replaced the usual announcements with a greeting:

Welcome Reverend Cyrus Christian

Putting on his best smile, he started up the stairs, eager to get started.

Somewhere far behind the church, back where the only sounds should have been the whisper of wind through corn and the laughing calls of hungry crows, a dog howled.

Before long, several others had joined it.

* * *

The man with the silver hair stood at the outskirts of Hastings Mills and listened. Behind him, the sun descended through the rapidly thickening cloud cover in a riot of purples, reds, and oranges. He wore a black jacket of indeterminate style that was far too heavy for the tropical-level heat.

Over the faint sounds of music, shouting voices, and car engines coming from town, he heard howling and barking in the distance.

It could mean nothing. Dogs bayed all the time, especially farm dogs. Or it could mean he'd followed the right road, read the magical signs correctly.

Lifting a small, road-worn leather satchel that resembled the black bags doctors once carried, he entered Hastings Mills.

Chapter 2

Billy Ray Capshaw hitched his faded, olive-green duffle bag over his shoulder, looked both ways, and crossed Interstate 17. 'You can't be too careful' was his favorite motto. It was this dedication to caution that had kept him out of jail so far.

On the other side of the highway was the exit for Hastings Mills. He scuffed his way down the ramp, using a sodden red bandana to mop the sweat from his face. The blacktop, baked soft by the blistering afternoon heat, grabbed at his heavy work boots like sticky chewing gum.

At the bottom of the ramp, where it met Route 16 going north and south, was a sign:

Hastings Mills
Population 15,000

Someone had added a third line in white spray paint:

'And shrinking.'

Billy paused and wiped his face again. Droplets of sweat fell from the point of his arrow-shaped Van Dyke beard onto the front of his yellow-stained, sleeveless t-shirt.

For the past three days the normally pleasant June weather had been doing a fine imitation of Florida in July, complete with steaming air, overcast skies, and swarms of mosquitoes. Billy was pretty sure he'd dropped several pounds while hitching northwest from Binghamton, despite the fact he'd been eating well, thanks to the wad of cash he'd lifted from a drunken trucker in Albany.

As he walked, he wondered what Tony was up to, where he'd gone after leaving Binghamton, or if he'd even managed to get out of town at all. *Serves him right if he's doing jail time. You don't shit where you eat, and killing those girls definitely counted as a hot load in the kitchen. Who knew how many other geezers they could have ripped off if the cops hadn't been breathing down Tony's neck?*

When he reached Route 16, he turned right and followed it into

town, where it changed to Main Street. He knew if he stayed on it, past the shopping district, the cemetery, and the river, it would become 16 South again, eventually taking him into Pennsylvania. In the other direction lay Buffalo, a two-hour drive north, and he most definitely didn't want to go there. Or any other large city. Not until his own heat cooled down.

Billy's path carried him past High Street Park and its rusty playground equipment and into Hastings Mills proper. The first couple of blocks were just as he remembered from his childhood, an assortment of small mom-and-pop stores lining both sides of the road.

Classic Vinyl was still there, its bins full of LPs and singles visible through dusty windows. Cusher's Used Furniture. The Salvation Army outlet. Angie's Italian Restaurant, where his Aunt Kate used to take him on Saturdays.

"Small towns and old women," he muttered to himself. His father had always said those were two things that never changed until they died. It was one of the few conversations with his old man he still remembered.

As he walked, new names began to show up on the storefronts, and the stores themselves were in better condition. A Burger King where there used to be an empty lot. A store selling nothing but video games. Another music store, CD-Mania.

No vinyl in there, he thought. *No cassette tapes, either.*

Clothing stores selling men's suits or fashions for professional women. A dry cleaner. Hot Wok Chinese Take Out.

Guess what, Pop? The town has changed. You were wrong. Again.

Billy stopped outside the Hot Wok and glanced at the menu in the window, thinking he might grab an egg roll and a Coke. He was reaching for the door when a blurry figure appeared ghost-like in the glass.

Turning, he found himself facing an overweight man in a tan uniform. A black hat, like the ones the State Troopers wore, perched over a wide, sweating forehead.

"Where you headed, son?" The sheriff's voice was deep and gruff, the voice of a man who enjoyed using his authority. Fresh food stains on his shirt and tie belied his attempt at making a positive impression as a capable law enforcement officer.

"Not exactly sure, Officer," Billy tried to keep his voice calm. The dime bag of weed in his duffle suddenly weighed a thousand pounds.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" The officer's round, porcine face grew redder, and he took off his mirrored sunglasses, exposing washed-out blue eyes.

Billy Ray launched into his standard lie. "I'm hitching to California. I got friends there, and I want to see the country the old-fashioned way. I decided to stop here for a few days because I used to live here when I was a kid." The last part was true, and he hoped it would lend credence to his story.

"Used to live here, huh? What's your name?" Disbelief colored the officer's voice and showed in the way one eyebrow rose up.

"Billy Ray Capshaw."

The second eyebrow joined its partner. "Capshaw? Kate Mulligan's nephew?"

Billy tilted his head, not sure if he was being played for a fool. "Yeah. We used to live out on River Road."

"I knew your aunt real well. You too, 'though you probably don't remember me." He scowled as he said it, taking any pleasantness out of the words.

"No, sir, I don't." Billy stared at the moon face, trying to imagine it twenty years younger, a piglet instead of a pig.

"Back then I was just a second-year patrol officer. I caught you and your friends picking the lock on the back door of the old bakery. Had to take you home to your Aunt."

Jesus Christ. Of all the people....

"Harry Showalter?"

The man nodded. "It's Chief Showalter now. Twenty-four years on the force, last five as Chief."

"I was only nine." Billy ventured a smile. "You know the crap kids get into."

Showalter nodded. "Sure do. I also know that most kids who get into trouble when they're young grow up to be even bigger troublemakers. Your aunt was a good woman. You caused her a lot of grief."

He leaned forward, putting his face close to Billy's.

"You best not cause me any grief while you're in my town. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Showalter nodded again, his round head tilting up and down on the squat neck as if on a greased track. "Glad to hear it." He slid his sunglasses on, hitched his pants up, and strolled away, unknowing or uncaring of the sweat stains on his back and ass.

Billy's knees went weak, and he leaned against the hot, dusty brick of the storefront until his heart settled into something resembling a normal

rhythm. When he could finally walk again, he cut across the street, no longer hungry.

Sonuvabitch.

Suddenly, laying low in Hastings Mills didn't seem like such a great idea.

Chapter 3

The sign over the Chilton Arms read, "Rooms by the day or week. Laundry facilities in the back." Beneath it a second sign proclaimed "Vacancies" in red neon.

The man with the silver hair paused at the door. Across the road, a few small houses sat side by side. A Pizza Hut, several families inside enjoying their meals of greasy bread and cheese, shared a parking lot with the King Cone ice cream shop. Soon there would be lines outside their windows, as children, adults, and couples in love all succumbed to the siren lure of cold chocolate and vanilla on a hot summer's night. A wistful smile came over his face as he remembered the carefree times of his own childhood, cut short far too soon.

The look faded as quickly as it had arrived.

With a sigh, he pushed open the door to the Chilton Arms. A bell tinkled as he entered.

"Can I help you?" A fiftyish woman sporting a beehive hairdo and squirrel-ish features that hinted at inbreeding sat behind the counter, a chicken drumstick in one chubby hand and a soda cup in the other. A small color television blared as a game show contestant correctly guessed the clue to a puzzle.

"I'd like a room, please." He set his worn case down and pulled an equally aged wallet from the pocket of his jeans.

"How many nights?" The woman put down her dinner with a frown and opened a ledger filled with names and dates.

"I'm not sure. A week; perhaps two or three."

"Gotta pay the whole week in advance. Since today's Friday, you can either pay 'til next Friday or Sunday." She looked him up and down, her beady eyes alive with curiosity and wariness.

He knew the reason for her caution. Although his clothes had a liberal covering of dust from long days and nights of walking, he wasn't the sort of person she'd expect to see staying in a run-down boarding house.

His face, tanned and lined from years of exposure to sun and wind, made him appear older than the forty-two his driver's license showed. His silver hair furthered this impression, while at the same time giving him a look of authority and responsibility.

She'd wonder at his eyes, as dark as night, and his eyebrows, with no trace of silver in them. No five o'clock shadow on his face. His jeans, white button-down shirt, and black boots were neither torn nor stained.

When he spoke, his teeth would be straight and clean and white, and his breath would have no trace of alcohol, distinguishing him from most of her other guests.

All in all, he'd seem more suited to a Motel Six than the Chilton Arms.

"I'll pay until Sunday, if that's all right. How much?"

"It's ten a day if you pay by the week, and fifteen by the night."

"That's fine. Here you go." He handed her four twenties and a ten. A quick glance showed only a five and a few singles remaining. First thing tomorrow he'd need to look for work.

"Sign in here." She slid the ledger over, pointed with the pen at the next empty line. Her demeanor had softened now that she had money in hand, and she even gave him a weak smile.

As he signed in tiny, economical script, the ring on the third finger of his left hand barely shone under the cheap fluorescent lights, the plain band so old and scratched it was almost unrecognizable as gold.

The woman glanced at his name before closing the book. "Welcome to the Chilton Arms, Mister John Root. You're in room 12B." She handed him a key on a large plastic tag. "I'm Marge Chilton. I own the place. You come see me if you need anything."

"Thank you, Marge. I will. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Mister Root."

* * *

Mitch Anderson hurried down the steps of Hastings Mills Middle School. Danni's old Mustang sat by the curb, little puffs of oily smoke squirting from the tailpipe.

He wondered if he'd make it in time.

Question: How can twenty yards seem like a mile?

Answer: If you're the brightest kid in your seventh-grade class, and also the smallest.

He'd bolted from World History the moment the three o'clock bell rang, but by the time he swung past his locker to get his books for the weekend, the halls had filled with students and teachers all migrating toward the doors, eager to begin their weekend.

He was halfway down the steps and thinking he had a chance when a hand came down on his shoulder.

"Hey, Tiny. Where do you think you're going?" The hand spun him around to face its owner.

Ralphie Morgese, resident school bully and bane of all the eight-graders, poked him in the chest with a hairy-knuckled finger.

"You made me look stupid in History, butt-face." He slapped Mitch's books to the ground. The boys standing behind Ralphie burst into laughter.

"You don't need me to look stupid," Mitch mumbled as he scrambled to gather his homework papers. As soon as the words left his mouth, he knew he'd signed his death warrant.

A collective gasp rose from the surrounding students. Sensing a fight, the onlookers crowded closer.

Hands pulled him up. He caught a glimpse of a fist coming his way and then the punch caught him in the stomach, bending him over and knocking his breath away in a loud *oof*.

"Whatcha got to say now?"

"Blow me," Mitch gasped. *Idiot! Three more days of school and you'd have been free of him for the whole summer.*

"What?" Ralphie raised both fists. "Oh, I am so gonna kick your ass for that."

His common sense shouted *Run!* but as he did far too often, Mitch found himself ignoring his own advice. "Fuck you."

The second punch came so fast he never saw it. Pain exploded in his mouth and nose, and the whole world disappeared behind red and black stars.

Mitch's hands moved to his face as he fell to the ground. Something warm and wet covered his palms.

"You little shit. I'm gonna—"

"Leave him alone, asshole."

Through tear-filled eyes, Mitch saw a tall, blurry figure stepping in front of Ralphie. For a brief moment he thought his prayers of a teacher rescuing him had been answered. Then his hope for a respectable escape plummeted as he recognized his sister's voice.

"Aww, look, Tiny's sister is here to help her widdle brother."

Danni Anderson put her hands against Ralphie's chest and shoved, sending him hard against the railing and then down onto his ass.

"Hey, cut it out!"

"What's the matter, little boy?" Danni stared down at him. "Is the big girl picking on you?"

"Screw you, bitch."

Danni grabbed Ralphie by the shirt and raised him to his feet. She slammed him against the railing again, drawing another shout of pain. He took a wild swing at her, but she stepped back and his fist flew harmlessly past. She grabbed the fingers of his other hand and bent them backwards until he cried out.

"Stop! Stop!"

Holding him in that position, she said loud enough for everyone to hear, "Apologize or I'm gonna break your fingers."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

"Good." She let go and he slumped against the railing, cradling his injured hand. "C'mon, Mitch. Get your books and let's go. I'm late for work."

Mitch wiped his arm across his face. It came away streaked with red. He touched his nose and felt around the inside of his mouth with his tongue, but nothing seemed broken or loose. He scooped up his books, never taking his eyes off Ralphie, who stared at him with murderous intent. The other students, most of whom had gone silent when Danni appeared, stepped aside to let Mitch down the steps.

"Hey, Tiny."

Mitch looked back.

"You're dead on Monday." Ralphie drew a finger across his own throat to illustrate his words.

"Get your butt in gear, Mitch," Danni called from the bottom of the steps, "or no trip to the museum this weekend."

Another burst of laughter followed him down to the car.

Just when I thought things couldn't get worse.

I can't wait for summer.

Chapter 4

Reverend Cyrus Christian looked up at the knock on his office door.

"Come in." He closed the book he'd been reading, resting one hand on the worn, brown leather cover.

Helen Kapinski, the church's gray-haired administrative manager, angled her head around the door. "I hate to bother you, Reverend...."

"That's all right, Mrs. Kapinski. I've just been preparing my sermon. What can I do for you?"

She entered the office, her floral print dress exposing a narrow hint of ankle above sensible shoes. One wrinkled hand, pale as a fish's belly, held out some papers to him. They drooped like dead flowers, victims of the same beastly heat that had the whole town in a funk.

"The maintenance and financial records you asked for."

"Oh, yes. Thank you." He took them, gave them a quick glance.

Two facts jumped out at him immediately. One, the church was long overdue for important renovations, such as a new roof, painting, and other repairs. Second, there was barely enough money in the bank account to purchase office supplies.

"This is most distressing. Pastor, um...."

"Pastor McMichaels," Helen supplied the name for him.

"Yes. He didn't do a very good job taking care of this place, did he?"

Helen pushed her cat's eye glasses back up her long, patrician nose. "He did the best he could, Reverend. But he was an old man, and when his wife got the cancer, well, he put most of his energy into taking care of her instead."

"Hmm. Well, that's all going to change. I want to raise at least fifteen thousand dollars by the end of the summer. That will take care of all the interior repairs, at least."

"Goodness!" Helen's liver-spotted hand went to her mouth. "How do you plan on getting all that money?"

Reverend Christian gave her a wide smile, then quickly closed his mouth when he saw her startled expression. “This is an old-fashioned town, so we’ll do it the old-fashioned way. We’ll have bake sales, raffles, picnics, maybe even a fair.”

He stood up, his tall, skeletal figure blocking the corner lamp and casting a narrow shadow across the desk. “Call the mayor and set up an appointment for me. I want to see what weekends the park is available, and find out what permits we’ll need.”

He picked up the leather-bound tome from the desk and stepped toward the door. “Excuse my hasty exit, but it’s time for services. Have a good afternoon, Mrs. Kapinski.”

The last strains of organ music faded away as Christian took his place behind the lectern. Afternoon sun streamed through the large, century-old stained-glass windows lining both sides of the church. Dust motes glittered in the yellow and red beams. The congregation fell silent, awaiting the start of the new Reverend’s first sermon.

“Welcome, brethren.” The wireless microphone clipped to his collar amplified his already powerful voice so it carried easily to those in the very back rows.

“I want to speak today of the Devil. Not the little red imp with the pitchfork who adorns the sides of your processed ham packages. No, I’m talking about the almighty, everlasting, perpetual Lord of Fire. Satan. Beelzebub. The Horned Goat.

“The Devil, my friends, is everywhere. He is the politician who takes the bribe and the businessman who offers it. He’s the street thug who steals your wallet and the CEO who steals your pension. He could be a small boy or....”

He paused, letting his gaze roam from one side of the church to the other, catching the eyes of the men, women, and children in the pews and making sure no one’s attention drifted away.

“Or an old man walking down the road.”

Christian threw his arms up and allowed his voice to rise in volume. “Beware the Stranger! Beware! The Devil could very well be...here...right...now!”

He punctuated each word by pointing to a different pew, making people jump in their seats or gasp. His voice ascended to a roar, the syllables shaking the candles on the altar.

“Fear the Stranger, people. He brings the fire that will burn your

town to ashes!" He shook his fist in the air. "You are but sheep before him! Baa! Baa! Your lambs belong to him. The Wizened Goat will rut with your women and cast them away. Your men will fall to their knees and tremble before him with bowed heads. His shadow will darken your doors."

As if on cue, the sunlight dimmed and sudden thunder detonated in rolling waves, vibrating the floors and wooden benches. Lighting exploded outside, the brilliant white washing away the rainbow colors of the glass.

Several women and children screamed and more than one man cried out as the church doors flew open with a tremendous bang. A man stood there, backlit by the lightning. His silver hair glowed with each unearthly display of energy.

Heavy gusts of wind pulled missalettes and event calendars from benches and turned them into confused paper birds. The sharp tang of ozone overpowered the comforting scents of incense and candle wax.

The silver-haired man turned and closed the doors against the storm-laden currents. Papers and pamphlets fell to the floor, flightless once more.

The silver-haired man's black eyes and unsmiling face glanced around the church until they locked on an empty seat in the back row. He started forward, his footsteps echoing in the silence.

A child's voice spoke. "Mama, is that the old man?"

Other voices joined in, the murmurs and whispers audible in the cavernous room.

"An old man."

"A stranger."

The silver-haired man ignored the comments and sat down. As he did, the lightning and thunder came to an end and weak sunlight brightened the windows again.

Reverend Christian eyed the man for a moment.

Is it him? It could be. So many years have passed....

Christian slapped one pale hand on the pulpit. "People, people. Quiet, please." He glanced at his notes and wondered if he should try to recapture their attention. Several parishioners were stealing not-so-secretive looks back at the stranger.

Momentary annoyance at having lost control of the crowd subsided as he realized the need for patience. *I've planted the seed. Better to move on and save the rest for another day.*

"Before we begin the Offering, I would like to take a moment and

ask a special favor of each and all of you. Our church, *your* church, is in dire need of repairs. This once-beautiful house of worship has fallen on hard times, which is why we will be organizing several fundraising events throughout the summer. Next week's bulletin will have a list. But in the meantime, please do add something extra to the collection plate, if you can. Every dollar helps."

Opening the Bible to the passage marked for the Offering, Christian began reading again. But his thoughts kept returning to the man with the silver hair.

Is it him?

* * *

Billy Ray Capshaw had been just as startled as the parishioners around him when the old guy walked in late and created a crazy scene.

It had been a nice diversion from the usual sleep-inducing church ceremonies – *although this pastor sure knows how to keep you awake. What a voice!* – but when the Reverend mentioned the fundraising events, that's when things had gotten interesting.

Billy had come to the service simply to see if he could snag a few wallets in the after-church crowd that always gathered by the door. His cash supply was okay, but it wouldn't last long.

Now, however, he had a much better reason to stick around. If he could get hired on as a handyman for the church, it would kill two birds: having a job so Showalter stayed off his back, and keeping him close to the donations jar. He knew from past experience that over the course of a few months a big church like Our Lady of Perpetual Hope could rake in ten grand or more.

That'd be enough to get me to Vegas and set up shop.

Billy waited until most of the parishioners had left before approaching the Reverend.

"Excuse me, Father."

"Yes?"

Up close, the pastor's appearance was even more severe than it had appeared from the back of the church. His onyx eyes seemed capable of ferreting out the secrets hidden in the darkest recesses of the brain, and his humorless mouth with its thin, pallid lips gave the impression of being allergic to smiling. The only thing out of place was his limp, shoulder-length black hair, which he wore combed straight back.

"I was wondering if maybe you needed someone to help out around the church, especially with all the renovations you were talking about. I'm pretty handy with a hammer or a paint brush, and even though I can't work for free, you'd save a lot of money by not having to hire carpenters or painters, or whatever."

The pastor's narrow eyebrows furrowed into a scowl, and Billy's hopes sank.

Just then, an elderly woman joined them. "Why, if it isn't Billy Ray Capshaw! I'd recognize Kate Mulligan's nephew anywhere! Where have you been all these years?"

Billy stared at the shriveled figure. "Mrs. Kapinski?"

He couldn't believe she was still alive, let alone still working at the church.

She was ancient when I was a kid!

"Yes! Reverend Christian, would you believe I used to babysit for Billy's aunt? Kate and her family were all very active in the church. Billy, what brings you back to town?"

"I'm traveling cross-country, and I thought I'd see how the old town is doing." The lie came easier than when Showalter had confronted him.

"Well, I hope you're planning on staying for a while."

"Actually," the Reverend interrupted, "Billy was just asking me for a job here at the church. It appears he's going to be our new handyman."

"I am?"

"Yes, indeed." A bony hand came down on Billy's shoulder. "I'm sure we can find plenty for you to do."

The long, knobby fingers tightened, just enough to let Billy know they could cause real pain if they wanted to.

"In fact," the Reverend continued, "There's even a room in the basement with a cot and a sink. You could stay there. We can both save each other money. How does that sound, Billy?"

"That's, uh, great. I'll bring my stuff over this afternoon, Father."

The fingers squeezed a little harder, tips digging into flesh and muscle. Reverend Christian smiled. "Reverend, Billy, not Father. I'm not a priest. Perhaps you need to brush up on your studies."

"I'll do that." He tried to move away, but the Reverend's grip grew even stronger.

Jesus! How'd a guy so skinny get so strong? He could already imagine the bruises he'd have tomorrow.

"Be not the stranger in the fold, Billy. Now that your name is known to me, I can protect thee from him who walks the lonely path."

"Uh, that's great, Fa…I mean, Reverend. Look, I gotta go. I'll be back later."

The vice grip on his shoulder eased. "Excellent. Tomorrow I will show you around, and we can put together a list of chores. I'll also need you to help me set up for the various charity events we'll be running."

"No problem. I'll see you later. Bye, Mrs. Kapinski."

He hurried down the steps before the old bat finished saying goodbye, in case the freaky pastor decided to lock his lobster claws on him again.

Walking the six blocks down State Street to the Hastings Mills Motor Lodge gave him time to start thinking of a plan. The offer to sleep in the church was a bonus. He couldn't have asked for a better way to get alone time near the cash.

Three months of shit work and I'll be out of town with enough lettuce in my pocket to put together a real scam.

A cop car slowed as it passed by. A round face hidden behind mirrored aviator sunglasses stared at him from the open driver's side window.

"Keeping out of trouble, Billy-boy?" Chief Showalter's gruff voice mocked him. The car sped up before Billy could answer.

Three months. All you have to do is keep your nose clean and stay the hell away from Chief Lardbutt.

As he knew from past experience, both of those were easier said than done.

Chapter 5

John Root paused a few feet away from Reverend Christian. He'd planned on asking the clergyman about being taken on as a handyman for the church when the scruffy young man with the impish beard and greasy hair beat him to it.

They just might regret hiring that one. It hadn't escaped John's notice the way the fellow's blue eyes had been focusing on people's back pockets. He'd been around enough thieves in his long life to recognize one when he saw him.

Well, that's their problem. Mine is I still need to find work.

He turned away and stepped right on the foot of a young woman standing behind him.

"Ow!"

"I'm terribly sorry, Miss. Let me get that." John picked up the purse the girl had dropped.

"That's okay. I thought you were waiting to speak with Reverend Christian."

"I was, but that other fellow got the job."

"What job?"

John smiled at her. "With all the renovations the church will be doing, I was hoping they needed someone to do the work."

"Are you a carpenter?"

"No, just someone new in town and looking to make some money. I am good with my hands and a hard worker, though, if you happen to know anyone who's hiring."

"Actually, I've been looking for someone to take care of a few things around my place."

John took another look at her. Late twenties, not too thin but not overweight like so many people these days. A pleasant, non-committal smile that showed just a hint of bright-white teeth. Brown hair cut fashionably to the middle of her neck. Eyes the dark green of mid-summer

maple leaves.

All in all, a face that had an intelligent look about it, not someone he'd expect to be asking strangers to come work for her.

Unless she had some type of ulterior motive?

Don't be a fool, John! he berated himself. The Stranger never appeared as a woman.

"Uh, Danni, what are you doing?"

The boy standing with her had more sense than she did, apparently. His close familial relationship with her was evident from the hair color and slightly freckled complexion they shared to the shape of their noses and the pout of their lips. But where her eyes were an almost unnatural shade of green, the boy's were a more common olive color, emphasized by the thick glasses he wore. The top of his head didn't quite reach the girl's shoulders. His pale skin and thin build made him look almost sickly.

"Quiet, Mitch."

The boy's mouth twisted up in a bitter grimace but he did as he was told.

"So, can you do the work for me?"

She stared directly at him, and for a moment her bright-eyed gaze stole all of his attention.

"Well, I can come over and see what needs to be done. Then I can give you a better idea of whether or not I can do it, and how long it will take."

"What are your rates?"

He took in her clean but definitely not new clothes. The boy was dressed in similar fashion; shirt and pants well cared for, but probably from a discount store, the kind whose names always ended in Mart. No wedding ring on her finger. A single mother working hard to raise her child? No shortage of those these days, here or back home.

"I work for forty dollars a day, plus lunch, if that's acceptable." He only needed ten for the room, and he could take care of breakfast and dinner on his own.

"Forty dollars? For a full day?" Her eyebrows, the same shade as her hair, rose up in twin arches.

"That's more than enough for me, ma'am."

She cocked her head slightly to the right and gave him a calculating stare. For a moment he wondered if he hadn't priced himself too high for her budget.

Finally she smiled and held out her hand. "You're hired. My name's

Danni Anderson. This is my little brother, Mitch."

He grasped her hand. Her grip was firm, almost man-like. The grip of a woman used to fending for herself.

"John Root."

"Well, Mister Root, why don't you follow us to the house right now and I'll give you the tour?"

"Didn't you want to speak with Reverend Christian?"

She shrugged, a girlish movement accompanied by a quick head tilt that lowered his estimate of her age several years.

"I was going to sign my brother up for the summer rec program, but I can do it tomorrow. I'm parked out back. How 'bout you?"

"I don't have a car. But if you give me directions, I can meet you in a short while."

"Don't be silly!" She patted his arm. "Come with us. I'll even supply lunch and take you home after."

"Thank you." He pretended not to notice the angry glare Mitch cast in her direction.

"No problem. I hope you like PB and J." She turned and headed for the slate and cement stairs that led down to the sidewalk.

"PB and...?" The unfamiliar phrase caught him off guard.

"Peanut butter and jelly. Don't they make PB and J sandwiches where you're from?"

John felt his lips turn up in a wistful smile. Clara had had always kept jars of homemade peanut butter and various jams down in the cellar. He couldn't remember how many years it had been since he'd had any.

"Actually, they're a favorite of mine. I enjoy pecan butter and almond butter as well."

"What? Are those for real?" Mitch paused as he opened the car door. He'd put on a sudden burst of speed and grabbed the handle of the front passenger door, leaving John to get in the back.

Cautious and smart. Good qualities to have.

John slid into the back of the Mustang, pushing aside crumpled papers, a baseball hat, empty soda cans, and other detritus. The black leather upholstery was hot even through the denim of his pants. Black electrician's tape covered several splits in the old leather.

"You can use any kind of nut to make a spread."

"I never heard of them," Mitch said, turning halfway in his seat. He'd put his glasses on, and the thick lenses gave his eyes a seen-through-a-fishbowl look.

"I've seen them in the grocery store," Danni said. She gave the key a twist and the car started with a loud rumble.

"Where are you from?"

"Mitch! Don't be rude." Danni frowned at him before pulling out of the parking spot.

"No, it's all right." *Better rude than hostile.* "I'm from South Carolina, Mitch. But I travel a lot for my work."

"What do you do?" Danni asked.

John raised an eyebrow to Mitch, letting him know he realized as well as the boy did that it was the same kind of rude question she'd just scolded him for asking. Mitch rolled his eyes in return.

Perhaps there's more to the boy than I first thought.

"I'm a historian. I document tales of past generations. Part of that means traveling the country, speaking with people and gathering their stories."

"You mean like fairy tales?" Mitch was turned all the way around and leaning on the top of his seat.

"Not exactly. These are more like legends. A good example would be the story of Johnny Appleseed, or Paul Bunyan and his blue ox Babe. Every locality has its own fables and legends. Often it's the descendants of settlers and Native Americans from whom I get the oldest, and best, stories."

"Aren't all those stories already in school books?"

John allowed himself a small chuckle. *If only people knew how limited the so-called history books really were.*

"There are so many stories and tales out there that I could fill a library of books. And that doesn't include the variations."

"Variations?"

"Of course. Here's a perfect example. Every Indian tribe has a tale of how the world was created. But many of the stories are different. In the Apache version, a tiny bearded man created three other gods, and together they created everything on Earth. But according to the Tuskegee, a crawfish and an eagle made the first earth. In the Crow legend, an old man and two ducks created the Earth."

"That's so cool!"

"It is," John agreed. He would have continued with more examples, but Danni interrupted him.

"Here we are," she said, turning onto a long, unpaved driveway. Gravel and dirt pinged underneath despite her slowing the car to a crawl.

The Anderson house was a two-story construction with a wrap-around porch on the front. It only took John one glance to see it needed a fresh coat of paint. The old-style asbestos shingles were faded and chipped. The front porch railing was broken in the middle so that it tilted down toward the dying, yellow grass of the front yard. The steps had warped from age and moisture, and the screen door hung at an angle from one hinge.

Danni glanced at him and correctly interpreted the look on his face. "If you think this is bad, wait 'til you see the inside."

"She's not lying," Mitch whispered as they bypassed the front porch completely and went around to the back door.

They entered through the kitchen, where peeling linoleum tiles provided glimpses of ancient, deformed plywood underneath. The wall paper, a shade of green so hideous it seemed almost demonic in origin, was peeling as badly as the exterior paint. A shoebox filled with bills and bank statements sat on the faded Formica-topped table.

"Follow me and I'll show you around while Mitch makes some sandwiches."

The rest of the rooms proved to be in similar shape. To John's experienced eye, most of the problems were cosmetic in nature. Patching some walls, a fresh coat of paint in every room, and new linoleum for the kitchen would be the main projects.

"I'd also suggest putting sheet linoleum in the upstairs bathroom instead of replacing the tile," he said, as they returned to the kitchen. "It's less expensive and easier to take care of."

"Sold. Anything that saves me money is a good thing."

Mitch had placed a pile of six peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, cut in halves, on a chipped plate in the center of the table, along with a large bag of potato chips, three glasses, and a quart of milk.

"We have soda if you prefer," Danni said.

"Milk is fine." John bit into a sandwich. The sweet and salty combination brought back memories of lunches on the porch with Clara and Jack. Even though the processed peanut butter and overly-sweet jam were nowhere near as good as his wife's had been, he still experienced a wave of homesickness that nearly brought him to tears.

"When do you think you can start?" Danni asked.

He had to take a mouthful of milk before he could reply. "How about tomorrow morning?"

"That's fine. Do you need me to pick you up?"

"No, don't put yourself out for me. I take a walk each morning anyhow; I'll just be going in a different direction now. I noticed a hardware store on the main road. I can stop and get prices on paint and lumber for you. In the meantime, I'll being by fixing the railing."

"Summer camp starts for Mitch on Tuesday. Usually he only does half-days, but he can stay the whole day so he'll be out of your hair."

"C'mon sis, do I really have to? Camp sucks."

"You need to do something besides play on your computer all day. Clean the jelly off your face."

Mitch raised his arm to wipe a sleeve across his lips.

"Mitchell Anderson, don't you dare!"

John passed him a napkin. "I've got an idea. Perhaps Mitch can be my assistant. He can go to camp in the morning and then help me in the afternoons."

"You mean it?" Mitch's hand stopped halfway to his face.

John nodded. "As long as it's all right with your sister."

Mitch scrubbed his mouth. "Danni, can I?"

Danni looked at them, unaware of the milk mustache decorating her upper lip. "John, that's awful sweet but you don't have to."

"Actually, I could use the help." He handed Danni a napkin as well.

"Well, if you're sure...okay." She put the napkin down without using it and glanced at her watch. "It's still early. If you want, we can stop at the hardware store on the way back to your hotel and you can pick up whatever you need to get started tomorrow."

"Can I come?"

Danni started to shake her head 'no,' but John caught her eye and gave her the slightest of nods. "Well, I guess if you're going to be helping John, you might as well come along."

She grabbed her purse from the counter and started toward the kitchen door.

"Uh, Miss Anderson?" John stood up and held the napkin out to her once more. Mitch giggled behind his hand.

"What? Oh." She took the napkin and hurried out the door without cleaning her face.

John looked at Mitch. "Your sister seems to have a lot on her mind."

"She's a flake," the boy said. "Ever since our parents died, it's like she's forgotten how to relax and have fun."

"Raising a child, no matter how good the child is, takes a lot of hard work and dedication." John held the door open for Mitch.

"Do you have children, John?"

"I did," he said to the boy's back. "I did."

* * *

Heavy clouds covered the sky, blocking the moon and stars. The only light came from occasional flashes of heat lightning far overhead. A thick mist rolled along the ground, obscuring both the road and the feet of the young woman who walked it. She was nude, her form ghostly in the fog.

River Road paralleled the winding course of the Alleghany River around the south end of town. The single-lane street alternated between crumbling asphalt and hard-packed dirt. Rarely traveled during the day except by the occasional farmer, at night it was deserted.

The woman walked eastward, unmindful of the rocks and broken pavement stabbing her feet. A meandering trail of bloody footprints lay behind her for more than a mile.

At the point where both river and road crossed under Main Street, the woman climbed the embankment and walked out onto the bridge. She stood still for a moment, captured beneath a cone of orange light from one of the street lamps. Her long hair lay limp as wilted flowers in the heavy air.

Other than thin lines of tears running down her cheeks, her face showed no emotion as she climbed the cement riser separating the bridge from the pedestrian walkway. She never spoke, even when she snapped two nails and left bloody finger prints on the concrete.

In one swift motion, she bent her knees and then pushed off, leaping into the night. Her body arced and then rolled over, like an Olympic high diver who'd forgotten her routine.

She landed on her side, striking the water with a resounding *crack!* loud enough to cover the brittle *snap* of her ribs breaking. A plume of water shot up and then subsided into a series of expanding wavelets that diminished in strength until they lapped gently against the shoreline.

The surface of the river grew calm again, giving no sign of the horrible struggle occurring beneath.

At a nearby farm, a dog woke up and began to howl.

Others joined in, more and more, until the whole town echoed with their mournful cries.

Chapter 6

"Christ almighty, it's fucking hot." Chief Harry Showalter pulled a bandana from the back pocket of his tan uniform trousers and wiped it across his bull-like neck. The red and white cloth was already soaked, and it wasn't even eleven in the morning.

"Radio said it's gonna be another scorcher today, plus high humidity," Officer Troy Nelson said.

The sky was overcast with thick clouds, a weird combination of grays, sickly greens, and ominous purples, but so far no rain had fallen. Random flashes of heat lightning, accompanied by low murmurs of thunder, sparked here and there deep within the idling storm mass. Moisture-laden breezes alternated with long periods of stagnant, tropical stillness.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Good thing there hasn't been a lot of rain," Nelson commented as they walked along the river bank. "A stronger current would've carried her to the next county."

Yeah, too fuckin' bad, Showalter thought. *Then I'd be sittin' at Rosie's Diner enjoying a lemonade instead of standing in the goddamn heat lookin' at a dead body. Fucking idiot.*

Mud and gravel crunched underfoot as they neared the crime scene. Three men, two in uniform and one in a white shirt and black trousers, looked up at their approach.

The two officers stepped aside as Ben Roberts, Cattaraugus County's Medical Examiner Emeritus, stood up. "'Morning, Harry."

"'Nothin' good about it, Ben."

"Ain't that the truth."

"What've you got for me?"

Roberts shook his head, his salt-and-pepper hair cut so short you could see the liver spots on his scalp. Silvery grizzle covered his chin and sunken cheeks, evidence he'd been roused from his bed well before the time

he usually sauntered into his office.

"Same as the others?"

"Yep. Third one this week. She's got some busted ribs and a broken nose."

"What's that tell you?" Showalter took off his hat and wiped his forehead. Sweat gushed from every pore in his body. By the time he left here, he'd need to change his shirt.

"She didn't try to stop the fall. Usually a jumper will hold their arms out, like this." Roberts demonstrated, crossing his arms in front of his face. "It's instinctive. Injuries like hers usually mean she was unconscious, or nearly so, when she hit the water."

"So she was attacked, and then thrown or dropped."

"I didn't say that. No evidence of pre-mortem violence. No bruising, no blunt force trauma to the head or neck, no strangulation marks. I'll know more after the autopsy report comes back. Hell, she might've been high on something and just jumped off."

"Great. That it?"

"Well, there's those weird blemishes on her, across her legs and chest, just like the others. Large and circular. Remind me of the marks a lamprey or leech leaves on its victims."

"So they're bite marks?"

"No, I just said they kinda look like that. I've fished this river all my life, and there's nothing in there that could have made those marks. I need to do more work on that."

"Anything else?"

"Some damage to the fingers, probably from when she climbed the pedestrian wall on the bridge. Joseph over there," he pointed to one of the officers, "found bloody fingerprints on the cement. Also, her feet are cut up pretty bad. She walked a long ways with no shoes."

"So you're telling me someone got her out of bed, made her walk naked for God knows how far, drugged her, and forced her to jump off a bridge, all without touching her? And no one saw a goddamned thing?"

Roberts shrugged. "That's one explanation."

"I sure hope you have a better one."

"Well, there's always sleepwalking."

"What?" Sweat rolled off Showalter's bulbous nose onto his tie, joining the egg yolk stains from breakfast.

"People can do crazy things in their sleep, Harry." Roberts closed his black medical valise.

"Gimme a break, Ben. Three young girls all sleepwalking off the bridge and into the river, in one week?"

Roberts shrugged. "Right now, it's the best I've got, at least until we get the toxicology results back."

"Christ on a crutch." Showalter kicked at the mud and stones. "Call me as soon as you identify the body, willya?"

"Sure thing, Harry. Stay cool." Roberts headed up the sloping bank, his spindly legs as surefooted and steady as they'd been twenty years ago when he and Showalter used to duck hunt not a hundred yards from where they stood right now.

Stay cool. Easy for him to say. He doesn't have three dead girls on his hands, waiting for someone to find their killer.

Because if there was one thing Showalter was sure of, those girls had been killed. Which in a morbid way was good.

A murderer on the loose was bad.

But not nearly as bad as trying to tell the mayor they had a sleepwalking epidemic.

* * *

"And the Lords sayeth unto them, scream, scream for your lives! And ask yourselves, 'If the Gods are good, if they are wonderful, why do they inflict pain upon us? Why do they ask us to offer our bodies up to them?"

Reverend Christian slammed his hands down on the pulpit's wooden surface. His wireless microphone amplified the noise and sent it cascading throughout the church. The heavy thud sounded in time to the thunder booming outside, the eighth day in a row that storm clouds had blanketed the town, full of threatening pyrotechnics. But the only moisture came from the one-hundred-percent humidity that turned the air into a steaming soup.

It was standing room only in Our Lady of Perpetual Hope, and the packed crowd seemed to pull in Christian's energy and spit it back out, over and over, until the atmosphere reminded him of being inside an electrical plant.

"The answer is simple, my friends. You *belong* to the Gods! Your bodies are *Theirs*, your souls are *Theirs*. Does your dog stand up and tell you what to do? No! And neither can we give orders to the Gods! They who see all, who know all, hold within *Their* hands the power to crush the life

from us or reward us with our greatest dreams. He who is obedient and serves *Them* shall earn favor; those who stray shall feel *Their* wrath. So sayeth the Ancient Ones, in the time before times!"

Christian paused for breath. All eyes were on him. He saw no patrons whispering to each other, no faces slack with boredom.

No, these people, his *people, had come today to hear him speak.*

To hear the Word.

"Too many people follow the path of the Other instead of the Word of the Gods! And now the burning time has come upon us! The sleeping giant wakes! Listen to the night, it speaks!"

Thunder exploded outside. Heads turned to the windows and then back again. Christian lowered his voice, and it was the only sound in the room. The congregation leaned forward as one.

"Hear me, people. Judgment Day cometh upon us. Will it find you ready, or will it find you wanting?"

Cyrus Christian held onto the silence for a count of three.

"This is the Word of the Gods."

"Amen!" The word leaped out of three hundred throats.

"Amen, indeed," he responded. "Now, please turn to page eighty-three. The song today is 'We Shall Overcome.'"

Chapter 7

John Root pretended to sing along with the rest of the congregation, but his mind was elsewhere.

Christian's sermon had warning bells a-clanging in his head, as his mother used to say. He'd arrived too late the previous week to hear the Reverend's talk, and so he had nothing to compare this one to. But certain words had caught his attention. Ancient Ones. The Other. Gods instead of God.

Is he the one? Or is he under the influence of the one I seek? Perhaps a simple test will tell....

After Mass, John waited outside among the churchgoers eager to speak with their new Reverend. Christian stood by the tall, wooden doors of Our Lady of Perpetual Hope, his long hair dangling in the sultry air. Finally it was John's turn. He approached the younger man, his hand outstretched.

"Reverend Christian, I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed your sermon today."

The Reverend's black eyes narrowed. "Thank you, sir. And your name is?" He extended his own hand.

Just as flesh touched flesh with an electric spark, someone bumped into John, breaking the contact.

"Sorry, dude." The tall, skinny man with the braided goatee gave John's shoulder a friendly pat.

"No problem. Good day, Reverend."

John hurried down the wide steps. Several dozen people still mingled at the bottom, and he wove his way through them, eager to put some distance between himself and the church.

Christian's voice followed him. "What's your name, sir?"

He ignored the question and continued walking, crossing the parking lot as fast as he could.

* * *

Billy Ray Capshaw had been approaching Reverend Christian when the unmistakable figure of Tony Lopez caught his eye. Thanks to his Caribbean complexion and long pony tail – not to mention his above-average height – Tony stood out among the farmers and townspeople like a dog among cats. Even worse, he hadn't bothered to hide his tattoos, blatantly flaunting them by wearing a wife-beater t-shirt.

Christ. In a farm town like this he's as subtle as a fart in an elevator. What's he thinking? Focused on his old partner in crime, he'd walked right into a guy talking to Reverend Christian and never even thought to snag the man's wallet.

Losing your touch, Billy.

"Who was that?" Reverend Christian's voice burst through Billy's musings, startling him.

"What? Who?"

"Get your head out of your ass, Billy. Him." Christian pointed toward a man with silver hair descending the church steps.

"The old guy? I don't know. I've seen him around a couple of times."

"Find out for me." The Reverend entered the church.

Billy tagged along. "You mean right now?" Following some old geezer wasn't high on his list of priorities. He had to get Tony alone and make sure the idiot kept a low profile.

Christian turned around so fast Billy fell back a step. "Is that a problem, Mister Capshaw?"

The preacher's eyes drilled into him like two black lasers. Billy practically felt their hot gaze boring into his skull, cutting through flesh and bone, exposing his deepest secrets to the light.

"N...no, it's just that they delivered the shingles for the roof yesterday, and I need to open them up so I can get started, and-"

"Billy Ray." Christian's voice went low and soft. "How hard can it be to find one man's name in a town this size? In the name of the Ancients, do I have to do everything myself?"

"No, I'll take care of it."

The Reverend's narrow head nodded once. "Good. Ask Mrs. Kapinski. She seems to know everything about everyone."

Christian strode away without another word, his boots thumping on the worn carpet.

Great. Helen Kapinski is the last person I want to talk to.

Every time the old crone saw him, all she wanted to do was ask him what he'd been up to since he'd left town after high school. Her constant prying was worse than being questioned by that overfed sheriff, Showalter.

Goddamned fat pig. Everywhere I go, he's there.

Billy had run into him just that morning at Rosie's. Officer Big Belly had been stuffing his face with steak and eggs when Billy walked in for coffee and a buttered roll.

"'Morning, Billy Ray. Heard you're bunkin' at the church these days."

A gob of thick, yellow egg yolk dropped from Showalter's lip onto his chin. One fat, sausage-shaped finger came up, scooped the escaping goo, and pushed it back into the man's gaping maw.

Billy's stomach did quick flip and he was suddenly glad he hadn't ordered his usual egg sandwich. "That's right. Reverend Christian said I could stay as long as I want."

"Sure beats paying for a room," commented an older fellow sitting next to the sheriff. Showalter gave the old coot a narrow-eyed glare and returned his attention to Billy.

"Thought you'd be on your way outta town by now."

Billy shrugged. "I can use the money the church is paying. Besides, it's kinda nice being back in town."

Showalter stood, his wide shoulders and belly eclipsing the view of the people behind him. "A wise man once said 'You can't go home again,' or something like that. Things here ain't the same as they were when you was a boy. I don't put up with no bullshit."

The waitress came back with Billy's coffee and roll. He handed her two dollars and grabbed his bag. "Good thing I ain't selling any."

He nodded to the girl to keep the change and walked out. He could feel Showalter's beady squint on his neck the whole way.

Now, walking down the back hall to Helen Kapinski's office, he shook his head and wondered if it was worth staying in Hastings Mills.

Kapinski, Showalter, a crazy preacher, and Tony Lopez on top of everything. I'll be lucky to grab the cash and get out of here without the cops on my tail.

Then he thought about how nice it would be to waltz into Vegas with a suitcase full of money in his hand.

C'mon, Billy. You're plenty smarter than a dumb cop, an old bag, and a bible-thumper. And if Tony starts causing trouble, well, who's to say he hasn't

been the one killing those girls? An anonymous note to Showalter might not be a bad idea.

Feeling better than he had all day, he opened the office door and went inside.

* * *

John sat on his bed and tried to slow his racing thoughts. His attempt at finding out more about Cyrus Christian hadn't been a complete failure, but it hadn't made things any clearer, either. Just as he'd made contact, the new handyman at the church had jostled him before he could ascertain Christian's true nature. An unlucky coincidence.

Or was it?

It was possible the handyman was involved somehow.

I'll have to keep an eye on both of them, while avoiding them at the same time.

He knew well that the one he sought was not only a master of assuming identities but in asserting his power over those around him, using mind games and dark magics to pull their strings, like some evil puppet master.

So I'll have to watch them both and still keep alert for the man behind the curtain.

He sighed as a spiritual exhaustion settled on him like a heavy blanket, the weight of the years crushing his soul the same way the heat and humidity seemed to crush his body, sapping his strength from the inside and out.

In the fading light of the late afternoon, he lay back and closed his eyes.

* * *

Sally Mundt twisted back and forth in her bed as the Voice in her dreams spoke to her.

Sally, it's time. Damon is waiting for you.

Damon? No, he left me. Dumped me for a cheerleader.

He made a mistake. He wants you back.

But...he treated me so badly.

That's all in the past. He's waiting for you, he wants to make everything all better.

The open window carried the sound of distant dogs howling, and despite the heat she shivered in her sleep.

Hurry, Sally. He won't wait all night.

"Damon...," she whispered.

Maybe this time things would be different.

Yes. Yes, they will, the Voice said. The softly-whispered words echoed in her head, over and over, until they pushed all other thoughts aside.

Yes.

Dressed only in her cotton nightshirt, she climbed the window sill, catching a brief whiff of musky sex from between her legs. Just thinking of Damon made her wet.

He's waiting.

Just as she had when she was a little girl, Sally scurried down the slope of the porch roof and into the branches of the old elm. From there it was a simple matter to shimmy down the branch and drop five feet to the soft grass of the front yard.

Where...?

Go to the bridge.

The picture appeared in her mind. The Main Street Bridge.

Hurry.

Running as if her life depended on it, Sally headed south on Birch, paralleling Main Street. Her breath came in hard gasps, but she continued on, imagining Damon waiting by the steel railing, perhaps already impatient.

Perhaps thinking she wasn't coming.

She forced her legs to move even faster. Her lungs burned and sweat ran from her forehead. Her nightshirt stuck to her chest, outlining the contours of her breasts. When she reached the Johnson's farm, she cut across the field, pushing her way through the rows of half-grown feed corn.

Five minutes later she burst from the stalks, coughing dust and corn silk. Colored motes danced in her vision.

"I'm coming," she tried to call out, but the words were little more than a croak. She staggered to the embankment on trembling legs and clambered up the hill. When she reached the top, she didn't waste time wiping the sweat from her body or the blood from her broken fingernails. She crossed the road and climbed the divider on the side of the bridge overlooking the Alleghany River.

"Damon? Where are you?" Was she too late? She looked up and

down the road, but only empty darkness waited, broken at periodic intervals by the greenish glow of the street lamps.

Look down, Sally.

She did, and her heart skipped a beat. There he was, his arms open wide, as if to hug her.

Or welcome her.

Go to him. He's waiting.

"Damon," she whispered, and leaped from the bridge. His image smiled, and she felt herself smiling in return. Then her expression turned horror as the face below her morphed into an obscene parody of Damon's all-American good looks. The skin fell away, revealing the bloody skull beneath. Instead of a tongue, a black snake with glowing red eyes wriggled and curled between yellow, aged teeth.

Sally opened her mouth to scream, but it was too late. She hit the water face first, crashing right through the dead-Damon's chest.

Rubbery, impossibly-strong tentacles encircled her body. As her lungs filled with cold, muddy water, she heard the Voice in her head one last time.

Laughing.

Chapter 8

The following morning brought no relief for John. Still distracted by the events of the previous afternoon, the stifling heat caused his temples to throb as he made his way across town to the Anderson's house. He arrived, sweaty and enervated, at eight, just as Danni and Mitch were leaving.

"There's cold water and ice tea in the 'fridge," Danni said. "Make sure you stop and rest. The last thing I need is to have you pass out from dehydration or heat stroke while I'm gone." She smiled to take the sting from her words. "Besides, I'm not sure my insurance would cover it."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm going to work on the porch today, so I'll be in the shade."

"All right. Mitch will be home at noon, and he can fix lunch for you both."

John waved as the car pulled away, then laid out the tools he'd need. In the past week, he'd already replaced the kitchen linoleum and patched the holes and cracks in the sheetrock throughout the entire house. Over the years, he'd found he had a real knack for carpentry, enough so that the projects at the Anderson's were moving along fast and easy.

After measuring the porch and determining the plank lengths he'd need, he removed his jacket and shirt and began sawing. He'd thought the manual labor would add to his malaise, but instead he found it almost rejuvenating, as if each motion of the saw built up the charge inside his emotional and physical batteries. By the time he finished cutting the sections of wood, sweat was pouring off him, the rivulets carving miniature canyons through the sawdust coating his arms and chest. But instead of exhaustion, he felt better than he had in days.

Nothing cures the blues like hard work. His father had always said that whenever John had gotten into a mood. Back then, John figured the hard work made you too tired to think about being depressed, but now he wondered if there might not be more to it than that.

"Whatever the reason, it's doing the trick," he said to the empty

yard.

John took a quick break at ten, helping himself to ice tea and an apple, then got to work replacing the broken planks on the porch and steps.

His stomach rumbled, and he glanced at his watch, surprised to see it was almost one o'clock.

Mitch is late. A tiny worry-mouse nibbled at his stomach. Since beginning camp, the boy had been unusually prompt about getting home. John suspected Mitch was one of those children doomed to have more friends in the pages of his books than in the real world.

Maybe he stopped on the way home to catch a frog, take a dip in a stream, or do any one of the thousand things young boys like to do during the summer.

After a moment's thought, John decided to take a walk to the hardware store and pick up some things, and if Mitch wasn't home by the time he got back, he'd go inside and call Danni. She had enough problems without him overreacting.

He jotted a quick note to Mitch explaining where he'd gone and set off down the road. The hardware store was barely two miles away; he could be there and back in less than an hour.

The inside of Homestead Hardware was a cool oasis after the fifteen minute walk.

"Afternoon," John said to the teenaged clerk, as he handed over the list of what he needed.

The young man stared at him for a long moment, a sour expression on his face. "We're closed."

"What?" John wasn't sure he'd hear correctly.

"I said—"

"It's okay, Roy. Mister Root here's working for Danni Anderson." The store owner, a gray-haired man named Max Hopper, came around the counter and gave the clerk a friendly pat on the shoulder. "Just put it on her account."

Roy glared at John and then walked away, heading toward the back of the store.

"Sorry 'bout that," Max said. "People are starting to get edgy from the heat. Seen it before. Hot spell like this, people get like mad dogs."

"It's all right. Let's hope the heat wave breaks before it comes to that."

"Amen to that. But I got my doubts. Like Reverend Christian says, 'Thou must suffer greatly before redemption can be found.'"

John nodded, unsure of what to say. He was saved from further

conversation by Roy's return, several pieces of molding balanced on his shoulder and a box of nails in his hand.

"Thanks again, Max. I'll probably see you tomorrow." John grabbed his purchases and exited the store. Stepping outside was like entering a sauna, and he staggered for a moment before regaining his balance.

He'd only walked for ten minutes when he spotted the group of kids scuffling in the empty field bordering the road. The waves of heat rising from the pavement made it hard to see their faces, but they didn't hide the fact that five or six boys were delivering a serious beating to someone who lay curled up on the ground. Fists rose and fell, and more than one foot arrowed in for a hard kick.

John stopped, debating whether or not he should get involved. He knew his status as an outsider already had some people eyeing him with suspicion; he didn't need to have a group of children making up false charges against him.

On the other hand, I can't just let someone get beaten like that.

At that instant, his decision was made for him as the boy at the bottom of the pile shouted, "Leave me alone!"

In response, someone said, "Your sister ain't here to save you now, Tiny."

That's Mitch!

John dropped the wood and took off across the field. "Hey! Leave him alone!"

As John drew closer, he saw it was indeed Mitch lying on the ground, his nose bleeding, his clothes and face covered in dirt. The boys backed off, and Mitch wasted no time getting to his feet and moving away from them.

"Hey, we didn't mean nothin'," the biggest of the boys said. His angry scowl belied the nonchalant tone of his words.

Ignoring them for the moment, John turned to Mitch. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Mitch wiped the blood away from his nose. Dark lines on his face showed where tears had turned dry dirt to mud. "These pussies couldn't hit their way out of a paper bag."

The boys' apparent ringleader took a step forward. "You little fuck. I'll—"

"That's enough." John stepped in front of Mitch. "Go home. Whatever problem you had with him is finished, understand? I find out

you've been making trouble, I'll go to the police."

The group of young teens laughed. "Go ahead. Fatso Showalter ain't gonna do shit to us." The heavyset boy crossed his arms over his chest, calling John's bluff.

Time to end this. John whispered a few words in the language of the swamps, then made a fist. "If he won't, then I'll come after you myself."

"You hit one of us, you'll be the one in jail."

"I didn't say anything about hitting."

John opened his hand, at the same time making an underhand tossing motion, as if throwing a ball to a small child. But instead of a ball, several long, green serpents sailed through the air toward the boys. The snakes landed on the ground, hissing and coiling. Two of the boys jumped; the one who'd challenged John shouted and fell down as the snakes slithered rapidly toward him.

When they got within two or three feet, the boys lost their nerve and ran away.

Mitch turned to John. "Holy shit! How'd you do that?"

"Do what?"

"The—" Mitch pointed at the snakes and then stopped as he realized they were gone. "Where'd they go?"

John smiled. "Maybe they weren't ever there. Or maybe they went back to where they came from. Cottonmouths prefer the swamps and streams."

"There's no cottonmouths in New York," Mitch said.

"You know what? You're right. So I guess there couldn't have been any snakes at all. C'mon," he put a hand on the boy's shoulder and led him back to the road. "Help me carry some wood to your house. We still have work to do."

As they picked up the railings, Mitch asked, "You're not gonna tell Danni about this, are you?"

"Why don't you want her to know?"

Mitch shrugged.

Remembering his own childhood, and taunts of the children – *Witch boy! You're momma sleeps with the Devil!* – John nodded. "Children can be mean, especially when someone's different. It doesn't matter if that difference is being smarter, or taller, or walking with a limp. I know it doesn't help now, but in a few years things will be very different. Your brains will carry you a lot further than their muscles."

"That's if I make it through the next few years."

John laughed. "You will. Nobody thinks they can, but everyone does. Look at all the adults around you. Most of them went through something at your age. Being a teenager is hard, no matter where or when you grow up."

Mitch looked up at him. "Even for assholes like Ralphie?"

"Especially them. How would you feel if everyone was smarter than you? Most bullies do what they do so no one makes fun of them first."

Mitch frowned as he considered John's words. "So maybe Ralphie's more miserable than me?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. And if he's not now, he will be someday. Bullies always get theirs in the end. My father used to say, 'The world has a way of evening the balance.'"

"Kinda like, 'what comes around goes around'?"

"Exactly. The Hindus call it 'karma.'"

"Reverend Christian says a real God smites his enemies, and we should do the same, before they can smite us."

A brief chill ran up John's back, making him shiver despite the blistering heat. "Be careful around him, Mitch. Some of the things he says, well...." He paused, unsure of how much to say.

"Well what?"

Leave it to a thirteen year-old boy to not let something go. John shook his head. "I guess what I'm trying to say is I don't trust him."

Mitch stared at the dusty road. "Yeah." A car went by, sending a wave of hot air over them that did nothing to dry their sweat. "He scares me," he said in a quiet voice.

"He scares me, too."

Mitch fell silent after that, and they walked the rest of the way to the house in contemplative silence. John knew the boy had more to say, but in the short time he'd known the Andersons, he'd learned it was best to let Mitch bring things up on his own, rather than try to force them out of him. The boy already had a parent figure in Danni; what he needed was someone he could talk to without fear of being judged, or told what to do.

A friend.

They deposited the wood by the porch. Mitch started gathering nails and a hammer, but John stopped him. "Let's get you cleaned up first, okay?"

Some scrubbing with a soapy washcloth removed most of the dirt and crusted blood and revealed the marks of the beating hiding beneath them: a swollen lip and a bruise already forming on one cheek.

"Oh, man, Danni's gonna shit when she sees my face."

John knew he was right. If Danni saw her brother like this, she'd probably take him out of camp, which would be the worst thing to do. The other boys already thought he was weak; quitting camp would be admitting it. It was important for Mitch to prove he could take a beating and return, bloodied but unbowed.

Another unfortunate aspect of growing up as a boy.

Ice might take down the swelling of the lip, but there was no way to hide that purple and green bruise.

No way except one. But can you trust him not to tell? John glanced at the boy, who looked close to tears again.

How can I not?

Pulling out his wallet, John did a quick calculation. He'd already paid for another week at the Chilton Arms. He'd also stocked up on canned soup and crackers. Lunches were usually taken at the Anderson's. That left him almost thirty dollars for the week, with nothing to buy.

"I think I might have something that can take care of that bruise, back at my room. But we'll have to hurry; your sister will be home in a couple of hours. Call us a cab."

Chapter 9

Billy Ray Capshaw shivered as he entered the cool darkness of McNally's Pub. He spotted Tony Lopez at the bar and nodded toward a booth at the back of the room. At three in the afternoon, the place was almost deserted. Two old-timers sat at the far end of the bar, eating pickled eggs and watching a horse race on an ancient television. A fat man in a cheap business suit occupied the first booth, reading the paper and finishing the last of a burger and fries.

Billy Ray sat down, relishing the feel of the cold leather against his sweaty back. A few moments later, Tony placed two frosty mugs of beer and two shots of Jack on the table.

Without waiting, Billy Ray downed his shot and chased it with a sip of beer. Wiping the foam mustache away, he asked, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Tony poured his whiskey into his beer, gulped down a large mouthful, leaned back, and belched. "That ain't much of a greeting for an old friend. Almost makes me think you ain't happy to see me." His dark eyes were colder than the beer.

"Can the shit. You were supposed to lay low until I called you."

"I was beginning to think that call wasn't coming. It's been almost three weeks since Binghamton."

Billy shook his head. "I needed to get settled in before I called."

Tony leaned forward, a scowl on his dark face. Heavy stubble covered his cheeks and chin, and the stink of days-old body odor wafted off him. "You got a job and a place to sleep. Seems to me you're pretty settled."

"Think again. I got the local sheriff riding me like a tick on a dog." Billy sipped his beer, trying to act like he hadn't caught the hidden threat in Tony's words. "How'd you find me, anyway?"

With a shrug, Tony said, "Read about the murders in the paper. I recognized Hastings Mills as your hometown, and I thought, hey, what

better place to start looking for my favorite home boy."

"What happened to you after Binghamton?" Billy waved to the bartender, two fingers raised for another round.

Tony laughed, the same nasty sound he'd made the night Billy'd confronted him about the dead girl in their apartment. "Shit, you didn't think I'd let them pin those murders on me, did you? I made sure the evidence disappeared. All of it."

Billy waited until the bartender set down their beers and walked away. "What are you talking about?"

Tony drank down half his Pabst. "I torched everything. First the apartment, and then the morgue."

Relief warred with disbelief in Billy's head. "You lit the fucking morgue on fire?"

"Burned it to the ground, m'man. Now they ain't got shit on me. Or you," he said, tilting his mug at Billy. "So I figure you owe me for coverin' your tracks. I want in."

"In? In on what?"

Tony slammed his glass down, the sound echoing like a gunshot in the empty bar. "On whatever score you're planning to pull in this shit-burg."

Billy took a long, slow sip of beer, considering his options. There weren't many. No matter what he said, Tony would stick around anyway.

"All right. I been puttin' some ideas together, but the time ain't right yet." He looked around, making sure no one else could hear them. "Next month the church is holding a big fundraiser, a carnival or some shit. They've already got a few thousand in a lock-box; after the carnival there'll be like twenty grand, maybe more. I was figuring we could snatch the box and head to Vegas, have ourselves a party."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "We?"

Spreading his hands, Billy said, "Hey, I told you. I was gonna call you, soon as the heat was off me. But you gotta make yourself scarce for now."

"So you can take off with the money and disappear? Bullshit on that. You owe me, Billy-boy." He poked a finger into Billy's chest. "I saved your ass."

Billy took a deep breath, controlling his frustration. He wanted to reach out and throttle some sense into Tony, slap the self-satisfied smile off his face. But Tony was larger, faster, and half-crazy.

Lowering his voice further, Billy continued. "Didn't you hear me?

The Sheriff's already watching me. If the cops see you hanging 'round, we'll never have a chance of getting close to that money. Shit, we'll be lucky if they don't run us both out of town."

"How the fuck does my being here screw things up? Nobody in this shithole knows me." He signaled for another round.

"Dude, have you looked in a mirror lately? This is fucking farm country, for Chrissake. Around here, *I'm* a long-haired freak, and I grew up in this town. You're a total stranger covered in tats. People see you, they'll go nuts. And that's not good when dead bodies are already piling up."

Tony pulled out a cigarette, lit up, and took a long drag. "All right. I'll keep a low profile. Find me a room someplace, stake me some cash, and I'll play nicey-nice."

Something relaxed in Billy's chest. "Just remember, we can't be seen together."

"Long as you keep me in the loop." Tony lifted his shot glass. "Here's to easy money and easy pussy."

Billy touched glasses and downed his whiskey, his thoughts already on his next move.

How can I set him up before he finds a way to double-cross me?

* * *

Randy Henshaw watched the two greaseballs saunter out of McNally's. He gave the bar a perfunctory wipe and casually made his way over to where Buddy Harris and Jack Skokes were arguing about the weather.

"Hey, you guys know those two?" Randy nodded toward the big front window. Out on the sidewalk, the two men from the back booth were heading in separate directions.

"Heard Harry Showalter say the skinny one's Kate Capshaw's nephew. Don't know the other fella." Buddy took another bite of his egg.

Jack held out his mug for a refill. "Looked like he had prison ink."

"Fucker stunk to high heaven," Buddy said. Chunks of yolk clung to his front teeth like fungus on tree stumps.

Randy set two more beers down. "These are on me."

"Thanks, Randy." Jack pulled another egg from the oversized jar, his fingers dripping pickle juice as he shoved the whole thing in his mouth.

Moving to the far end of the bar to escape the briny, sulfurous stink of old eggs and beer breath, Randy made a mental note to mention the

Capshaw fella and his friend when Deputy Cullin came in for his usual burger and beer that evening.

"Scumbags like that give the bar a bad name," he muttered to himself.

At the other end of the room, Buddy Harris let loose a loud fart, the sound reverberating off the wooden bar stool like a string of firecrackers going off. Jack Skokes laughed around his mouthful of white and yellow mush, sending egg shrapnel across the bar.

With a sigh, Randy headed back to clean up the mess.

* * *

John opened the door to the Chilton Arms and ushered Mitch inside. Two over-sized ceiling fans spun the humid air into a warm, damp breeze in the empty sitting area.

Marge Chilton, her hair festooned with pink curlers inadequately covered by a gossamer kerchief, looked up from her *People* magazine and smiled. "Afternoon, Mr. Root. Hot enough for you?"

"Hello, Marge. Yes, it's certainly been warm lately." One hand on Mitch's shoulder, he led the boy up the stairs to the second floor.

Once inside his room, he locked the door and pointed at the bed. "Have a seat."

Ignoring John's request, Mitch went to the small mirror over the cheap wooden dresser and touched a finger to his cheek. "How are you gonna fix this?"

John removed his valise, which resembled an old-fashioned doctor's bag, from under the bed. The silver clasp was scratched and tarnished, the leather cracked and scuffed, the handle worn to a polished shine. He reached inside and withdrew a small jar filled with a green, thick liquid.

"With this. It's an old herbal remedy, made from plants that grow in the swamps where I live."

He motioned again for Mitch to sit down, and opened the jar. The sweet, wild scents of mint, honeysuckle, and fresh earth rose up, transporting John back in time to his mother's kitchen, watching her fill jelly jars with the potions she cooked on the old wood-burning stove.

The sense of smell is tied so closely with memory in the brain. Just a whiff of gingerbread reminds us of the holidays; fresh-cut grass makes us think of lazy summer days.

He gave a mental shake of his head to send the ghosts of his past back to their graves. Dipping a finger into the cool paste, he scooped out a dab and applied it to Mitch's cheek, spreading it across the bruise.

The boy's body twitched with an involuntary shudder. "Yuck. It's all cold and slimy."

"Only for a moment," John said, working the mixture into the skin. Another tiny dab went onto the swollen lower lip. "Now, leave it alone for a few minutes, give it a chance to work."

"Did you make it?" Mitch asked as John closed the jar and returned it to his bag.

"I did. My mother taught me the recipe. She taught me how to make a lot of remedies, what people today would call botanicals or herbals. Back when I grew up, we just knew them as the only medicine around."

"What else do you have in there?" Mitch reached for the bag, but John quickly shut it and pulled it out of reach.

"I'll show you some other time. Right now we have to get going."

Mitch crossed his arms, a pout on his face. "It's not like I was gonna break anything."

"I know. But we need to get you back before Danni gets home. Go take a look at your face."

Still frowning, Mitch went to the mirror. "Holy shit!" He touched his finger to his cheek. All traces of John's were medicine gone. Even more amazing, the bruise had disappeared and his swollen lip had returned to its normal size. "It worked!"

"Don't thank me, thank Mother Earth. Now let's go. We still have to call a cab." Not for the first time in recent years, John wished he owned a cellphone. It would make life so much easier. But these days you couldn't get anything without a credit card or proof of employment, neither of which he had.

When they emerged from the staircase to the lobby, John led them outside to the tiny porch, preferring to suffer in the heat rather than get stuck in a conversation with Mrs. Chilton. While they waited for the cab, he cautioned Mitch about the afternoon's adventures, more for his own protection than the boy's.

"Remember, this is our secret. Your sister doesn't strike me as someone who'd understand about the pecking order of teenage boys."

Mitch looked up at him, his eyes wise behind thick lenses. "Or about potions that cure people like magic?"

"That, either."

"No problem. She'd probably think I made the whole thing up anyway."

That's what I'm hoping, John thought as the cab pulled up. *Otherwise, I'll have a lot of explaining to do.*

* * *

Marge Chilton leaned over the counter and watched the yellow cab pull away. Something tickled her brain, bothering her like a fly that wouldn't stay away no matter how often you shooed it.

That Root fella seemed decent enough, but what was a grown man—and a stranger in town at that—doing bringing a young boy to his room in the middle of the day? And there'd been no mistaking the mark's on the boy's face; he'd been through one hell of a beating.

She wanted to think their being together was innocent enough, but God knew that all sorts of depravities went on every day, all over the country. All you had to do was turn on the news and you'd hear about perverts hunting for young children on the internet and at the mall.

That's when it came to her; something Reverend Christian had said during the Wednesday Mass.

"Many forms taketh the Stranger; he likes nothing better than to corrupt the innocent, foul the chaste, despoil the righteous. The hand that strikes the wife or touches the child the wrong way does the Devil's work. And we cannot count on our leaders, our politicians and our police, to stop it. For they, too, are corrupted, by power and greed. It is up to us—you and I and our neighbors—to right the wrongs, to fulfill our Gods' plan, to act as our Gods' fists."

"The hand that touches the child in the wrong way," Marge whispered to the empty lobby. She scowled at the cloud of dust left in the cab's wake.

"Not in my town, Mister Root."

Chapter 10

Harry Showalter jerked the wheel of the police cruiser, sending the car to the right so hard Wade Cullen's container of iced tea splashed cold liquid across his chin and down his shirt front.

"Jesus, Harry, what's the matter?" the deputy asked as the car pulled up to the curb.

"That's the matter," Showalter replied, staring out his driver side window. Across the street, a skinny man with a long ponytail was just coming out of McDonald's, a bag of food and a soda in his hands. "Didn't you say that bartender friend of yours said Capshaw was in McNally's earlier today, with some other scumbag?"

"Yeah, big fellow with tattoos all over and a pony tail. Randy said he looked Mexican, or maybe even part Indian."

"I think we need to have a talk with Mr. Capshaw." After checking for other cars, Harry flipped the siren on and cut across the road, stopping just ahead of Billy Ray, whose face had gone as white as the paper bag he carried.

"Where you headed, Billy?" Showalter asked as he hefted himself from the car. He heard the other door slam shut, indicating Cullen had also gotten out.

"Nowhere." Capshaw's voice struggled between nervous and angry defiance.

"Sounds like loitering to me, Chief," Cullen said. He tapped his fingers against the baton hanging from his belt. At six-five, Wade was the biggest man on the force, one of the reasons Harry preferred him as a ride-along partner.

"I don't mean nowhere like *nowhere*." Billy Ray glanced from Showalter to the deputy and back. "I mean, I'm heading back to the church."

"Well, we wouldn't want you to be late for work, would we, Wade?"

Cullen smiled and shook his head. "Sure wouldn't."

"Hop in, Billy." Harry opened the cruiser's back door. "We'll give you a lift."

Capshaw backed away. "No, that's okay. I got time. I'll walk."

Harry let his own smile drop from his face. "I ain't askin'. Get in the car."

Billy Ray looked at the open door, his eyes narrowed. "I've only got a few minutes for lunch."

"Lunch is over," Cullen said, slapping the bag and soda to the ground. "Get in."

"Hey!"

Harry grabbed Billy Ray's arm and twisted it. Billy Ray let out a yelp and tried to pull away, then cried out again as Harry put more pressure on his arm.

Placing his lips next to Billy Ray's ear, Harry whispered, "Behave yourself and you'll be back to work before Reverend Christian even notices you're late. But if you raise a fuss, I guarantee you'll be takin' your meals through a straw."

He watched the arrogance drain away from Billy Ray's eyes. The younger man stopped struggling and ducked down to enter the car. Harry considered slamming his head against the edge of door frame, but a quick glance around showed too many people already gathered on the sidewalk, enjoying the unexpected afternoon show.

As he drove, Harry sang an off-key rendition of 'Dry Bones.'

"Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around. Now hear the word of the Lord!"

"Yeah! That's what I'm talkin' about." Cullen clapped his hands and joined in on the song.

Instead of turning left at the corner of Main and State, Harry kept going straight, past Perpetual Hope Cemetery and toward the river.

Billy Ray banged his fist on the wire mesh divider. "Where're you going? The church is back that way."

"Sit back and shut up, asswipe." Harry felt a raging heat rise up inside him, something the car's air conditioning couldn't do a damn thing about. "We're takin' the long way."

"What the hell—"

"I said SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Harry let his anger—a righteous anger, as Reverend Christian liked to say—burst forth.

Billy Ray fell back from the grill and squeezed himself into the

corner like a frightened child.

And ain't that a fine sight? Hal-a-fucking-lujah. Can you say amen?

When they reached a stretch of road bordered by farmland on both sides, Harry pulled over and shut off the car. Stepping out into the stifling heat stoked the fires inside him and he had to fight down the urge to just put a bullet in Billy Ray's head and leave him for the dogs. Instead, he took a deep breath, hot air scorching his lungs, and opened the back door.

"Let's you and me have a chat, Billy-boy."

Billy Ray must have seen something in his eyes because he pushed himself across the seat to the other side of the car. "No way. I can talk fine from back here."

Deputy Cullen opened the other door, dragged Billy Ray out, and slammed him against the back fender.

"Chief wants to have a talk, you're gonna talk, shit-for-brains."

"I didn't do nothin'. You—"

Cullen slammed a fist into Billy's stomach, doubling him over. Billy's breath whooshed out and he fell to his knees, gasping and retching. Harry grabbed him by the shirt, pulled him to his feet, and leaned him against the car.

"Heard you got yourself a new friend in town."

His voice weak and full of pain, Billy Ray said, "What? Who?"

"That's what I want to know, fuck-face. Tall, Mexican-looking fellow with lots of tattoos."

Billy shook his head. "Don't know anyone like that."

"Yeah? Maybe this'll jog your memory." Harry drove his knee up into Billy's groin, was rewarded with a scream as the skinny piece of shit doubled over again. Before he could fall, Harry grabbed his arm and punched him in the side of the face, making sure his old high school ring made a solid connection.

Billy Ray collapsed, landing on his side, his knees drawn up to his chest, one hand cradling his balls while the other went to his cheek.

Cullen barked crazy laughter. "Damn! You laid him out but good!"

"Know who I'm talkin' about now?" Harry prodded him with one steel-toed work shoe.

Billy Ray nodded, tried to speak, but nothing came out except a choking sound.

"That's okay, you take a minute."

"Tony...Lopez." Billy Ray said, his voice barely louder than a whisper. He took a deep breath before continuing. "I owe... money. Lost a

bet. That's why I stayed in town. Need a job to pay him off."

"What I heard, he don't look like no bookie."

"Not. He's the muscle."

"He got a record?"

Billy Ray nodded, his face never lifting from the dry ground.

Harry turned to Cullen. "I don't need no Mexican leg breakers in my town; I got enough problems. Find him and arrest him. I don't care for what. Just get him the hell off the streets."

Cullen nodded. "What about him?" He tilted his head toward Billy Ray.

"We'll take him back to the church, just like I said. Long as he's workin' there, we can keep our eyes on him. Ain't that right, Billy-boy?" He kicked him softly in the thigh, and Billy Ray nodded vigorously.

"There you go. Put him in the car, and let's get going. I got a meeting with the Mayor at five."

Harry had just started the car again when the radio squawked. "Chief? You there?"

Thumbing the mic, he said, "This is Harry. What's up, Shirley?"

"Got a phone call from Marge Chilton. She said one of her guests took a young boy up to his room, and then left with him again about twenty minutes later," said the dispatch officer.

"Shit. All right, I'm heading over there right now. She say who it was?"

"Yep. A Mister John Root. Only been in town a couple weeks. Average looking fellow with silver hair, she said."

"I seen him in church a couple times," Cullen said.

"Thanks, Shirley." He hung up the mic. "Let's go."

"You think maybe he killed those girls?"

"Only one way to find out. But if he did... he's gonna be sorry he ever stepped foot in my town."

Chapter 11

John looked up at the sound of a car pulling into the Anderson's driveway. His first thought, that Danni had come home early from work, disappeared when he saw the gold-on-black Cattaraugus County Sheriff insignia on the hood of the car and the light bar on the roof.

As the car came to a stop in a cloud of dust, John put down his paintbrush and wiped his hands on his shirt. A stocky officer, his stomach stretching the uniform shirt to its limits, got out from the driver's side. Mirrored aviator sunglasses hid his eyes.

The passenger door opened, and a taller, more muscular man exited the car. He wore matching sunglasses, and what John had always thought of as a 'cop' mustache: square and thick. Back home in South Carolina, it always seemed like two out of every three police officers favored the same style.

Based on the hat, and his evident older age, John guessed the rotund officer was in charge. The man didn't wait long to confirm John's suspicions. He took three steps forward and removed his sunglasses, revealing hard, angry eyes set deep in the round, doughy face.

"John Root?"

The aggression in his voice matched his expression and set off alarms in John's head.

"Yes, Officer...?" He kept his voice soft and neutral, not wanting to aggravate the already tense situation.

"Chief. Chief Harry Showalter. This is Deputy Sheriff Cullen." He jerked his thumb at the younger man, who'd also taken off his glasses. Like the Sheriff, he radiated anger as he stroked one hand menacingly on his baton.

"What can I do for you, sir?" John asked.

Showalter cocked his head to the side, like a bird listening to a distant sound. "Rumor 'round town is you been spending an awful lot of time with the Anderson boy."

"I'm doing renovations on their house. Mitch helps me out after summer camp. I keep an eye on him until his sister gets home."

"It's true. John's been here every day."

John glanced back, saw that Mitch had come outside. He stood by the front door, a half-eaten apple in one hand.

"I don't doubt it, boy." The Sheriff nodded at Cullen. "Check him out."

Cullen moved forward, and John took a step back. "Am I under arrest?"

"Depends what we find. I just want to make sure you ain't armed before we have our chat."

"I'm calling Danni." Mitch ran back inside.

John held his arms up. "I'm not carrying any weapons."

"We'll see. Pat him down, Wade."

The deputy slapped his hands along John's sides, stomach, back, and legs, all the way down to the ankles. When he stepped back, he looked even angrier, as if he'd been hoping to find something.

"He's clean. Not even a wallet."

Showalter's eyebrows rose. "No identification? How do I know you're who you say you are? Could be you're a drifter, scamming these poor folk."

Slowly lowering his arms, John shook his head. "My wallet's on the porch. You can go check my identification. And I'm not a drifter."

Deputy Cullen picked up the wallet from the small glass table. "Got it, Chief."

"I don't know what you are, or what you're doing in my town, and I don't like that." Showalter took the wallet from Cullen, started looking through it as he talked. "How long you been in Hastings Mills, Mister Root?"

"A little more than three weeks."

"And what's the purpose of your visit? I'm assuming you didn't come here from," he paused to read from John's driver's license, "Sunset, South Carolina, just to fix the Anderson's porch." Showalter looked up from the license and stared at John.

He thinks I'm involved in the murders. That's what this is about. John took his time answering the question, knowing that whatever he said would sound suspicious and be checked out the minute the Sheriff got back to his office, if not sooner.

"I'm traveling across the country as part of my work. I collect old

tales and write books about them."

"You expect me to believe that horseshit? 'Cause what I'm hearing is you ain't nothing but a drifter, just like I thought."

"I'm not a drifter. I own a home."

"So why you doing odd jobs for cash and stayin' in cheap motels?"

John shrugged. "It's part of the process. See the country from a different perspective, rely on my own hands to earn my keep. Get to know people."

Showalter started to say something, but just then the sound of a car engine drew everyone's attention to the driveway. Danni Anderson's beat-up Mustang came to a sharp stop in a cloud of dust, from which Danni emerged with a glare that John feared would only worsen the situation.

"What the hell's going on here? Mitch just called me, saying you think John's some kind of pedophile?"

Showalter smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "No one said anything of the sort, Ms. Anderson. But we had a call that Mister Root here was seen bringing the boy up to his room, and since he's a stranger in town, I felt it my duty to check things out."

"Nothing happened," Mitch said, coming out onto the porch. "One of the kids at camp roughed me up, and John had some stuff at his place that he put on the cuts to help them heal."

"What?" Danni turned and stared at John. "Why didn't you call me?"

Knowing he was in trouble no matter what he said, John opted for a version of the truth. "Mitch asked me not to. He didn't want to upset you. And he wasn't hurt bad, just a few scrapes. I figured it could wait until you got home."

She pointed at Mitch. "I'll deal with you later. In the meantime," she looked back at Showalter, "are you through? John hasn't done anything wrong."

"I guess that's so, Ms. Anderson. But I still need to check out Mister Root's story about why he's in here in the first place. In case you forgot, we've had some girls turn up dead recently, and it started right around the same time your friend here arrived in town. I wouldn't be much of a Sheriff if I didn't look into that, would I?" Before Danni could respond, he put his sunglasses back on and flipped John's wallet to the ground. Motioning for Cullen to follow, he got in the car and started the engine.

"I'll be keeping an eye on you, Root."

He steered the cruiser around Danni's Mustang and headed back

toward the main road.

John picked up his wallet and turned to Danni. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything. But Mitch....”

“Yeah, I know. He didn’t want me to know. Guys stick up for each other, I get it. But I’m responsible for him, and I need to know what’s happening in his life.”

“Danni—”

She shook her head. “Maybe you should call it a day. We’ll see you in the morning.”

He wanted to stay, to try and explain further, but her face had taken hard, a tight, determined expression he’d never seen her wear before.

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

John headed down the drive, hoping the young woman hadn’t soured on him being around. He needed the money, sure; but more than that, he needed someone in town who trusted him, who didn’t look at him as an outsider.

Otherwise, his job would be much, much harder.

Chapter 12

Billy Ray held a plastic bag filled with ice cubes against his cheek, the frigid cold delivering blessed numbness to the swollen flesh.

"He's got it in for me, just because I was kind of wild when I was a kid," Billy Ray said to Reverend Christian. The act of speaking brought tears to his eyes, each word stabbed like shards of glass grinding in his skin.

The Reverend stepped forward and poked a steel-hard finger into Billy Ray's already aching chest. "I don't care what kind of shit you got into as a child. I don't care what you did before you stepped foot in this town. But as long as you work for me, I expect you to stay out of trouble. And if that means you have to kiss the chief's ass from here to Sunday, you better pucker up. Understand?" He emphasized his words with another poke.

Backing up a step, Billy Ray nodded. "I got it. Don't worry. I haven't done anything wrong." *Yet.* He rubbed his chest; there'd undoubtedly be another bruise to go with the ones the cops had given him.

"Keep it that way. Remember, my Gods see all."

"Uh, yeah, right." Billy Ray hated it when Christian talked like that. Somehow, coming from his thin-lipped mouth, the warped Sunday-school phrases took on a deeper, more sinister meaning. Billy Ray could almost see an angry God staring at him from up in heaven, his eyesight more powerful than any spy satellite as he watched over his flock, ready to weed out the sinners.

Jesus, I'm starting to sound like him!

Hoping to change the subject away from himself, he adjusted his cold pack and said, "Maybe your Gods should keep his eye on that new guy in town. He's in some hot water, too."

"Who?"

"That old guy you asked me to find out about. I got his name today. John Root. He—"

The Reverend's face grew angry and voice rose to near shouting, "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

Caught off guard by the man's unexpected vehemence, Billy Ray struggled to find the right words. "I...I...planned to. I mean, I am. Now."

"What did you discover?" Christian's eyes, normally coal-black, seemed even darker, like black ice.

"While the cops were using me for a punching bag, they got a call about this Root guy. They were heading to his place after they dropped me off. Something about him spending too much time with some little kid."

"What did the Chief say?"

Billy Ray shook his head. "Not much. Just that they were gonna check him out."

Christian smiled and turned back toward the window. "Thank you, Billy. That's interesting news. Let me know if you hear anything else."

"Sure." Billy Ray edged his way to the door, eager to get away. "Uh, I gotta go get more ice." Before Christian could say anything else, Billy Ray closed the door and hurried down the hall.

That night, Billy Ray's sleep was haunted by nightmares of vengeful gods pursuing him with lightning bolts. The gods all had Christian's face and black holes for eyes.

When he came awake for the fourth time, teeth clenched around a scream, he gave up and spent the rest of the night with the lights on and the television blaring.

Even then, the mocking laughter of the gods echoed in his head.

Well after midnight, Cyrus Christian removed a leather-bound book from his bottom drawer. His memory guided him through the stiff, yellowed pages until he came to the section he needed. As he read from the text, the words rose from the page to form three dimensional patterns. The stink of sulfur and rotten flesh permeated the room, and the black candles he'd placed in each corner flickered as gusts of hot wind appeared from nowhere.

An image appeared over the desk, wavering and blurred, like the picture on a dying television set. However, it remained clear enough for Christian to make out the sleeping form of John Root. He read the words again, louder, trying to get a clearer look, but the image broke into hundreds of tiny pieces that fell to the floor like ashes from a fire.

"No matter," Christian whispered, as the multi-colored sparkles faded away. "Now I know for sure it's you." That was all he needed.

He walked around the office, extinguishing the candles and turning

off all the lights, saving the small desk lamp for last. In the resulting darkness, strange glyphs and symbols became visible on the ceiling, glowing with a faint purple luminescence, the way certain liquids will glow under an ultraviolet light.

Christian lay on the floor and concentrated on the glyphs.

"Find her," he whispered. "Find the one who waits for another. Show her to me."

Slowly, moving in fractions of inches at first and then gradually picking up speed, the glyphs shifted position, rotating around an invisible axis until a whirlpool design took shape. Keeping his attention on the swirling design, he repeated his words, over and over.

"Find her. Show her to me. Find her. Show her to me."

Something took shape in the center of the ghostly maelstrom. It grew larger, taking on definition. The face of a young woman, her cheeks stained with mascara-polluted tears, her eyes red from crying.

Her name appeared in Christian's head.

April Kohl.

Perfect.

"April Kohl. Listen to me. It doesn't have to be this way. You can be rid of this sadness that he's caused you. You can be happy again. All you have to do...."

On the other side of town, seventeen-year-old April Kohl sat up in her bed.

"...is what I tell you. Then I will free you from this pain, and he will love you forever."

Love me forever. That was all she'd ever wanted. That was all she'd asked Jack to do, just love her forever. But he couldn't even do that.

"Not then, but if you do as I say, April, he will love you."

"Tell me."

The voice told her. As she listened, a smile grew on her face. *How easy! And then I'll be happy forever.*

She lay back against her pillows and drifted down into a dreamless sleep. Outside, dogs howled and thunder rumbled, but the sounds no longer seemed threatening.

They seemed...right.

The smell of fresh-brewed coffee, fried eggs, and bacon greeted John like a long-lost friend as he entered Rosie's Diner. As much as he hated to admit it, stopping for coffee and a muffin in the morning before heading

to Danni's house had become one of the most enjoyable parts of his day. The people were friendly, the muffins were baked right in the kitchen, the coffee was just the way he liked it—a hint of bitterness and chicory—and for those few minutes while he sat at the counter and ate he felt almost like he belonged.

So it was kind of a shock when no one said 'Good morning' as he took a seat at the counter. Anna, the usual waitress, gave him a cold stare. "Can I help you?"

Word of Showalter's suspicions must have already made the rounds, he realized. *Now half the town will be thinking I'm a child molester, and the other half will think I'm a murderer.*

"I'll have a black coffee and a blueberry muffin, please." Anna nodded once, her usual smile hijacked by a tight-lipped frown. Several other people glared at him with similar venom.

"Hi, there," a voice said from behind him.

He swiveled around on his stool, found himself face to face with a pretty girl who looked to be in her late teens.

"Hello. Can I help you with something?"

"I hope so. I got a little careless parking my car. It's, um, stuck on the curb." She gave him an embarrassed smile. "Do you think you could help me push it off?"

John looked around the diner again. There had to be twenty people eating breakfast, most of them hard-looking men on their way to jobs at the ConAgra plant or one of the local farms. Surely the young girl knew some of them. He was about to ask her why she'd approached him out of everyone when Anna came back with his order.

"Here. That'll be two-fifty," she said in a cold voice, placing a bag in front of him.

"Wait. I always eat here."

"Not anymore." She turned and walked away.

He placed three dollars on the counter, picked up the bag, and gave the young girl a half-hearted smile. "I guess I'm free to give you a hand."

"Thanks! My name is April."

"I'm John Root." He held the door for her. "Where's your car?"

"Over there. She leaned past him and pointed to a recent model Toyota. Besides sitting several inches off the ground, the front end was wedged into a bush.

"You get in and put it in reverse. I'll push." As he walked around the car, a tingling feeling between his shoulders made him turn around.

Several of the diner's patrons stood at the door and the window, watching.

Maybe they think I'm going to rape her right here in the parking lot. Then he chided himself for the spiteful thought. *It's not their fault. The influence of the Other grows stronger. Soon their suspicions will extend to each other.*

April leaned out the driver window. "Ready!"

"Okay." John put both hands on the hood and pushed, ignoring the sharp pricks from the stems of the bush. At the same time, the engine roared as April stepped on the gas. The car hung for a moment on the curb's edge, and then rolled back, the front end hitting the blacktop with a loud bang.

"Thanks so much," she said. "My father would have killed me if I had to call a tow truck."

"My pleasure. Have a nice day." He picked up his breakfast bag and started walking toward the road.

He'd only gone a few feet when April pulled up next to him. "Need a ride?"

"No, thanks. I'm used to the walk."

"C'mon. It's the least I can do after you helped me out."

It would be nice to ride for once. "All right. I'm headed to the Anderson's place, off of Route 16."

"Hop in."

The tingling feeling on his neck returned as he sat down. He glanced back at the diner, but sun's glare made it impossible to see if anyone was looking at him.

It was well past noon before the feeling of being watched finally went away.

* * *

"Ain't seen you in church lately, Tina." Although there was nothing unusual to Francine Rose's statement, the atmosphere in the kitchen immediately dropped by several degrees.

"Haven't been there." Tina didn't look up from her cards, or she'd have noticed the other three women staring at her over their bridge hands.

Not that noticing would have changed anything.

"Missed you at the raffle last week, too." Patsy Winters placed her cards on the table and lit a cigarette,.

"Reverend Christian asked about you," added Martha DeGroot, an immense woman with a beehive hairdo who spilled out over both sides of

her chair.

At the mention of the reverend's name, Tina's mouth tightened before she spoke.

"Why's he so interested in me all of a sudden?"

When no one answered, Tina glanced up, a frown coming to her face as she noticed the stony expressions of her friends.

"Somethin' wrong?" she asked. It was unusual for any of them to bring up serious matters during their weekly card game. Bridge night was their time to cut loose and have fun. They might talk about which of their husbands snored worse, or how the Clancy's daughters were turning into a real pair of brazen sluts, or the fact that it was a damn shame Ben Shay had lost his job but what did he expect with the way he kept going in late and hungover half the time? Complaining, sharing stories, commenting on their neighbors – that was all fine and dandy for bridge night. But serious problems were put aside for morning discussions, with coffee and danishes the only distractions.

"We been talking," Martha said, "and it seems like you got a problem with the church all of a sudden."

"I got no problem with the church. Truth is, we've decided to attend services somewhere else, that's all."

"Somewhere else? Why on earth would you do that?" Ashes dropped from Patsy's cigarette as she spoke. No one paid any attention.

Tina's eyes darted from one suddenly unfriendly face to the next.

"Well, it's Reverend Christian. There's something about him that puts goose pimples up my arms every time I see him, and not in a good way. Eddie don't like him, neither. And he scares the bejeezus out of the kids. All that talk about elder gods and fiery retribution. It ain't right. I don't remember nothin' in the Bible about no ancient ones or beasts guarding the gates to the afterlife. Whatever that man is preaching, me and my family don't want no part of it."

"Christian's a good, God-fearin' man and that's what this town needs. Too many people ain't following their faith no more." Francine pursed her lips and directed her gaze right at Tina, making it evident just who she was talking about.

"Following their faith?" Tina slapped her cards down on the table. "That man's corrupting your faith. Ain't you noticed? It ain't Jesus he's been preaching about. It ain't God in Heaven. I can't even pronounce the names of his gods, but you all are following his every word like cats chasing the milkman. It ain't right. It ain't natural."

Martha rose from her chair, a human mountain expanding to change the landscape of the kitchen. Stacks of coins fell over on the table and dishes shook from her tectonic vibrations.

"That's too bad you feel that way," she said, her voice rumbling from deep within her chest.

Tina started to get up also but Francine and Patsy were faster. They placed their hands on her shoulders, forcing her back down into her chair.

"Reverend Christian was right," Patsy said. "Not everyone will hear the truth in his words." She brought her cigarette down on Tina's arm, smiling as Tina's cry of pain and the smell of scorched flesh filled the air in the kitchen.

Martha lumbered around the table, picking up a triangular pie slicer from the dish that had once held Patsy's famous blueberry cobbler.

Without a word, she shoved the blade into Tina's left eye. Tina let out a howl that cut off in mid-scream as Martha twisted the wide blade and pushed it deep into Tina's brain. Martha and Francine let go of the body and it toppled off the chair, hitting the tile with a dull thud. The three women looked at each other and smiled.

Reverend Christian would be so proud.

Martha reached down and turned Tina's cards over.

"I knew it. She had the goddamn queen of spades the whole time." She threw the cards onto Tina's corpse.

Francine went to a drawer and took out three long carving knives.

It was time to bring the word of the gods to Tina's family.

* * *

The day after getting banned from Rosie's Diner, John was sitting on the Anderson's new front steps, eating his lunch, when three squad cars roared up the drive, lights flashing and sirens wailing.

"John Root! Put your hands in the air and step down from the porch," Showalter's amplified voice bellowed from the car's speaker.

John dropped his sandwich and raised his hands. His stomach did a flip and his legs trembled as he walked slowly down the steps. Several of the police officers had exited their vehicles and were approaching him, guns drawn.

"John, what's going on?" Mitch asked from the door.

"I don't know. Call your sister." John's mind whirled as he tried to

think of what he'd done to bring about such a dramatic response from the police.

Whatever it is, I sense the hand of the Other in it. He'd been on edge all morning; for the past two nights he'd dreamed of a giant red eye staring at him from a starless night sky. The protective wards he kept around his bed had prevented the unknown presence from coming any closer, but they'd also hidden who it was that watched him.

And now this. He kept silent as two deputies pulled his arms down and slapped handcuffs roughly on his wrists, tightening the bands until the metal cut into his flesh.

Showalter walked up, a wide grin on his porcine face. "Well, well, looks like we done caught ourselves a murderer, boys."

For a moment John couldn't believe his ears. "What?" he asked. "I haven't killed anyone."

The Sheriff held out a plastic Baggie with something small and square in it. "Then how do you explain us findin' your license in her hand when we pulled her from the river?"

John shook his head. "My license is in my wallet, in my back pocket."

Showalter nodded to one of the officers. "Check it."

John felt a hand dip into his pocket and remove his wallet. After a short pause that seemed like an eternity, a voice behind him said, "I've got some cash, a library card, some receipts, and a picture. No license."

"That's impossible." John started to turn around but the men behind him held him still.

"'Fess up now, and maybe the courts'll go easier on you," Showalter said. "Unless you got yourself a real good alibi, it appears you were the last one to see her alive."

"I don't even know who you're talking about."

Someone twisted his arms up, sending shooting pains from his elbows to his shoulders. "April Kohl, you piece of shit. She was friends with my daughter."

"I told you, I don't—" John stopped as he recognized the name. "Wait. April Kohl? I helped her with her car, and she gave me a ride out here. That was all. She drove away after that."

"Is that right? Well, we got witnesses saw you get into her car. You got any who saw her drop you off here?"

Something in John's stomach sank. "No. But I told Danni about it." Even as he said the words, he realized how useless his story sounded.

The Sheriff tilted his hat back, raised his eyebrows, and pursed his lips. He made a small *tsk-tsk* sound, and then said, "Ain't that a shame. Guess that means you'll be spending the night in a cell. Maybe this'll help you sleep." He drove his fist into John's stomach. "Take him away, boys."

Gasping for breath, John struggled to keep his feet as the officers dragged him to a car and pushed him into the back seat. He managed to duck his head at the last moment to avoid hitting it on the door frame, which drew disappointed looks from the deputies.

The angry stares of the officers served as a reminder to John that thanks to the Other, everyone in town would be convinced of his guilt, which meant he'd have a hard time finding adequate representation. Normally, the chances of his being found guilty and going to prison would be slim. There was only circumstantial evidence against him, and not even much of that. But times weren't normal, meaning things could very well go bad for him in court. Of course, it could be months before he even went to trial, giving the Other all the time he needed to destroy the town.

I can't let that happen.

Which meant that somehow, he had to gain his freedom.

Not long after John had been booked, stripped of his belt and shoelaces, and pushed into a small cell in the basement of the Sheriff's office, Showalter came to visit him.

"Best make yourself comfortable. You're gonna be here a long time, Mister Root."

"I believe I'm entitled to a phone call?" He'd had time to think things over, and he'd decided to call Danni and hope she knew a good lawyer.

The Sheriff reached into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone. A tiny label affixed to the case read, 'Property of Cattaraugus County Sheriff's Department.'

"Here. You got someone in mind, or do you need the list of town attorneys?"

"I know the number I need."

The phone picked up on the third ring. "Hello?" Danni said.

"Danni? It's John Root. I'm...I'm in a bit of trouble. I've been arrested."

"John! I've been calling the Sheriff's but no one will tell me anything. What happened?"

"They think I'm the one who's been killing those girls."

"What?" Her tone grew suspicious. "Why do they think that?"

John sighed. He knew this would come up. "Apparently my license was found with the last body, the same girl who drove me to your house yesterday."

"How did your license end up with the body?"

"I don't know. Maybe it fell out of my pocket in her car. I didn't even know it was missing until they arrested me."

For a moment, Danni didn't speak. John heard Mitch asking over and over what was going on. Finally, she let out a long breath, and he knew he'd lost her as a friend.

"John, I'd really like to help you, but there's nothing I can do. I don't have any money to pay bail or hire you a lawyer. Hell, I don't even really know you. I'm sorry."

"I understand. Can you tell Mitch—" He stopped as a loud click sounded in his ear.

He handed the phone back to Showalter, who wore a broad grin. "Guess you'll be needing assigned counsel."

John nodded.

Showalter's grin grew wider. "Ain't that just dandy. I'm sure he'll do a bang-up job." He took a step closer to the bars and his smile dropped away as if it had never been there. "I knew sooner or later I'd find the man responsible for those girls. You sickos always fuck up. The Gods say, 'Seek and destroy that which harms you.' And I been workin' hard to find you. Reverend Christian told me, told all of us, to beware the stranger in our midst. He was right. Now you're gonna fry for what you've done."

By the time he finished, the Sheriff was risen to a shout. Spittle flew from his lips. Fearing the man's anger, John retreated to the cell's lone cot and sat down, facing the floor. He didn't look up until Showalter's footsteps faded away down the hall.

The Other's influence is stronger than I thought.

That sparked a new fear in John's heart.

Maybe it was already too late.

Part II

He speaks in words that sound like riddles,
He brings the lighting down to earth,
He makes the young girls leave their homes,
When the Stranger comes to town.

- The Stranger, undated Southern folk myth

Chapter 13

"And in the olden days, the dark days, the forces of Heaven and Hell fought mighty battles. Long before the God of Christianity brought his message of peace to the people of Earth, the Elders struggled for supremacy in the Universe. From the farthest reaches of cold space to the lands and oceans of our own world, blood spilled in waves and mythical creatures fought with a ferocity unlike anything witnessed before or since. Mountains shook with their fury, and their sciences were as magic to the primitive dwellers on Earth."

Reverend Christian paused to take a deep breath, and Mitch shifted nervously on the hard wood of the pew. All around him, the church-goers sat in enraptured silence, eyes focused on the man who no longer stood behind the podium but stalked back and forth, his wireless mic amplifying his voice to near-deafening levels. Sweat dripped off the noses, chins, and foreheads of everyone in the church, with the exception of Christian. He seemed immune to the heat, his long hair unkempt but suspiciously dry. Women fanned themselves with limp church notices and men wiped brows with sodden handkerchiefs, but Christian remained unfazed by the tropical conditions.

Mitch cast a glance at Danni and saw that she was as caught up in the sermon as the rest of the crowd, something he couldn't understand. She'd never been much into religion. They only reason they even went to church was because they'd promised their mother, right before she died, that they'd go every Sunday until Mitch was sixteen. Then he could make his own informed decision.

But lately she'd gotten more and more interested in Sunday services. *Ever since Reverend Christian came to town,* he realized. *He doesn't scare her the way he scares me. Or John*.

He still couldn't believe the police had arrested John. There was no way he was a murderer. Mitch thought back to the day John had chased away the bullies and healed his cuts and bruises. If anything, the guy was

a hero. He wanted to tell Danni about that day. Then she'd understand what kind of person John was. But he'd promised John he'd never say anything about the black bag or its magic contents.

It's not fair! Everyone in town, even Danni, seemed convinced John was guilty. It'd been three days since John's arrest, and Danni still got mad if Mitch tried to talk about it. People in town were even saying he deserved the death penalty. When he'd tried to say something in John's defense, Danni had hushed him and said, "You've got to face facts, little brother. He pulled a fast one on us. I just thank the Gods he didn't hurt you."

The Reverend's voice boomed out again over the new speakers placed throughout the church. "The time of retribution is at hand. Too many of our own have been taken from us these past weeks, and like the lambs sent to slaughter, they were sacrificed for the greater good of the community. Yes, that's right, the greater good. For you see, our community isn't just in this church, or in this town. It's everywhere"—he spread his arms wide—"all across the nation and the world. And by giving their lives up, they've played their part in the Gods' plan to return the world to what it should be."

He paused again, returned to the small podium. "It is no coincidence that the Stranger came to our town. We have been chosen by the Gods to bring him to justice. Not the Christian God; no, for he would preach forgiveness, even allow this man to rid himself of his sins through confession.

"But is that what you want?" Christian's voice rose in volume, startling several women and children.

Mitch's body jerked the way it sometimes did just as he was falling asleep, and he looked around, embarrassed at his momentary fright.

"No," murmured scattered voices across the church.

Pounding his fist on the podium, Christian shouted, "I said, is that what you want?"

"No!" This time the entire congregation responded, including Danni, whose emphatic shout scared Mitch more than the Reverend's antics.

"No! That's why when it comes to justice, the old ways are the best. So sayeth the Elders, those who know what it means to be betrayed, to take vengeance. These are the Gods, my fellow citizens, who have brought me here to you, to awaken you, so that you shall be prepared to fight in the coming battles."

Christian's eyes narrowed, and his voice grew so soft that a single

voice from elsewhere in the church would have drowned him out.

But not even a cough interrupted him.

"And mark my words, good people, there *will* be battles. The time of the Elders approaches once again, and we have been chosen to carry their flags. We are the soldiers of the coming apocalypse, and woe to those who stand before us. Now, let us pray."

Sudden chills went up Mitch's spine as Reverend Christian closed his eyes. Everywhere he looked, people had shut their eyes as well, many of them murmuring under their breath.

Christian opened his eyes and spread his arms once more. "In the name of those who wait in the houses of R'lyeh, we bow to you."

"We bow to you." The congregation bowed their heads.

For a moment, Mitch sat there, and then he saw Christian's gaze fix on him, the man's black eyes like twin gun barrels aiming death. Quickly, he bowed his head, afraid he might draw attention to himself by acting differently from everyone else.

He held his breath, not daring to look up too soon but desperately anxious to know if he was still being watched. The silence in the church was so absolute he thought everyone must be able to hear the pounding of his heart. It seemed like an eternity until Christian cleared his throat and spoke in a normal tone.

"Before we end today's service, I want you to consider the debt you owe to families of the young women we have lost. In their honor, the church will be holding a bake sale Saturday, downstairs in the rec center. Please help in any way you can, either by setting up a table of baked goods or by simply purchasing a nice cake for your family."

Gentle clapping filled the air for a moment, and then the Reverend concluded the Service.

For the first time Mitch could remember, no one idled at the bottom of the stairs, chatting with neighbors about the weather, or sports, or who was barbequing where that afternoon.

And no one waited to speak with Reverend Christian.

Are they as frightened as I am? Or still under whatever spell he put on them during his sermon?

Danni headed for the Mustang, as silent as the rest of the congregation. Trotting to keep up with her, Mitch asked, "Hey, can we grab an ice cream on the way home?"

She stopped so abruptly he walked two feet past her before he realized it. "No," she said, her voice filled with February ice. "I have to start

cooking for the bake sale. It's the least we can do, considering we were the ones employing the man who destroyed those families' lives."

"We don't know he's guilty!" Mitch said.

"Don't be naïve, Mitchell. Didn't you hear Reverend Christian? The stranger among us?"

A thought struck Mitch. "Reverend Christian's only been in town a couple of months. Does that make him a suspect?"

Before he knew what was happening, Danni grabbed him and slammed him against the car. "Don't ever say anything like that again!"

"Ow! What's your problem?"

She relaxed her grip, and something seemed to drain out of her, leaving only the old Danni behind. She knelt down, bringing her face to his level. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I'm just on edge, that's all. Between John, the heat, and the bills.... I'll tell you what. We *will* stop for that ice cream. We deserve it." She smiled and tousled his hair, and then got into the car.

For the rest of the day, Danni seemed her old self, but Mitch thought maybe it was just an act.

Like the one he put on, pretending nothing was wrong.

Chapter 14

Tony Lopez blended into the darkness outside Lucy's Bar and Grill. He was waiting for the blonde waitress with the big tits to come out. He'd spotted her as he finished his first beer of the night. As soon as he saw her, the Plan popped into his head. That's how he was already thinking of it, with a capital "P."

He'd kept his promise to Billy Ray, staying low, avoiding the cops. But how many days could a man hole up in a cheap-ass hotel room? So he'd decided to grab a few drinks before buying a bottle and heading back to his squat. He'd purposely chosen a place in the worst part of the shitburg Billy Ray'd set up in, the kind of bar the town council liked to pretend didn't exist.

Watching her tits bounce under her tight shirt, he'd thought, *Now, if I was killing broads, that's the kind of girl I'd go after.*

And that was when the Plan came to him.

Grab her. Rape her. Kill her. And then dump her in the river, just like the real killer had been doing. The best part was, the cops already had someone in custody. When another body showed up, they'd think they arrested the wrong guy and let him go. Assuming he was the murderer, he'd probably pick up where he left off, and in doing so, take the heat off Tony.

And if he wasn't the real killer, then that psycho was out there, and it was just a matter of time before he struck again, also taking the heat off Tony.

Either way, I win. He'd immediately left the bar and taken a position in the doorway of the abandoned building next door, where he'd settled in for a long wait.

Just after two a.m., right after he'd lit his fifteenth cigarette of the night, she came out the side door and headed for one of the few remaining cars behind the building. Tony flicked the butt away and darted across the parking lot, coming up behind her just as she used her remote to unlock the

car. A quick punch to the side of her head and three minutes later he was driving down the road, her unconscious body in the passenger seat.

He'd parked the car outside of town and wasted no time stripping her clothes off and spreading her legs. He was hard before he even got her panties down over her ankles, as much from the thrill of the kill as the coming sex.

When he was done, he wrapped the condom—he always put on the raincoat; too many diseases out there—and buried it. Then he drove back into town.

He'd read enough of the local papers to know that all the bodies had been found under or downstream from the main bridge over the river; it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out they'd been tossed over the side, usually while still alive. But he had no desire to expend that kind of energy. Instead, he slid her down the embankment and out into the river. When he reached the halfway mark, he pushed her under until bubbles stopped rising from her mouth, and then let her go.

Returning to the car, Tony paused. His fingerprints were all over it; even a Keystone Kop like Sheriff Fat Ass would be able to nail him in a heartbeat.

Then he remembered his cigarette lighter. Congratulating himself on his own genius, he drove the car back to the other side of town, where he used strips of the blonde's blouse to construct a makeshift fuse, which he shoved down into the gas tank.

After lighting the fuse, he ran as fast as he could, feeling like a character from a spy movie. When the explosion came, it vibrated the ground under his feet even from thirty yards away.

The walk back to his hotel was a long one, but he laughed most of the way. When he finally pushed an old pizza box off his bed and collapsed, his last thought was, *Can't wait to see the papers tomorrow!*

* * *

On the opposite side of town from where Tony Lopez was busy torching a car, Officers Dan Kerwin and Geoff Daw were patrolling West State Street, near the State College, hoping to find some drunken college boys to rough up or, even better, some horny college girls looking for a good time.

They'd just pulled in to the Handi-Mart for coffees when Kerwin spotted the man hitchhiking just down the road.

Hitchhiking *into* town.

"Sonofabitch," he said, pointing the man out to his partner. "What kind of asshole hitchhikes in the middle of the night?"

Daw's face went tight. "Maybe it's one of the Strangers Reverend Christian said to beware of."

Kerwin smiled. "Looks like we're gonna have us some fun after all."

Daw gunned the engine. As they drew abreast of the hitcher, Kerwin opened his door. Too late, the hitchhiker realized what was happening and tried to leap out of the way, but the door caught him in the back and sent him tumbling across the blacktop.

Daw pounded on the steering wheel. "Twenty points!" He skidded to a stop and reversed, skidding again as they pulled up next to the man, who was rolling on the ground, holding his elbow and shouting in pain.

"Damn, he's a loud one," Kerwin said.

"I know how to fix that." Daw slid his baton out and twirled it around. "Doctor's orders: Apply generous amounts of hard plastic to skull. Repeat as needed."

Kerwin laughed as he drew his own baton. As they approached the injured man, he shouted, "Hey, pal, the doctor's in the house!"

Daw landed the first blow, across the man's mouth. Blood and teeth flew in all directions, and the man's screams rose to an ear-splitting howl.

"Well, that won't do at all," Kerwin said, and brought his baton down on the man's prominent Adam's apple. There was a sound like dry twigs breaking, and the hitchhiker's cries changed to choking gasps. He tried to bring his hands up to his throat, but Daw swung several times in quick succession, breaking several fingers and both wrists. Kerwin turned his attention to the legs, striking the shins over and over until they took on unnatural shapes beneath their denim covering.

Daw shifted his aim from the arms to the belly. On the fourth blow, the now-silent body emitted a sound like a loud, wet fart and the air filled with the hot stench of human shit.

For a moment, the two police officers stood still, bloody batons in hand, staring at each other with shock. Then Daw burst into laughter and Kerwin quickly joined in, hooting and snorting so hard he doubled over, holding his stomach.

"Oh, man," Daw said, when he was finally able to speak, "talk about beating the crap out of someone."

"Stop it, you're gonna get me going again." Kerwin held up a hand in mock surrender.

"What should we do with him?"

Kerwin shrugged. "Toss him in the river and let him turn into someone else's problem."

"All right. But let's make sure we dump him way downstream from town. The last thing the Chief needs is another stiff showing up."

"Sounds good." Kerwin opened the trunk. "I'll get his feet, you grab his arms."

"Wait!" Daw dug through the cruiser's trunk until he located a green tarp. "Lemme lay this out. I don't wanna be cleaning shit and blood later."

"Okay. But let's hurry. Our shift's almost over."

"I hear you. Hey, when we're finished, wanna grab a beer?"

* * *

John Root leaned against the wall of his cell, doing his best to ignore the springs poking him through the thin mattress. The sheets stank of old piss and sweat, the odors hanging in the hot, moist air like foul balloons.

Even though the temperature had to be above ninety, John's body trembled.

Something's out there tonight, something evil.

He could feel it, a miasma wafting over the town, not unlike the tendrils of piss-stink swirling through the cell. Every now and then the dark energy would reach out and touch someone, infect them. Anger, envy, greed, fear, and frustration joined with the unnatural heat and brought out the worst in people.

John knew well enough where that dark cloud originated: the thing that currently posed as Reverend Christian. In other towns, other times, it had used different names. Amaguq, Discordia, Loki, Wemicus. The Native Americans of the Southwest knew him as Trickster and Coyote.

He was all of them, and more.

He was the Agent of Chaos who'd killed John's mother so many years ago, and his grandmother before that.

Unless he was stopped, Christian's evil influence would grow until wife beatings, child beatings, rapes, murders, and suicides became as common as handshakes and how-do-you-dos.

That's how it had happened in John's hometown, back when John was just a boy. By the time John's mother drove the Ancient One away, more than half the town was destroyed and she'd barely had the strength to make it home, where she'd collapsed into her bed and fallen into a coma.

She'd passed on a few days later.

Another shiver ran over him, and he prayed it was from fear and not because another life had succumbed to the evil.

Please, God, don't let anything happen to Mitch or Danni while I'm stuck in this cell.

He'd been thinking all night about the Andersons. He couldn't help it, even they no longer considered him a friend—at least Danni didn't—and he had more important things to worry about. Like how he was going to get close enough to Cyrus Christian to stop him from destroying the town.

Of course, if he didn't get out soon, it wouldn't matter.

There'd be no town left to save.

The first two rings of the phone got lost in Harry Showalter's dream of sipping an icy margarita while he relaxed on a tropical beach. Then the cries of the seagulls turned to a jangling electronic sound that roused him, and he fumbled for the phone on his nightstand. "Hello?"

He glanced at the clock and his gut clenched. Five-seventeen in the morning. A call that early always meant trouble.

"Chief? We got another floater."

It took a moment for Showalter to make sense of the night officer's words. "What? Where? I mean...never mind. Is it...?" He let the sentence trail off, afraid to give voice to his fear.

"Yeah, another girl. Two fellas out fishing for muskies found her, 'bout a quarter mile downstream from the bridge."

"Shit!" Harry kicked the covers off. Next to him, Nora snorted in her sleep and turned her head away. After all the years of getting late night calls, she could sleep through anything. "I'll be there in fifteen."

With a curse, he pulled on the same uniform he'd worn the previous day, gave his armpits and shirt a liberal spray of deodorant, and hurried out to his car.

Three hours later, Showalter sat in the small meeting room in the police station, nursing his third cup of bitter coffee. Across from him sat Mayor Del Watkins, whose angry features went well with Harry's own mood. A pile of reports and files lay scattered on the table between them.

"Goddammit, Harry. You said you had the bastard. For chrissake, I was quoted in the paper as saying the streets were safe. Now what the

fuck do we do?"

Showalter exhaled, his rancid coffee breath harsh even to his own nose. "You saw the evidence. Stranger in town. Last person seen with the victim. No alibi. Everything pointed to him."

The mayor narrowed his eyes, a sign he was considering how to save his hide. Harry knew the look well. He and Del went back a long ways, back to high school, where they'd both been second-string on the football team and just smart enough to graduate.

Look at us now. People said we'd end up working down to Joe's Citgo, and now we run this goddamn town. And I'll be damned if Del or some drugged out serial killer is gonna ruin things for me.

"What if we say it's a copy cat?" Del asked. "Think that will fly?"

Harry shook his head. "A copy cat serial killer in a town that hasn't had a murder in five years before this summer? No one would believe it. But we caught a break this time. Guy got careless." He tapped a file. "Left a bunch of cigarette butts across the street from the bar she worked at. He must've been waiting a long time. We sent a few up to the crime lab in Buffalo for DNA testing. And I got my boys dusting the whole alley for prints."

"What about her car?"

"Too burnt to get anything from."

Del stood up, started pacing back and forth. Harry had time to feel annoyed that the mayor looked refreshed and ready to go, his suit neatly pressed. By comparison, Harry felt like he'd just finished a ten-mile hike through the swamps. Mud and burrs stuck to the cuffs of his pants, and the sweat stains under his arms were spreading at an alarming rate.

The mayor paused to look out the window, which faced State Street. Shops and businesses were preparing for another scorching summer day.

"What about that fellow you got locked up?"

"I still ain't convinced he's innocent. Maybe he's the killer's accomplice."

Someone knocked on the door. Before Harry could tell them to go away, Sergeant Mathers, the morning desk officer, stuck his head in.

"Sorry to bother you, Chief, but there's someone out here to see you."

"Not now, Mathers."

"Um, he's from the FBI. Agent Nova."

"FBI?" the mayor asked. "What the hell are they doing here?"

A tall man in a dark suit, his short hair neatly brushed, pushed past Mathers and entered the room. "Apparently the Chief forgot to inform us you've had a series of murders, all following the same MO. I'm assuming it was a clerical error, since I'm sure he knows the protocol: the FBI is always brought in on any case involving a suspected serial killer." Nova pulled out a chair and sat down.

Mayor Watkins started to say something but Showalter cut him off. "We appreciate you wanting to help, Agent Nova, but you're too late. We already caught the man responsible." He allowed himself a small smile. "Seems like we're not quite the small town yokels you FBI folk think we are."

Watkins' eyes went wide, but he kept his mouth shut.

Nova raised one eyebrow. "Is that so? Well, good for you. Still doesn't explain why we weren't called."

The Sheriff shrugged. "The first few, we thought they were suicides. Young girls dealing with bad relationships. Wasn't until the last couple that the fella got careless."

"Mmm-hmm." Nova's lips turned up in a small grin, and Showalter noticed the smile stopped far short of his eyes.

Watch out for this one. He's trouble. "Anything else, Agent Nova?"

The FBI agent stood up. "Not now. But you won't mind if I come back for the arraignment? Just to satisfy my own curiosity, of course. Since you've got your man, there's no need for us to become officially involved."

Showalter shrugged again. "Whatever floats your boat. Now, if you'll excuse us, we've got a lot of paperwork to take care of."

Nova nodded to them, and left the room.

Watkins waited until they saw Nova crossing the street to his car before exploding.

"Jesus on a crutch, Harry. What the hell were you thinking, lying to the FBI like that?"

"Relax, Del. I didn't lie. I still think Root's involved in all this somehow. Nova can go sit on his gun and rotate for all I care. No hotshot FBI agent's strolling in here and stealing my case. This is my goddamn town and I'm gonna find the bastard whose killing those girls. And when I do...."

He paused for breath, then crushed his empty coffee cup.

"The fucker is gonna pay, and pay big. Like the Reverend says, 'Let he who sins against thee feel the wrath as if he sinned against the Gods.'"

"Amen," Watkins said, nodding emphatically. "But that doesn't

solve our other problem. What am I gonna say to the paper when they find out you've released Root?"

Showalter sat back down in his chair. "Who says I'm gonna let him go yet? Until we find out who did that waitress, Root's gonna cool his heels right where he is. Now, I really have work to do."

Showalter waited until he was sure Watkins had left the building before calling for Mathers.

"What is it, Chief?" the skinny Sergeant asked.

"Round up a couple of the boys. No official vehicles. Agent Nova is on his way back to Buffalo. I think he might have an accident, if you catch my drift. Otherwise he's gonna make our lives real difficult. And I don't need difficult, understand?"

Mathers smiled. "Yes, sir."

Showalter got himself another cup of coffee and returned to his desk. Now there was nothing to do but wait and see if any of the evidence panned out.

Twenty minutes later, his phone rang.

"Showalter here."

"Chief?" It was Parsons, at the desk. "Just got confirmation on one of the prints in the alley. Belongs to a career low-life named Antonio Lopez. Rap sheet includes petty theft, aggravated assault, and possession. And get this: the Binghamton police suspected him of raping and killing four girls, but they didn't have enough evidence to hold him."

"Lopez? Where've I...shit on a shingle! That's Billy Ray's buddy. Where's Wade Cullen?" He wanted the biggest officer on the force at his side when they went after this one.

"Last I heard, out by Miller's Farm Road."

"Tell him to come back. And start calling motels; I want to know where this scum bucket is keeping himself."

He'd barely hung up the phone when an ambulance roared past the station, siren wailing, heading north on Route 16.

Toward Buffalo.

Showalter allowed himself a smile. The day was turning out to be a good one, even if it still felt like Death Fucking Valley outside.

Chapter 15

Harry Showalter stood to the side, gun drawn, as Wade Cullen kicked open the door to Tony Lopez's room.

"Hands in the air! You're under arrest!"

"Hey!" Lopez, wearing only faded blue boxer shorts and a stained wife-beater t-shirt, jumped from the bed, dropping the latest issue of *Barely Legal.* His stiff cock protruded from his underwear.

"What's goin' on? I didn't do nuthin'! I—" His words turned into a gasp of pain as Cullen delivered two quick kidney punches.

"Shut the fuck up, perv. You see that, Chief? Fucker was wackin' it. Probably thinking about killin' another one." He punched Lopez again, then kicked at the magazine. "You like 'em young, right?"

"You got the wrong guy," Lopez gasped.

"Bullshit." Showalter put his face even with Lopez's, where Cullen had it pressed against the stained wallpaper. "Got your prints. Got your DNA. Now your ass belongs to me." He straightened up. "I'm going back to the car," he told Cullen. "You got five minutes to bring him down."

Showalter closed the door behind him, but it didn't do much to dim the satisfying sounds of flesh striking flesh.

The man Wade Cullen dragged into the police station barely resembled the Tony Lopez of an hour before. His nose angled sharply to one side and dripped blood; one eye was swollen shut. Both of his lips were split and bleeding, and when he opened his mouth there was a space where a front tooth once sat.

Cullen tossed the half-conscious man into a chair and headed toward the men's room to wash up. Blood coated his knuckles and splatters of red darkened his tan uniform shirt.

Officer Mathers looked at Lopez and then over at the Chief, one eyebrow raised.

"He resisted arrest," Showalter said, a vicious smile pulling at his

lips.

"Ain't that a shame."

"Yep. Keep an eye on this piece of shit until Wade books him. If he moves, shoot him." Showalter went into his office and shut the door.

"You got it, Chief." Mathers sat down on the corner of a desk across from Lopez, his gun drawn and resting on his lap.

"Go ahead," he whispered, when he saw Lopez staring at him. "I knew one of the girls you killed. You picked the wrong town, asshole. Around here, we're ready for the coming war. The Gods have told us what to do."

For the first time in many years, Tony Lopez knew what real fear felt like.

* * *

John Root opened his eyes at the sounds of the Sheriff and Officer Cullen dragging a semi-conscious man into the cell next to his. Cullen paused long enough to spit on the new prisoner, and then left. Showalter, however, remained behind. He waited until the sounds of Cullen's footsteps faded away, then took out his service pistol and aimed it into the man's cell. Without hesitating, he pulled the trigger, the shots sounding like two explosions in the cement-walled basement.

His face expressionless, Showalter stepped over to John's cell and stared in, hands on his wide hips and melon-sized sweat marks staining both armpits. John shrank back, fully expecting the Sheriff to end his life the way he had the other prisoner's.

"You know what that was?" Showalter asked, nodding his head toward the dead body.

John said nothing.

"That was small town justice. He tried to escape. Saves the taxpayers a lot of money. And it helps you, too. Know how?"

When John didn't answer, the Sheriff continued.

"That was your get out of jail card, Mister Root." The Sheriff holstered his gun and tapped his fingers against the bars as he spoke. "Turns out he was the one killin' those girls."

Showalter waved his hand toward one of the cameras mounted by the ceiling. A moment later there was an electronic hum and a click as the lock on John's cell disengaged.

Showalter made no move away from the door, and John remained

sitting on his cot, wary of a trick.

"I don't believe in coincidences, Root. Two strangers in town, one a known felon and th' other seen with at least one victim. I got to believe there's some kinda connection."

"I didn't know him."

The Sheriff pulled open the cell door and stepped back, one hand resting on his pistol. "What you say and what I believe is two different things, but I got no choice 'cept to let you go. Take my advice, though," he said, as John stood up.

"What's that?"

"Get your ass outta my town fast as you can, and don't ever come back."

John slowly stepped forward, keeping his eye on the Sheriff's gun hand. He stopped at the cell door and looked Showalter in the eyes. "I can't do that, Sheriff. I know you think I'm involved in what's going on in your town, but I'm not. If anything, I'm here to stop it from spreading further. I can't leave until my job is done."

For a moment neither of them spoke. John met the sheriff's narrow-eyed gaze, knowing he couldn't back down, couldn't show any weakness.

Sweat trickled down John's back, and it seemed as if Showalter's face grew larger, rounder, until every pore stood out like craters on an alien moon. A stray crumb nestled in one of the deep crevices lining Showalter's mouth. Beads of sweat dotted his brow like morning dew on a car window.

The Sheriff's radio squawked and both men twitched.

"Chief? The Mayor's lookin' for ya."

Showalter blinked, and John felt something between them snap, as if they'd been tied to an invisible rope. "I'll be watching you, Root. Now get the fuck outta here."

John nodded and moved past the Sheriff. He felt the man's gaze on him as he hurried up the stairs. The feeling intensified when he stopped at the front desk to collect his belongings. He glanced up, saw that several people had paused, were all staring at him.

None of the looks were friendly.

If my welcome wasn't worn out before, it sure is now.

He exited the building without even looking to see if they'd returned everything. All he wanted was to be outside, free to breathe the oppressive, muggy air of another stifling summer afternoon.

Something struck him painfully on his left shoulder. Turning, he saw Reverend Christian standing there with several small children.

All the children had rocks in their hands.

The Reverend pointed at John and said, "And the Gods said to their people, 'Do not turn away from your enemy, but rather meet it with all your strength. For only by casting the first stone can you drive away that which seeks to destroy you.'"

"Go away," a young girl shouted. She threw her rock at him. More stones followed as the children took aim and threw.

"I won't let you corrupt this town," John said, holding his hands up to shield himself.

Christian smiled. "I am merely the vessel of the Gods, John Root. You can no more stop me than you can stop the winds or the rain."

Thunder crashed overhead and the sky grew darker.

"You've been stopped before, Old One. I will not let these people die for your dark Gods."

Another explosion of thunder echoed across the town, rattling windows and setting dogs to barking. The children picked up more stones, but before they could throw them, John whispered three words. The children screamed as the stones turned to spiders in their hands. Dropping the black, hairy creatures, they ran away.

Christian laughed. "You're good at scaring children, but your homespun magics are no match for the real thing. If you don't believe me, ask your mother."

John gasped as his mother, her face dead-pale, stepped out from behind the Reverend, still dressed in her black burial gown.

"Listen to him, son. You can't win. Leave this place to him. Save yourself." Her lips moved, but the voice came from everywhere, as if it was part of the air.

Tears welled up in John's eyes, and he let them flow. She'd been gone more than thirty years but his memories of her were still as fresh as the day she'd said her final words to him.

The burden is yours now, John. It's a heavy load, but stay righteous and true, and you'll always be able to shoulder it. God loves you, my son, and so do I.

Thinking of her now, John couldn't remember one time she'd ever given up or admitted defeat, not even when the very Devil himself had stood outside her door.

Breathing deep of the humid air, John raised his voice to shout over the thunder and the rising winds. "Trickery cannot fool me, Old One."

With a howl of laughter, the Reverend disappeared, taking John's mother with him. The thunder and wind faded away, returning the day to

its previous desultory, stagnant calm.

Not a single stone littered the sidewalk.

They were never there; it was all an illusion.

What happens when I can't tell the illusions from reality?

Sheriff Showalter watched John Root turn and walk down Main Street, his head hung low as if he'd just seen his dog put to sleep. For the past five minutes the man had just stood in the street, looking for all the world like he was arguing with someone.

Man's crazier than a loon in June, talkin' to himself like that. Even if he ain't a killer, he oughtta be locked up in the nut house.

But the words felt wrong even as he thought them. Something about John Root seemed larger than life all of a sudden, and Showalter had a notion that maybe he'd done the right thing setting him free.

And if not, we can always kill him later.

* * *

Reverend Christian lifted his head from his desk. Sweat from his forehead left oddly-patterned stains on the green blotter. He sat back in his chair, eyes closed, until the momentary dizzy spell passed. Creating illusions with physical sensation took a toll, but the effort had been worth it.

"He's no match for me," he whispered to himself. Strong, yes; maybe even stronger than his mother had been.

That bitch. She'd bested me that time, sacrificed her own life to banish me. It had cost him dearly. Each failure weakened him. Each triumph brought more power, power he needed to open the gates.

He's strong, yes; but I'm stronger.

Christian opened his eyes and stared out the window. Gray cloud banks covered the sky again, and you could almost see the trees and plants dying under the combined weight of the summer heat and the moisture-laden air.

Still, it might be prudent to place another obstacle in his way, now that the damned fool Sheriff had let him go.

"Tonight," Christian said to the empty room. "I'll use his own strengths against him."

Chapter 16

John stood in the lobby of the Chilton Arms. By his feet were his leather satchel and a paper bag containing the meager items he'd purchased since arriving in town: matches, soap, shampoo, a deck of cards.

"But the police dropped the charges against me," he said to Marge Chilton. Pink curlers still covered her head, and he wondered if she ever took them out. "Can't I have my room back?"

"Harbor neither the serpent nor the stranger," she said, her voice a cold monotone, "for they may be one and the same. In the time of the Second Coming, trust only the emissaries of the Elders, for all others hide blasphemy in their hearts."

John tried to think of something to say, even knowing he had no chance of changing her mind. He had a feeling she was parroting parts of Christian's sermons. The Lord only knew what kind of dark readings he was delivering these days.

"You're not welcome among us, Mister Root, and you'll find no shelter here, nor anywhere else in town." She stared at him, as if daring him to argue.

Instead, he picked up his bags and headed for the door. He had a feeling he'd be safer sleeping under the stars than under the same roof as Marge Chilton. Before resorting to that, however, there was one other alternative he had to try.

Two blocks down, he stopped at a gas station and dropped a quarter into the pay phone. He dialed Danni's number and waited.

"Hello?"

"Danni? It's John Root. Please don't hang up; this is important."

A long silence made him think she'd ended the call, but then she said, "Go on."

"I don't know if you've heard, but the Sheriff released me, dropped all the charges. They've arrested someone else. I...," he stopped, unsure of what to say next.

A loud sigh came over the phone. "John, I'm so glad to hear that." Her voice held a hint of its old warmth. "I never wanted you to be guilty; but they said they had evidence, and I had Mitch to think about...."

"I understand. I was wondering..., could I—"

"Come back to work? Of course." She gave a little laugh. "I think there might even be more for you to do. Mitch and I don't have a handy bone between us."

"Actually, I wanted to ask you if I could stay at your house for a few days. I've been told I'm not welcome at the Chilton Arms."

"What about another hotel?"

"Apparently there are no rooms available anywhere in town. At least not for me."

Danni made a *tsk-tsk* noise. "Small town prejudice at work again. I'll make up the guest room for you. Are you coming over now?"

"Yes, I'll be there in an hour or so. And Danni...thank you."

"It's the least I can do. I guess I should have had more faith in you, like Mitch. I'll see you later."

After hanging up, John leaned against the hot wall of the gas station and felt something ease up inside him. He hadn't realized just how upset he'd been over losing Danni and Mitch as friends until now.

You shouldn't let yourself get involved. Personal feelings will only make your job harder.

"A man can't help his feelings," his mother's voice echoed in his head, something she'd said to him more than once growing up.

The question was, what exactly *were* his feelings?

* * *

"John!" Mitch greeted him at the door. Before John could say or do anything, the boy wrapped his arms around him and squeezed.

John remained still, watching Danni for any sign of annoyance. She wore a bemused smile on her face. "Go ahead." She mouthed the words at him and nodded.

Relieved, John returned the boy's hug and then pulled back. "Why don't you go get my bags from the porch?"

"Sure!" Mitch darted out the door.

Still not sure where he stood with Danni, John said, "If me being here is an imposition...."

She shook her head, and for the first time he noticed the coating of

flour on her hands, the smudges of white on her cheeks. More powdery stains dotted her pale blue t-shirt. The incredibly delicious odor of baking desserts filled the air, reminding him he hadn't eaten in more than a day.

"I already made up the guest room." She paused while Mitch went past. "But as long as you're here, you can make yourself useful." She nodded toward the kitchen.

Glancing past her, John saw several mixing bowls set up on the counter. Trays of cookies and brownies cooled on the table.

"Getting ready for the bake sale?" His stomach growled as he spoke, and Danni laughed.

"Yes, and if you help, I'll fix you a little plate to hold you until dinner."

"That's the best offer I've had all day," he said. "What can I do?"

With a glint in her eye, she asked, "How are you at mixing cookie dough?"

At six o'clock, Danni pulled one last tray of peanut-butter chocolate-chip cookies from the oven and set them on the counter to cool. By then, the kitchen felt like an extension of the oven, even with two fans going and all the windows open.

While John wrapped foil over one of twelve aluminum pans filled with an assortment of brownies, cookies, and homemade fudge, Danni opened the refrigerator and stood there, waving the cold air across her body.

"Oh, lord, that feels like heaven."

"It is hot in here," John said. He was looking forward to a cold shower and then relaxing on the front porch with a lemonade, or possibly a beer.

"And it's not going to be much cooler in church." Danni grabbed the pitcher of ice tea and poured them two glasses. "With all the renovations they're doing, it's too bad putting in air conditioning isn't one of them."

"You're going to church tonight?" The idea of Danni and Mitch participating in one of Christian's unholy rituals raised gooseflesh on John's arms.

"Of course we are. It's Wednesday service. You should come too; it might be a way to show the town you're not such a bad guy." She said the words in a lighthearted tone, but John saw from her expression she was serious about his attending.

"I—"

"Hey, sis, I don't feel so good." Mitch entered the kitchen, one hand on his stomach and the other against the wall for support. His summer tan was gone, replaced by a pasty-white pallor with a hint of green. Dark smudges rested below his eyes. His hair lay plastered to his head and sweat dripped from his forehead.

"You look like crap." Danni grabbed his hand and guided him into a chair.

"Thanks. You don't look so great yourself." He gave her a half-hearted grin.

"Glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humor." She touched a wrist to his forehead. "You're warm, but probably no worse than me or John. I don't think you have a fever."

"It's my stomach. It feels like there's a cement mixer turning around inside me." As if on cue, a rumbling sound came from his belly, and he groaned.

Hands on her hips and a stern look on her face, Danni asked, "Just how many cookies did you eat while we were baking?"

"I don't know." He closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the chair. "I didn't think I had that many."

"Great." She turned to John. "Sometimes he's like a dog; he just eats until he's sick."

John shrugged and tried to keep a smile from his face. "I was the same way when my mother used to bake cookies."

"Ugh, you men. All you ever think about is your bellies and your.... Anyway, now what am I gonna do? Church is in an hour, but I can't leave Mitch home like this. He might puke all over the bathroom or something."

"Ha, ha," Mitch mumbled, then groaned again.

"I can stay with him. That is, if you don't mind." John hoped he didn't sound too eager. Remembering the conversation he'd once had with the boy about how Reverend Christian scared him, he wondered if the stomach ache wasn't a ruse.

If so, it's a good one.

Danni chewed her lip. "I hate to do that. You didn't sign on to clean barf."

"I think he'll be okay as long as he stays out of the kitchen. Besides, you'll only be gone an hour."

"Two or three, actually," Danni said, untying her apron. "After services, a bunch of us are setting up for the bake sale on Saturday."

"We'll be fine. You go ahead and get ready. I'll put the food in the car for you."

"What about me?" Mitch asked, opening his eyes. Something about his poor-me look made John even more suspicious.

"You march yourself to bed, and make sure you've got an empty wastebasket next to you," Danni said.

"Eeww, gross."

"Not as gross as vomit all over your rug. Let's go. Upstairs."

He nodded and rose slowly, walking down the hall hunched over like an old man.

John had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

"You're sure you're okay with this?" Danni brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. The back seat of the Mustang was filled with cookie tins, Tupperware bowls, and aluminum pans.

"Positive. Go. By the time you get back, my miracle cure will already be working on Mitch's stomach ache." John closed the Mustang's door and handed her the keys.

"What miracle cure?"

He winked at her. "I'll tell you when you get back."

She started the car and drove off, twin plumes of dust following her down the driveway and onto the road.

John waited a good three minutes, just in case Danni came back for some reason. Then he went into the house.

"Mitch?" he called out. "You can come down now. Your sister's gone."

For a few heartbeats there was silence, and then he heard the creaking of floorboards overhead. A moment later, Mitch appeared at the top of the stairs.

"How'd you know?"

John laughed. "It would take an awful lot of cookies to make a boy your age that sick."

Mitch came down the stairs and joined John in the kitchen. "You gonna tell Danni?"

"No. How'd you make yourself look so ill?"

With a shy smile, the boy said, "I snuck out to the shed and breathed from the gasoline can a few times. The smell of gas always makes me nauseous."

"That was mighty foolhardy on your part." John opened the

refrigerator and got out the ice tea, poured them each a glass.

"I'd rather sniff gas than go to church."

Taking a sip of his tea, John could only nod. "Well, since you're feeling better, and we've got two hours with nothing to do, how about you help me set out the shingles and tools I'll need to repair the porch roof tomorrow?"

Mitch groaned. "It's too hot to work."

"Would you rather I told Danni you faked your stomach ache?"

"That's blackmail!"

John ruffled his hair. "So it is. But if we finish before she gets home, you'll have time for an ice cream."

"How 'bout an ice cream and some cookies?"

"You drive a hard bargain, kid."

Chapter 17

"The time approaches, my friends. The Old Ones prepare to wake. For eons they have waited, waited for the stars to align themselves in the heavens. They are those who cannot die, who always have been and always will be. From beyond space and time they will come, from below the seas they will rise, from beneath the Mountains of Madness they will emerge. Invulnerable and unstoppable."

Christian paused for breath, used the time to look around the church, alert for anything out of the ordinary; the movement of whispering lips, the twitch of an eye not staring straight forward in rapt attention. The....

There! In the back; something amiss. Now he stared, homing in on one person.

Danni Anderson. She was....

Alone?

Where is the boy?

He returned to his sermon, letting his voice grow louder, until it shook the floor.

"Behold! Behold, I say! He Without Form will come to you at night and trample your dreams. Listen for him, for his words will open your mind. *Baagga Ka Ba Alluma! Azza Hrgalub!* He is the Keeper of the Gate. His children are Legion! Prepare yourselves, give yourselves to them, for through them you will open the tunnel and look upon the unimaginable, until our world is shaken to the very core and what is unreal becomes reality!"

Christian pointed at the windows. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed. "Let Him who sleeps beneath the ocean floor awaken. Let Him who mothers the walking fish rise again. He who clears the way hungers for release. Sacrifice is the way to enlightenment, blood the river of life."

He raised both hands over his head, and outside the clouds grew darker, heavier, casting a shadow across the town.

"This is the Word of the Gods!"

"Praise the Gods!" three hundred voices responded. "Praise Shub-Nggurath! Praise Cthulu!"

Reverend Christian lifted the chalice. "Come and partake of the Blood of Sacrifice, my friends." He sipped the liquid inside, the cold, thick goat's blood trailing soft clots on his tongue.

Below him, the people of Hastings Mills approached the altar.

"Miss Anderson, might I speak with you a moment?" Christian placed a hand on Danni's arm and guided her away from the line of women heading down to the rec center.

"Of course, Reverend Christian. What's wrong?"

"Nothing is the matter, or at least I hope there isn't. I was just wondering why your brother wasn't at the service tonight?"

Danni gave a rueful smile. "He's home, probably praying to the porcelain god right now."

"The what?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. No disrespect intended. He ate too many cookies while we were baking, and earned himself a giant bellyache. John's watching him until I get home."

"John Root?" Christian struggled not to let his true emotions show.

The young woman nodded. "I know a lot of people in town don't trust him, but even the police admitted he had nothing to do with the murders. And Mitch really seems to like him."

"I see. Well, as long as the boy isn't too ill. I'll let you get back to work. I presume you'll both be at the bake sale on Saturday?"

"Oh, yes." Danni laughed. "I don't think he'll be over-indulging again any time soon."

He stayed by the doorway after she went inside, greeting several other women and expressing his thanks for their help. Only after the last of the volunteers trickled past did he let his smile drop.

The boy's alone at the house with Root? Perhaps I should send them a little surprise.

Christian hurried to his office. After closing and locking the door, he pulled down the dark window shade and removed the Book from the bottom drawer of his desk. He took a moment to caress the ancient cover, running his fingers across the rough, cracked human skin that bound the eons-old pages.

It's almost time to replace the binding. Maybe after my work is done, I'll

have a use for the boy after all.

Opening to a well-worn page, he began reading:

Vermis Mysteriis, Absu, Ur, and Orm,
Hear my call, heed my desires:
Bring forth the Dogs of Hell,
Turn the Spectres into Flesh,
Look inside me and see the one for whom
Your beasts should be brought to life
And send them to do thy bidding.
Alla Xul! AI!

As he uttered the last line, Christian raised the book over his head. A flickering green light filled the room and the five-sided sigil branded on the front cover glowed bright orange.

Outside, thunder crashed, setting the town dogs to howling once again. A ragged bolt of lightning speared down from the dark clouds and struck a tree behind the church, the sudden explosion shaking the walls and causing the lights to flicker momentarily. The brittle sound of splitting wood filled the air as the decades-old pine toppled over.

Startled voices came from the recreation center as the volunteers reacted to the sudden pyrotechnics.

The glow faded away from the book and Christian returned the tome to its hiding place.

"Have a pleasant evening, Mister Root."

* * *

John and Mitch were sitting on the front porch, enjoying homemade ice cream sandwiches, when a chorus of howling suddenly filled the air.

"Wow, I've heard dogs barking at night before, but lately it seems like every dog in town is going crazy," Mitch said.

John started to nod, and then he remembered something his mother used to say. *He calls the howling of the dogs.*

"Mitch, I think it's time you got ready for bed."

"What? It's only eight o'clock. I don't have to go to bed for another two hours."

"Go upstairs and get ready for bed. Now." John tried to keep his voice firm without sounding anxious. He wanted the boy to listen to him, not be frightened.

He should have known Mitch was too smart not to see that something was going on.

"What's wrong, John?"

"Maybe nothing. Maybe something. But either way, I want you inside. Now."

"What about you?" Mitch stood up but didn't open the door.

"I'll be in shortly. Now go on."

Mitch had barely shut the door behind him when John heard the first growl. It seemed to come from the azalea bush in the front yard. A second later, another growled sounded, in the darkness to the left of the porch.

A third animal answered from somewhere near the driveway.

Something rustled in the azalea.

Thinking *better safe than sorry,* John opened the screen and backed inside, keeping his eyes on the suddenly menacing landscape of the front yard.

Even then, he never saw the creatures until they crashed through the flimsy barrier of the screen door.

The first one hit John in the chest and knocked him into the hallway. He managed to get an arm up in time to block the beast's teeth from reaching his throat; instead, the wolf-like monster's jaws bit into the flesh just below his elbow. He screamed as something snapped inside his arm. With his free hand, he jabbed two fingers into one of the dog's eyes. The creature opened its muzzle to howl and John climbed to his feet, cradling his mangled arm against his chest.

For the first time he was able to get a good look at the animals. Each stood four feet tall at the shoulder, with barrel-shaped bodies and short tails. Their fur was black as midnight, and their eyes burned a luminescent pale orange, with no pupils that John could see. Beneath curled lips, jagged teeth showed bone-white against dark red gums.

He recognized them instantly: Hell Hounds. Creatures of the nether realms, usually only seen in spirit form on Hallows Eve, when they accompanied imps and demons on their rounds of mischief. In their own worlds, they feasted on the eternally tortured flesh of those condemned to the fiery pits.

It took a powerful person to not only call the Hell Hounds to Earth, but to give them solid form as well.

Cyrus Christian. His powers had grown.

The three Hounds arranged themselves in a triangle in the hall, the

one with the injured eye hanging back a step or two. John desperately tried to remember how to banish a Hell Hound, but the pain in his arm dominated his thoughts, the red-hot agony filling his arm from wrist to shoulder.

The lead Hound crouched down and the others followed suit. He realized they were about to pounce, and he had no way of defending himself.

"John? What's - holy shit! What are those?"

The Hounds glanced past John to where Mitch stood at the bottom of the stairs.

"Mitch. Go back upstairs and lock yourself in your room." John didn't look back. He tried to keep his voice low and steady, but with his teeth clenched against the pain, his words came out more brusquely than he intended. He fully expected Mitch to either panic or argue about being sent to his room.

So it was something of a surprise when he heard footsteps thumping up the stairs.

With the boy gone, the Hounds returned their full attention to John. At that moment, a banishment spell came to mind, something his mother had taught him. It wasn't specific to Hell Hounds, but he hoped it would work well enough to buy him some time.

"Dea to order vos. Vado tergum , Vado tergum. Reverto ut vestri locus. Licentia is universitas. Dea to order vos. Dea to order vos."

A purple glow appeared around the three Hounds. The lead creature shook its head and snorted; the one with the injured eye howled again and fell over, its body contorting in violent spasms. The purple field of energy intensified to a bright violet and contracted around the injured Hound. With a loud pop, the glow disappeared, taking the beast with it.

The other two crept forward, unharmed.

John said the spell again, but nothing happened. He hadn't expected it to work. He knew his talents lay not in magical spells, which required years of training and building reservoirs of power, but in the potions and herbs he made with his own hands, 'down home' cures and tricks that owed as much to homeopathic medicine and botany as to magic.

Now all those jars and vials lay useless upstairs, locked away in his carry bag.

Think! There had to be something he could do, something to slow them down or hold them off long enough for him to get to his room.

He backed up two steps, and the Hounds moved forward again,

keeping pace. Their constant growling vibrated the walls, rattling pictures and causing his teeth to ache. He reached the stairs and grabbed an umbrella, knowing it was as useless as a pencil against the giant creatures.

"John, duck!"

Reacting instinctively to Mitch's shout, he crouched down. A strange yet familiar sound came from above him, almost like someone slapping a hand on flesh, and a flash of light flew past him.

The lead Hound cried out and turned away. Another snapping sound followed, and this time John saw a tiny, glittering object hit the second Hound. It, too, barked in pain and stepped backwards.

John risked a look upwards. Mitch stood halfway down the stairs, a metal slingshot strapped to his arm. He loaded and fired again, sending another piece of shiny metal at the Hounds.

Silver. It had to be. Nothing else would work.

"Hurry up," the boy shouted. "I've only got a couple more left."

Without pausing to ask questions, John bolted up the stairs. Mitch had time to fire one more round, then John grabbed him and carried him down the upstairs hall and into the guest room. He slammed the door shut and locked it.

"Get away from the door," he said to Mitch as he dragged his valise from under the bed. Using only one arm, it took him longer than he planned to open the case. He was still reaching into the black bag when the first Hell Hound crashed through the door.

The demonic beast knocked Mitch aside with its shoulder and focused its attention on John. Its front shoulders went down as it prepared to leap; behind it, the second Hound entered the room, black tongue hanging down and steaming strings of foamy saliva dripping from its jowls.

John dug furiously into the dark depths of the bag, sticking his arm in well past the elbow as he felt for the jar he needed. His hand closed on the clay container just as the lead Hound let loose with an unearthly howl and sprang forward.

Moving as fast as he could, John swung his hand at the creature and smashed the jar against its head. Black powder exploded in all directions, coating John and the Hound as they tumbled backwards into a wall. John's scream was drowned out by the Hound's agonized shriek as it burst into ice cold, neon-blue flames even as its claws raked John's chest. An instant later, all that remained of the hell beast were a few hairs floating in the air.

John tried to stand but his legs wouldn't obey him. He sat up

straighter, using the wall for support, as the second Hound growled and crept toward him. Unlike the first Hound, it moved slowly, wary of meeting the same fate as its companion. John quickly brushed as much of the black powder from his hair and clothes as he could, gathering a small handful that he held up to the beast.

"You know what this is; return to your own world or you'll burn in this one." John's heart thumped in his chest, as much from fear as from his exertions. He had no idea if the remaining powder was enough to vanquish the Hound; if it wasn't, his last few minutes would be filled with agony beyond belief.

The Hound tilted its head and regarded John with glowing, narrowed eyes. Then, with a final angry cough, it turned around and ran from the room.

John let his arm fall to his side. A wave of weakness flowed over him, and he leaned against the wall. The room spun around him; he couldn't seem to focus on anything. He closed his eyes and let his head drop forward, hoping the dizziness would pass.

So tired. Maybe just a quick nap....

The throbbing agony faded to a dull ache as the world receded.

And disappeared.

* * *

Billy Ray dropped his tool belt onto his bed and sat down with a loud sigh. First, there'd been the headlines in the paper that Tony Lopez had been shot dead trying to escape from jail. That alone was enough to knock the wind from his sails, although he couldn't say he was saddened by the news. Then Reverend Christian had run him ragged all day; between setting up the tables for the bake sale and cutting up the big-ass tree that'd fallen behind the church, he'd barely had time to catch his breath, let alone eat or piss or grab a smoke.

"Christ, I could use a goddamn beer," he muttered. Realizing what he'd said, he looked around, afraid he might not be alone. The crazy preacher had a habit of appearing so silently you'd almost think he beamed in, like on Star Trek. Seeing the basement was empty, he decided to take a quick break before stacking the last cords of wood he'd cut.

"Whole town's crazy," he muttered, as he opened his mini-fridge and pulled out an ice-cold Genesee Cream Ale. The sooner he made his score and bolted, the happier he'd be. The preacher and the sheriff were

bad enough; but lately the whole town seemed to have caught the religious fever. They walked around quoting Christian's weird sermons, and half of them had the same dazed look he'd seen on junkies right after they shot up or hit the pipe.

On top of everything, the heat wave still hadn't broken and the hellish temperatures were bringing out everyone's mean streak. It was getting so that you couldn't go into town for a cup of coffee and a donut without seeing at least one fist fight. The only good thing was Tony Lopez getting pinched for the murders. And now that he was dead, he couldn't spill his guts about what Billy Ray had planned.

Spill his guts. Good one.

Billy Ray rolled the bottle across his neck and forehead, the chilled glass providing a moment of relief. He got up with a groan, intending to head back outside, but found himself drawn, as always, to the closet at the far end of the basement.

The closet where Christian kept the money.

"I like having it close at hand," he'd explained when Billy Ray had asked why he kept all the cash from the fundraisers and collections in boxes and jars.

"Aren't you afraid someone will steal it?"

Christian had turned and given him a cold smile. At the time, Billy Ray'd thought that if he didn't know Christian was a man of the cloth, he'd have sworn he stood in the presence of a cold-blooded killer.

"Billy, this is a house of worship. None of my people would think to steal from it. Besides, only you and I know the money's here. I know *I'm* not going to steal it. Are you?"

An involuntary shiver had run through Billy Ray, a feeling like something was crawling down his spine, something with hundreds of legs and poisonous fangs.

"No, of course not. I'd just hate to see anything happen to the money, after all the hard work it took to get it." Billy Ray managed to keep his voice in a normal tone as he spoke, but inside he fought a war with himself. Half of him wanted to shout for joy, knowing how easy it would be to grab the cash and run. The other half was screaming to forget the money and get the hell out of town.

Christian had shut the door and given him a wink. "Don't worry, Billy. No one's going to take the money. My Gods wouldn't like that."

Billy Ray had no faith in religion; the only things he believed in were the power of money and his own quick wits. However, there was

something about Cyrus Christian and the way he spoke that almost—*almost*—made you think the Gods he talked about really existed. Vicious Gods; Gods of war and pestilence and blood; Gods that made the stories from the Old Testament, the ones Billy Ray had read back in Sunday school, seem like fairy tales.

They were not Gods Billy ever wanted to meet.

Even so, he couldn't help staring at the money. *There has to be over four thousand dollars in there, between the jars and boxes and bags of coins.*

"Four thousand, eight hundred and thirty, give or take."

Billy let out a startled yelp and turned around. Reverend Christian stood there, grinning his half-crazy grin, his eyes dancing with merriment.

"Jesus! I mean, holy sh... you scared the hell out of me."

"Watch your words, Billy. The Gods' ears are everywhere." Christian leaned past and looked into the closet. "Was there something you needed?"

His heart pounding from the sudden scare, Billy fumbled for an answer that didn't sound suspicious. "No, I, uh, like to check the closet every now and then, to, you know, make sure no one took off with the money. A lot of people have been coming in and out lately, what with the bake sale and all."

Christian shut the door and leaned against it. "No need to worry about that, Billy. I'll know if anything gets taken. Now, don't you have some wood to dispose of?"

Before Billy could respond, Christian's face took on a shocked, angry look, the kind a man gets when he comes home and finds his wife in bed with his best friend.

"Reverend? Something wrong?"

Christian's eyes narrowed to slits. "Nothing. I have to go." He pushed past Billy and hurried toward the stairs.

Son of a bitch. Billy put a hand on his chest. His heart was still kicking a mile a minute.

Forty-eight hundred bucks. I could get pretty far on that, far away from that crazy preacher and this crazy town.

A second voice spoke up inside his head, as if stealing the church's money was a question for debate. *Yes, but think how much there will be after the fair next month. Ten thousand, maybe more. You could go a lot further on that. Vegas. Or even LA. Party city!*

I guess I can deal with crazy for a few more weeks.

It made sense. But as headed across the back lawn toward the

woodpile, he wondered if he'd made the right choice.

Or if it would come back to haunt him.

Cyrus Christian slammed his office door shut and kicked a chair across the room.

Damn that John Root!

He'd felt it just as he was about to put a little scare into Billy Ray. The Hounds had failed in their mission; two destroyed and the other slinking off with its tail between its legs. Once again, the backwoods do-gooder had managed to thwart his long-overdue demise.

Damn him!

Christian raised a hand to slam down on his desk and noticed at the last moment that smoke was rising from his clenched fist. It took all his willpower to open his fingers and bring his arm back to his side. Only after several long, deep breaths did he trust himself to sit down. Even then, his rage whirled inside him, a tornado of hatred and wrath threatening to burst free.

So why not put it to good use?

Christian's scowl slowly turned into a smile as he closed his eyes and released his malevolent energies into the atmosphere surrounding Hastings Mills.

Immediately, the temperature all over town rose two degrees, bringing more people closer to their personal boiling points.

Christian's unholy grin grew wider.

Chapter 18

"John? John, wake up!"

Something pushed at John, bringing the pain in his arm and chest back to fiery life. He tried to return to the cool darkness, but the voice kept intruding.

"John! You're bleeding. What should I do? Are those things gonna come back?"

John opened his eyes. Mitch sat a few feet away, an anxious expression on his young face.

"Are you alright?" John managed to whisper, each word sending bolts of pain through him. The boy looked fine, but John had a vague memory of a Hound knocking Mitch to the floor.

"Yeah, just some bruises. But...I think you're hurt pretty bad, John." A tear ran down Mitch's cheek.

John tried to smile. "I've been hurt worse." *But not by much. Loss of blood has me dizzy and weak.* He knew what he needed, but even if Mitch brought him his bag, he doubted he'd have the strength to find the right remedies.

That left only one solution.

"Mitch, you're going to have to help me. The medicines I need are in my bag, but you're going to have to get them for me."

"I can do that!"

Mitch jumped up and grabbed the black bag from the bed. He started to turn the bag over but John shook his head. The movement sent sparkling stars across his vision, but he ignored them.

"Wait. Listen carefully. I want you to close your eyes and then put your hand inside. The bag is...magic." He hated to use the word, but couldn't think of any other way to describe it. "You'll have to reach in really deep, deeper than you think is possible. You'll feel jars and bottles. Be careful not to knock them over. As soon as you feel them, let me know and I'll tell you which ones to take."

Mitch gave him a curious look but did as he was told, closing his eyes and sticking his hand inside.

"Hey, it's really cold inside," the boy said. He frowned as his arm went in almost to his shoulder. "How...wait! I felt something."

"Be careful."

"Now what?"

Here came the hard part. Would the boy be up to it? "You need to find a box. Concentrate on it. It's a wooden box the size of a dictionary, with a metal clasp. Picture it in your head. Can you see it?"

"I...I don't know."

"Concentrate, Mitch. Pretend you're searching a shelf. Imagine your fingers touching the smooth wood."

"Shelf? I—"

"Keep your eyes closed!"

Mitch squeezed them back shut. "Okay, already. Geez."

John waited, watching the boy's shoulder move, the rest of his small arm hidden inside the black leather satchel.

"Oh! I got it!"

"You're sure?"

Mitch pulled his arm out and opened his eyes. In his hand was an old, dusty wooden box. Generations of hands had worn away any sign of paint or shellac; now the smooth surface had the color of old driftwood.

John's heart jumped. "That's it. Bring it here and open it."

Placing the box on the floor, Mitch tipped back the lid. Inside were unlabeled plastic bags filled with green and brown dried herbs. In one corner sat a small jar of clear liquid.

"I thought you said there'd be medicine in here," Mitch said with a confused frown.

"It's all medicine. Here's what you have to do. Take a pinch of powder from each bag and drop it carefully into the jar. After you do that, put the lid back on the jar and shake it."

"That's it?" One eyebrow went up and his eyes narrowed—the same look John had seen him give Danni at the dinner table when she'd told him to try the sushi, it tasted good.

"That's it."

John watched as the boy mixed the ingredients, and prayed Mitch didn't spill the resulting brown-colored liquid.

"Open it and hand it to me," John said. He downed the bitter liquid in one gulp. Instantly the pain in his arm and chest diminished, as if a

stream of cold water had washed over red-hot coals. A long sigh escaped him at the sudden cessation of his misery. He closed his eyes and said a quick prayer of thanks.

"What's gonna happen?" Mitch asked.

"Go get me some wet towels and I'll show you."

The boy ran out of the room and returned a minute later with two towels, one dripping wet and one just damp.

Using his good arm, John wiped away the worst of the blood from his wounds. Mitch gasped when he saw that the deep cuts had already closed, leaving behind jagged, pink scars.

"Holy shit! How'd you do that?"

John pushed himself to his feet, groaning a little at the residual aches and pains from the attack. He was still an hour or two from feeling normal, but it was good enough for the time being. "The same way I healed your injuries when those boys hit you. Only this potion was a lot stronger and had some different ingredients."

"Like what?"

"Like Holy Water, for one." John glanced around at the room. The door was hanging from one hinge, and there was a hole in the wall where something, either John's head or shoulder, had gone through when the Hound attacked him. He imagined similar damage existed downstairs. All of it would need fixing before Danni came home.

But he knew he had to explain things to Mitch before anything else. He owed the boy that much…owed him his life, in fact.

"Sit down. There are some things I have to tell you, things that might be hard to believe but that you deserve to know."

Mitch raised his eyebrow again. "Harder to believe than giant werewolves and magic potions?"

Once again, the boy's easy acceptance of the supernatural surprised John. "Maybe. Let's start with the creatures that attacked us today. They weren't werewolves, although they might be the basis of those legends. You got lucky thinking silver would hurt them. They're Hell Hounds, and silver is painful to any of the demons from that realm."

"Demons? You mean, like from Hell?"

"I don't know if there's an actual Hell, although since I believe in Heaven, I have to accept that Hell probably exists. But there are other worlds in other dimensions, and some of them are very much like the Hell described in the Bible."

Mitch tilted his head, thinking. "So there are other things besides

the...."

"Hell Hounds," John supplied.

"...Hell Hounds that come from those dimensions? Are they all evil? Are they like demons and monsters?" He asked the last question with definite excitement in his voice.

"Some of them are evil. A few are good. The majority are in-between, just like most people you meet. But when someone wants to hurt another person, it's the evil ones that get brought into our world."

"What kind of person can do that? Do you have to be a witch or a sorcerer?"

John put his arm around Mitch. "If you know the right spell, anyone can perform magic. But the greater the magic, the more power a person has to have. To call Hell Hounds to Earth, well, only a very powerful man can do that." He waited for the next question. Mitch was too smart not to figure it out.

"Who...? Was it Reverend Christian?"

"I'm afraid so. And he's more than just a man; he's a very old and powerful creature whose job it is to create chaos and fear and sorrow wherever he goes. I've been trying to find him for many years."

Mitch looked up at John. "Are you from another place, too?"

A laugh burst from John's throat before he could stop it. "No, I'm not. But my family, well, I guess you could say we're like witches. Instead of spells, though, my magic comes from the Earth. I know how to use the plants and animals to create powders and potions." It wasn't the whole truth, but there was no need to frighten the boy with tales of centuries-old battles between good and evil, of the monsters and spirits that kept John, like his mother before him, in business.

Especially since, unlike in fairy tales, in the real world the good guys didn't always win.

"That's so wicked," Mitch exclaimed, then he looked at the black leather satchel. "What about your freaky doctor bag? Is that magic, too?"

John hesitated before answering. He'd kept his secrets for several decades, ever since he'd taken over his mother's role as a provider of... services... for people in need.

"Sometimes you just have to trust your instincts." His mother's words, spoken on a hot summer afternoon much like the current one. He'd just cast his first spell of protection, and the time had come to test it.

By placing his hands in a box containing live rattlesnakes.

He knew he'd said the spell correctly; the lotion he'd rubbed into

his skin had been prepared exactly as she'd taught him. But when he saw the snakes curled and hissing in the wooden crate, all his confidence had drained away like floodwaters after a storm.

Remembering that day, John came to his decision. He placed the bag next to Mitch and opened it as wide as it would go.

"Go ahead, look inside."

Mitch peered into the satchel. "I don't see anything. It's...all black."

"The bag is magic, just like you thought. I can't carry everything I need when I travel. Back home, I have a whole cellar filled with shelves, and every shelf is filled with jars and boxes and all sorts of things. So I have my bag. It's like a door; I just think about what I need, and then I put my hand inside, and I'm usually right where I need to be." He smiled. "Of course, sometimes you have to feel around a bit. Kind of like trying to find something in the dark."

"Wow." Mitch's eyes were wide.

For the first time John could remember, Mitch seemed at a loss for words. Before the boy could find his tongue, John changed the subject. "We can talk more later. Right now we have to get the house cleaned up and fixed before your sister comes home."

"Are you going to tell her why you're here?"

John stood up and put the satchel and suitcase back in the closet. "No. I don't think she'd believe me. She's...."

"Under Christian's spell, like the rest of the town." Mitch pursed his lips and his voice grew angry. "He's turning her into some kind of religious freak."

"Yes, that's one of his powers, only he's got them worshipping Chaos and Anarchy. There's nothing remotely good about Christian's gods. That's why I need to stop him before it's too late."

As they headed downstairs for John's tools, Mitch asked, "But how?"

"That's why I'm here. My mother defeated him once; now I have to find a way to do it again."

Mitch stayed quiet while they fixed the front screen and replaced the hinges on the guest bedroom door. From the unusually serious look on the boy's face, John figured he must be contemplating everything he'd seen and heard.

It's a lot to swallow all at once. John knew that from first-hand experience.

It was only when they were sweeping up the last of the broken

plaster and sawdust that Mitch surprised him with another well-considered question.

"If everyone in town is falling under Christian's spell, how come I'm not affected?"

John leaned on the broom. "Not everyone in town is affected; it just seems that way. It's only the people who go to Christian's sermons."

"But I go to church with Danni every week."

"You're right." John thought for a moment, and then the answer came to him. "The day you were hurt. The salve I put on your bruises to heal them also contained a protective spell. It must have made you immune to Christian's influence."

"Can we put some on Danni?"

"I could, but it wouldn't work. He's already got a hold on her. I'll have to find another way."

"I hope you find it fast," Mitch said, his voice low and sad. "I want my sister back."

Chapter 19

Martha Brophy burst into Enid Doake's kitchen without bothering to knock. "You thieving bitch!" she shouted, waving a flour-covered rolling pin in Enid's direction. "How could you?"

Enid put down her measuring cup. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Martha's face went an angry shade of purple. "Don't give me that. You knew damn well I was making a Bundt cake for the bake sale, and now you're making one."

"Oh, and is there a law against two people making Bundt cakes?"

"You were supposed to make a cherry pie." Martha shook the wooden roller at her next-door neighbor, the wrinkled flab under her arm wiggling like flesh-colored Jell-O.

Enid planted her fists on her wide hips. "And you were supposed to leave Bobby Johnson alone so he'd ask me out."

"That was the seventh grade!"

"And if he'd gone out with me, maybe I'd be married to him now, instead of that lazy slob of a husband I got stuck with."

"Don't blame your shitty marriage on me. I'll knock your dentures out, you old wind-bag."

"Oh, yeah? Come and try it." Enid grabbed a paring knife from the counter and brandished it like a switchblade.

Martha rushed forward, swinging the rolling pin back and forth. Enid ducked and stabbed out with the short knife, catching her best friend of forty years across one ample breast. Martha cried out and swung again, this time landing a direct blow to Enid's stomach. The smaller woman doubled over, gasping for breath.

"That'll teach you." Martha leaned forward to make sure Enid heard every word. "And just so you know, Bobby never liked you. He told me so. That's why—"

"Shut up!" Enid straightened up so fast Martha never had a chance

to move. The knife punctured Martha's left eye with a wet *pop!* She screamed and took a step back, but Enid stayed with her, pushing the knife in even further, until only the handle was visible.

"Now who—"

Enid never had a chance to finish, as Martha managed one more swing with the rolling pin before collapsing to the floor. The pin caught Enid square in the nose, smashing bone and leaving a smear of white powder behind.

Tears streaming from her eyes and blood choking her throat, Enid tried to reach the phone but stumbled over Martha's body. She never saw the corner of the table that crushed her temple.

When Dan Doake returned home from work that evening, he found the bodies of his wife and neighbor lying in pools of tacky, fly-covered blood on the kitchen floor.

He managed to dial 911 before his heart seized and refused to beat any longer.

* * *

Ralphie Morgese led two other boys down Birch Street. "This is gonna be so cool," he kept saying, as much to himself as to his makeshift posse. "This'll teach the old bastard to pay for his papers on time."

"You sure we won't get in trouble?" Ken Anders asked. "What if Old Man Lewis calls the cops on us?"

"Who cares?" Ralphie laughed. "Even if he does, we'll be long gone before they get here."

They stopped in front of a house that had a tall, white fence around it. Only the roof of the house was visible above the solid wall of white. Two identical signs hung on the front, one on either side of the gate:

BEWARE OF DOGS

"Man, I heard them dogs are vicious," Benny Freeman said. "My brother told me they can take your hand off in one bite."

"You're brother's a wuss." Ralphie banged on the fence with the large rock he carried in one hand. Immediately a chorus of barking rose up from somewhere behind the fence.

"See?" Ralphie said to the others. "They're tied up. Now let's have some fun." He reared back and threw his rock over the fence as hard as he could.

The boys waited in excited silence; seconds later, they got their reward: the sound of breaking glass.

"Direct hit!" Ralphie pointed at Benny. "Your turn. Don't miss, or I'll toss you over next."

His lower lip quivering ever so slightly, Benny took a rock from his pocket and threw it over the fence. Once more, the sound of breaking glass filled the humid air.

"Yeah!" Ralphie pumped his fist in the air.

The gate flew open, revealing an old man, stooped and leaning on a cane, his hair almost as white as the fence.

"Hey!" he shouted over the furious barking of the dogs. "What're you boys doing?"

"You didn't pay your bill, you old bastard!"

"Ralph Morgese? You cut that out. I'm gonna call your parents."

"The hell you are." Ralphie took the stone Ken was holding, but instead of throwing it at the house, he launched it at Old Man Lewis, striking him in the stomach.

The octogenarian cried out in pain and fell to his knees. "Get the hell out of here, you bastards, or I'll set my dogs after you!"

"Fuck you!"

Ralphie took a step toward the old man, but Benny grabbed his arm. "Don't. The neighbors are watching."

"Yeah, let's get out of here." Ken started running away, and Benny followed him.

"You and I aren't through," Ralphie said, pointing at the fallen man, and then he took off down the street.

As he reached the corner, the sound of the barking changed. Looking back, Ralphie saw two huge German shepherds racing after them.

"Shit!"

It only took the dogs a few moments to catch up, and by then Ralphie, twenty pounds heavier than his friends, had already fallen several lengths behind. He tried to put on a last burst of speed, but he was no match for the shepherds. One leaped onto his legs, tripping him and sending him face-first onto the sidewalk. The pain of his flayed skin had just started to register when something tore into his neck and arms with frantic abandon. He rolled over and tried to scream for help, but powerful jaws clamped on his neck, crushing his windpipe and ripping away a huge chunk of meat.

The last thing he saw was his own flesh hanging from the dog's mouth.

By the time the police arrived, the two dogs were sitting calmly by Ralphie's mutilated body, their muzzles sticky with blood and bits of skin.

When questioned, witnesses all gave the same story: Ralphie Morgese, a known trouble-maker, had broken poor old Mr. Lewis's windows, beaten the old man with stones, and then tried to steal the dogs. The dogs had turned on the boy.

"It's his own fault," they all said.

"Can't blame a dog for protecting its master," Chief Showalter agreed. He returned the dogs to Mr. Lewis, who was being treated by an EMS worker.

"Sorry this kind of thing had to happen. You take good care of these fellas. They done right by you." He shook Eddie Lewis's hand and then headed back to his car and drove off.

Ralphie's body lay on the sidewalk for three hours before Showalter remembered to send the coroner for it.

No one complained.

* * *

Reverend Christian paused in the act of handing Billy Ray a list of things to pick up at the Wal-Mart.

"What's the matter?" Billy Ray asked.

Christian shook his head and passed the envelope over.

"Nothing, Billy. Nothing at all. In fact, things are getting better every day."

* * *

Cookie Dodge opened her bedroom window and prepared to step over the sill. The midnight breeze brought no pleasure; instead of cool comfort, it delivered soggy, hot air and the distant sounds of dogs howling. The stink of cow shit from the surrounding farms rode the cruel currents with manic glee, adding to the general unpleasantness of the night.

"No, Cookie. Not the window. What would Mr. Albert think if you did that?"

Cookie paused. It didn't make sense to hear a voice in her head, but then, so much in the world didn't make sense to her. The only person who'd ever been able to make her see things clearly had been Mr. Albert, the tall,

handsome Special Education teacher. She'd known she'd loved him since the first day of school, had thought he felt the same way about her, too. After all, he always said thank you when she wrote poems for him on heart-shaped pieces of paper.

What else could that be but love?

Except two days ago, she'd seen his picture in the newspaper while searching for the funnies. She'd been excited to show her parents, so much so that when she'd asked them to read the words to her, she'd forgotten to be embarrassed about being fifteen and unable to read like the other girls.

"This is a wedding announcement, honey," her mother had said.

"What's that?"

"It means Mr. Albert is getting married to the pretty girl in the picture with him. Isn't that wonderful?"

But it wasn't wonderful. It was horrible. Cookie had screamed and torn the paper to shreds. Her parents tried to calm her down, but she ran back upstairs and threw herself onto her bed and buried her face in her pillow so no one could hear her cry.

Since then, she'd only left her room to eat and use the toilet. Mr. Albert had even called her on the telephone, but she'd yelled at him, told him he was a rotten cheater-cheater-cheater, just like the boy who broke up with her sister Sharon last year. Then she'd hung up the phone.

Cookie had planned on staying in her room the rest of her life, until earlier tonight when the voice started speaking inside her head. A man's voice, as cool and smooth as chocolate syrup on ice cream. She liked the voice, because it chased all her sad thoughts away, made them hide.

"You need to teach Mr. Albert a lesson," it had said. *"Show him he made a mistake. It's not too late."*

"It's not?" she'd whispered.

"No. He's not married yet. If you show him he was wrong, he'll leave her and marry you. But you have to do it tonight."

That made sense. "Okay."

The voice told her to put on her prettiest dress, like she was going to a party.

"Am I going somewhere?"

"Yes. A special place, where no one makes fun of you and Mr. Albert will always be there to help you."

"My mommy says Heaven is a special place. Am I going to Heaven?"

"Someplace even better."

"Do I have to die?"

For a moment, the voice stayed silent. When it spoke again, it had sounded like it was smiling. *"No one ever really dies, Cookie. We only go to different places."*

The voice reminded her of Mr. Albert's, 'cause it had an answer for everything. So Cookie had put on her dress as fast as she could.

"You need to go to the river, Cookie. To the bridge. Do you know where that is?"

She nodded. She liked walking across it. Sometimes she took rocks and dropped them in the water to see the splashes they made.

"Good. Go there now. I'll be waiting there for you, to tell you what to do next."

"Okeey-dokeey."

Sneaking out of the house was no problem; Cookie did it a lot in the summer. She liked to sit outside in her underwear and feel the breeze tickle her skin. Sometimes she even peed in the bushes next to the driveway. That was scary, 'cause her parents would get mad if they caught her, but it was fun, too. Like a game.

As she crept out the back door, she thought about peeing in the bushes now, but decided against it. The voice might get angry if she didn't get to the bridge right away.

After looking both ways, Cookie Dodge ran across the street and headed for the river, singing softly to herself the whole way.

"Me and Mr. Albert sittin' in a tree. K-i-s-s-i-n-g..."

Chapter 20

Cyrus Christian stood in the doorway to the church's recreation room, where two dozen or so women were busy stacking paper plates, setting up coffee urns, and unfolding tablecloths. While the original plan had called for having the sale outside, the ongoing heat had forced the committee to bring it inside, where Billy Ray had set up every fan they could beg or borrow.

He scanned the room until he spotted the person he'd been looking for. Danni Anderson stood at the opposite end, sorting packets of regular and decaf coffee. Ignoring the greetings of his flock, Christian strode across the room and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Danni, might I have a word with you in my office?"

She looked up, a small smile gracing her lips. "Of course, Reverend."

He felt like smiling himself. Anyone in their right mind would have been nervous to be alone with him; he had no illusions as to his effect on people. The dark forces filling him were growing stronger each day, and it had reached the point where the tainted energies leaked out of him the way curry or garlic will leak out from the pores of habitual eaters.

The fact that Danni expressed no concern meant she was well and truly under his influence, something that would make his job that much easier.

When they reached the office, Christian shut the door and told Danni to have a seat.

"We have a problem, Miss Anderson, one I'm hoping you can help me with."

"Anything, Reverend. What is it?"

"I'm afraid it's this man you are putting up in your house, John Root. I've done some checking on him, and the information I've received makes me nervous not only for yours and Mitch's safety, but for the safety of our fair town."

"John?" Danni frowned. "But the police said he had nothing to do with the murders of those women. And he's so good with Mitch."

"The Devil cloaks himself well in the skin of friendliness," Christian said. "He seems nice enough now. But what about later?"

"Later?"

"When his true colors come out." Christian walked around the desk, sat in his chair, and leaned toward Danni. "How much you know about Mister Root?"

Danni pursed her lips as she thought. "I know he's from South Carolina and that he travels the country collecting old tales for his books."

"Mmm-hmmm. And did you know that in the last several towns he's stayed in, there have been reports of children going missing?"

"What?" Danni's eyes went wide.

"That's right. Of course, he always had a strong alibi when questioned. And then there was the money...."

"What money?"

Christian fought to keep from smiling. "The money that went missing from the homes he stayed in. Again, nothing that could be linked directly to him, and even if it could, he was always long gone before the theft was discovered."

"How did you find all this out?"

The Reverend leaned back. "I have friends in other churches, ministers and parishioners who had their suspicions of Mister Root, just as I do. Do not forget, it was I who warned the town of the stranger in their midst. And you cannot say that things in Hastings Mills haven't been going sour since the arrival of your so-called friend."

Danni chewed her lower lip as she considered Christian's words. He wanted to pound the desk in glee; he could see her thoughts as clearly as if she'd spoken them out loud.

Things have *been strange lately.*

And John's already been in trouble with the police.

What if the Reverend is right?

"I...I don't know," Danni said, looking torn between anger and self-doubt.

"Of course you don't. None of us do." Christian spread his hands. "But as the saying goes, isn't it better to be safe than sorry?"

"Yes." Danni nodded. "Yes, it is. What should I do?"

Now Christian allowed himself a small smile. "I can't tell you that, Miss Anderson. But if it was me, I wouldn't want a stranger like John Root

anywhere near my little brother."

A look of hard determination came over Danni's face. "You're right. I'll go take care of that as soon as I'm done here."

"Why wait?" Christian stood and indicated the door. "Go now. We can handle things here. Your family is much more important."

Danni rose from her chair. "Thank you, Reverend. I'll see you in the morning." She existed the office at a fast pace.

Christian waited until the door shut behind her before letting his smile take on its natural malignancy. "Have a nice night, Miss Anderson. And you, too, John Root."

* * *

"Tell me more about Reverend Christian."

John looked up from the pot of macaroni he was stirring, wondering how he should answer Mitch's question. He'd been debating how much of the truth to tell the boy ever since he'd promised him more information.

After a moment's thought, he decided to be totally honest, even if it meant frightening the boy. Better scared than unprepared.

"It's a long story. Suffice to say that the thing pretending to be Cyrus Christian has been around a long, long time, long enough for his ways to become the stuff of folk tales and mythology. Wherever he goes, you can count on certain things happening: young women dying strange deaths, violence in the streets...."

"And people falling under his spell?"

John nodded. "Yes. A handful at first; but the longer he stays, the more powerful he grows and the more people he can influence."

Mitch poured himself a glass of ice tea. "If he's always the same, why can't people find him and stop him?"

"The trouble he causes is always the same, but he is not," John said. "Sometimes he's a politician; sometimes a teacher. And he wears a different face in every town. That's why it's taken me so long to find him."

"How long?"

John ran a hand through his silver hair. "When I started my search, you weren't even born yet."

"Wow. I didn't think you were *that* old." Before John could comment that Mitch wouldn't believe how old he *really* was, the boy asked, "So how I can help you?"

That was a question John hadn't expected. He took a moment to consider it before answering.

"You can gather information for me," John said. "No one in town trusts me enough to tell me anything. But you'll have to be very careful; don't ask too many questions. I'd rather not have the information than risk something happening to you."

"What could happen?"

"A lot." John placed both hands on the boy's shoulders, made sure he was paying close attention. "Remember, the town isn't the same anymore. The people you know..., well, they might not really be the people you know anymore. Say or do the wrong thing, and they'll mention it to Reverend Christian."

Mitch's somber expression told John the boy understood the seriousness of the situation. "I'll be careful, I promise. But while I'm doing that, what will you be doing?"

"Figuring out a way to keep us safe and break Christian's hold on Danni."

The sound of Danni's car pulling into the driveway stopped John. He put his finger to his lips. "Remember, right now your sister can't be trusted. Not a word of this to her, understand?"

Mitch nodded.

John hoped for the boy's sake he knew how to keep a secret.

* * *

Reverend Christian returned to the rec center just as Marjorie Campbell was putting the finishing touches on the banner hanging proudly over the stage, where the prizes would be awarded.

"Reverend Christian!" Marjorie waved a hand at him. "Does this look right to –"

With a *snap* like a tree branch breaking, the hinges of the ladder pulled free from the wood. Marjorie had time for one terrified gasp as the ladder collapsed beneath her, leaving her suspended in the air for a split second. Then gravity forced itself on her again, and she crashed to the ground. Several more breaking-branch sounds followed.

Christian had a feeling they weren't from the ladder.

"Oh, my God!" Helen Kapinski dropped a box of plastic forks and ran to the stage. "Someone call an ambulance!"

The rest of the women crowded around their motionless friend,

heads bobbing up and down, bodies jigging side to side like a gaggle of geese jostling each other for better look.

Christian let them caw and screech for a moment, then strode forward, putting on his best authoritative air.

"Ladies, ladies, please. Step back. Give me some room. I'm trained in first aid."

The gaggle parted before him. Mrs. Kapinski knelt by the body, one shaking hand hovering hesitantly over Mrs. Campbell's wrinkled face.

Christian nudged her aside and placed his fingers against Mrs. Campbell's wattle-laden neck. The pool of blood spreading under the woman's head, combined with the unnatural angle of her neck, told him they'd be better off calling a hearse than an ambulance. But he pretended to search for a pulse. After several seconds, he pulled his hand away and shook his head.

"I'm afraid the Gods have claimed her."

"Oh!" Mrs. Kapinski put her hands over her face.

Someone in the crowd murmured that it was a terrible thing.

"Nonsense." Christian stood up and took them all in with his gaze. "Blood consecrates, my brethren. Blood is life, blood is what the Gods demand. The giving of one's blood—one's very life! —for the Gods is the truest sacrifice any of us can make. And to do it in this very place of worship...." Christian paused, spread his arms. "To do it here is a wondrous thing!"

"Praise be the Gods!" someone shouted.

"Yes!" Christian raised his hands over his head. "Praise them! Praise them all! Let them know you live to do their will!"

"Praise the Gods!" the group called out in unison. "Praise the Gods!"

Christian dropped to one knee and placed his hands in Marjorie Campbell's blood. Standing, he held his hands out to the gathered women.

"Come now, and feel the power of Marjorie's sacrifice."

One by one, they bowed their heads and stepped forward to be anointed.

With each touch of his bloody fingers, the power within Reverend Cyrus Christian grew a little more.

Chapter 21

John knew something was wrong the moment Danni entered the kitchen. She strode past her little brother without so much as a hello, her face twisted in an angry grimace.

"John Root, we need to talk," she said, her voice cold and hard.

"Is something wrong?" John asked, rising from his chair.

"I want you out of my house. And you're never to go near Mitch again."

"Danni!"

"Shut up, Mitch. This has nothing to do with you. Go upstairs. We'll talk later."

Mitch stood still, prepared to argue further.

"Listen to your sister, Mitch," John said, not wanting the boy to get in trouble.

Stomping his feet in anger the whole way, Mitch left the room.

"What happened, Danni?" John asked. He had a good idea he knew what her answer would be, and she didn't disappoint him.

"Reverend Christian told me all about you. The missing boys. The stolen money. Did you honestly think you'd get away with it?"

John shook his head, in sorrow rather than an admission of guilt. "You've been misled, Danni, and not by me. But I don't want to cause any trouble. I'll get my things and go."

"No." She held out a hand. "You go now. You can wait on the porch while I get your stuff. I don't want you to say another word to my brother."

"All right."

Ten minutes later, John stepped off the Anderson property and onto the highway, then paused.

So where do I go?

All the hotels and motels were closed to him; the townspeople were under Christian's spell and more likely to stone him than give him a place to stay.

You could just go home. People are going to die here no matter what you do; it's just a question of how many. And it's not like this town is going to complete the cycle, set the final clock in motion. You know the Stranger has a lot more work to do, many more places to visit, before he has enough power to open the Gates.

John recognized the voice; it was that side of him open to influence from the Powers the Stranger served. All people had it, were vulnerable to it. Sin, temptation, selfishness. It all stemmed from the same place. But even knowing that, he couldn't help arguing with his own internal weakness.

Yes, but if I stop him here, it sets him back decades or even centuries. Maybe even for good.

For good? Hah! You cannot stop Chaos; you can't end Evil. And what about all the good you could be doing while you waste your time here, on this town full of people who could not care less if you live or die?

That's only because they're under his influence.

No, it's because they're human and weak. They're more concerned with helping themselves than helping others. In fact, if you think about it, the world might be better off without them. These are the kind of people who killed your son, your wife.

John set down his bag so he could swipe a hand across his face, brushing away more than just the ever-present summer sweat. The thought of Clara and Jack never failed to bring tears to his eyes.

That's right. Your family, whom you should be growing old with right now. Instead, they're in graves, thanks to a superstitious swamp rat with a gun and a can of gas. In fact, you might say this is all your mother's fault. If she hadn't raised you in magic, you might have had a normal life.

Suddenly, the images in John's head broke into pieces, replaced by his mother's face. *Never let temptation fool you, John,* she said, her voice as clear as if she was standing right next to him. *Remember, it's not* you. *Don't give in. Doing the right thing isn't always easy, but it beats losing your soul.*

She smiled, and her face faded away, leaving John's thoughts clear again. In the aftermath, he realized who'd really been speaking in his head.

The Master of illusion.

"Nice try," he whispered to the night air. "But it will take more than that."

So be it, the dark voice of the Stranger said. *Have a nice night, John Root.*

With a sigh, John picked up his bag and began the long walk into town.

Cyrus Christian opened his eyes; the taste of Marjorie Campbell's blood was still sharp on his tongue. He'd held a small hope that the power it contained might be enough to break through John Root's defenses—both magical and personal.

"No matter," he said to the empty room. "There are other ways to skin a cat. Or a man."

He closed his eyes again.

Twenty minutes of walking brought John to the town limits. During that time, he'd decided on a course of action. After using his black bag to search his shelves at home, he'd determined he had everything he needed to break Christian's spell on Danni Anderson, and possibly to drive the Stranger from town completely, except for one crucial item.

Holy Water.

Normally, he would have just taken a jar or flask to the nearest church and filled it. But with Christian's influence befouling Hastings Mills more and more each hour, there was no telling if the Holy Water at any of the town's churches was contaminated or not. Which meant a trip outside the city limits. And since he had no car, and couldn't trust any of the local cab services, he had no choice but to walk the eighteen miles to Elmsville and back again.

The idea of being away from Mitch and Danni for almost a full day sat like bad fish in John's stomach. It felt as if he were abandoning them, even if his reason for leaving was to help them.

Just goes to show how attached you've become to them, he told himself. *Which is the one thing you* shouldn't *be doing.*

Shouldn't, it was true, but then again, how can you tell your heart what to do? Facts were facts, as his mother used to say. And you can't take them back. And the fact was, he cared for Danni and Mitch. Too much so, especially in Danni's case.

With a sigh, John headed up Route 16.

"Hop to it, Mitch. There's a lot to do today, and I need your help."

Mitch rolled over, ready to object to Danni's brusque good morning, but something about her expression killed the words before they reached his mouth. It wasn't anything he could pin down; she wasn't

frowning or glaring, her lips weren't tight, her teeth weren't clenched. But there was a lack of warmth, a stony, blank look that seemed somehow familiar even though he couldn't remember ever seeing it on his sister's face before.

Then it came to him.

It was the reptilian gaze of a cobra, like the one he'd seen on Animal Planet a few nights before. The snake had been in hunting mode, its head raised, dark tongue flickering in and out as it tasted the air. But all the while, the eyes had held that same cold look, as emotionless as a robot.

"Okay, sis," he said, tossing back the sheets. John's warnings about Christian's influence suddenly seemed all too real. The idea that his sister was under some kind of evil spell made him want to scream. But he had to act normally; if Danni suspected anything, she'd go right to Reverend Christian, and that would end any chance John had of breaking the minister's enchantment.

"As soon as you're dressed, come downstairs and help me load the folding chairs in the car."

"What about breakfast?"

"They have juice and rolls at the church for everyone." Danni's words came back to him from the hallway; she was already heading downstairs.

Mitch pulled on a t-shirt and shorts, knowing the church had no air conditioning. *Great. Not only am I gonna have to deal with the congregation from Hell, I'm gonna be sweating my ass off all day.*

He glanced out the window, thinking how strange it was not to see John walking up the drive or setting up his tools on the porch. A sky filled with ominous gray clouds served as a backdrop for a lawn of heat-yellowed, desiccated grass. It looked desolate, just the way he felt.

John, wherever you are, please hurry back.

At exactly eleven a.m., Reverend Cyrus Christian opened the doors to the rec center and townspeople began streaming in. It was easy enough for him to pick out those who hadn't yet succumbed to the force of his will; unlike their sullen friends and neighbors, they still appeared eager to chat and say a nice word to one another.

That will change soon enough.

The fact that the bake sale had started on time was a bit of a small miracle in itself, considering how many arguments and shoving matches had broken out during the early morning hours as the volunteers finished

setting up.

Every insult, every rough gesture, had been music to Christian's ears. Although they didn't know it, his parishioners were doing his job for him, sending even more negative energy into the invisible miasma that hovered over the town, as nasty and heavy as the brooding rain clouds that refused to release their pent-up liquids.

And just like the clouds, my own smog is also growing toward critical mass. And when that is achieved...

Oh, what a fun time we'll have!

Mitch Anderson breathed a sigh of relief when Reverend Christian opened the doors. With the sale officially under way, he could finally escape the insanity that was the Bake Sale Committee. For the past three hours, he'd stood by and watched normally pleasant old ladies act like the bullies who enjoyed pushing him around at school.

Worst of all, Danni had been right in the center of things, calling people names and threatening to break one ancient crone's nose for not putting out napkins fast enough.

On top of everything else, his stomach had been complaining all morning. When they'd arrived at the church, nasty old Christian was opening boxes of buttered rolls and donuts, a sight that put an unpleasant thought in Mitch's head.

What if he laced the food with something that makes people do what he wants? Maybe all he has to do is touch the food, and it's poisoned.

After that, Mitch had refused to eat or drink anything, pretending he wasn't hungry. But as the hours went by, his stomach had delivered increasingly loud announcements that it wanted food and wanted it *now.*

Pulling a dollar from his pocket, Mitch hurried over to Mrs. Hildebrand's spot at a nearby table; an assortment of cookies and muffins sat in front of her, practically begging for someone to eat them.

Better still, his old third-grade teacher was actually smiling, unlike the two crow-eyed ladies sitting next to her.

"Hello, Mitch. Are you here for the food or helping out?"

"Hi, Mrs. Hildebrand," he said, laying his dollar on the table. "I was helping. Now I'm ready to eat!"

Just then, his stomach let loose with another thunderous growl.

Mrs. Hildebrand laughed. "So I hear. Well, since none of this would have been possible without good volunteers like yourself, I'll give you a special deal for your dollar. How does two cookies and a muffin sound?

Take your pick."

"Thanks!" Mitch selected two chocolate chip cookies and a chocolate muffin with colored sprinkles. He had a cookie in his mouth almost before he finished saying goodbye.

Wishing he had a glass of milk to go with his overdue breakfast, Mitch decided it was time to get away from the crowd and eat in peace.

Two steps out of the church, he immediately wondered if he'd have been better off eating somewhere cooler, like the boiler room. As hot and sticky as the church basement had been, at least the fans set up around the room had provided a breeze.

Outside, the offensive humidity hung heavy in the air, so thick and wet that Mitch felt like he was standing in a sauna. Streams of sweat ran down his neck and chest, and he decided to take his snack down to the river, where at least he could dip his feet in the cool water.

When he got there, he took off his shoes and socks and sat down on a large rock, his feet dangling in the drought-shallow currents. For the first time in days, the heat seemed just the tiniest bit less oppressive, and he wondered why he hadn't thought to come down here sooner. He'd always loved the quiet serenity of the place.

He was leaning back, eyes closed, when a voice spoke behind him.

"Hello, Mitchell."

Chapter 22

Mitch let out an involuntary yelp and scrambled to his hands and knees, his heart knocking against his ribs like a caged animal trying to escape. Balanced on his rock, he looked over at Cyrus Christian, who stood a few feet away, his lips cast upwards in a smile as cold and dangerous as an icy sidewalk.

"Uh, hello, uh, Reverend." Mitch glanced around, but his only choices for escape were into the river or right past Christian.

"I looked for you at the church but you were nowhere to be found. Your sister was worried, but I had a feeling you'd be down here. Young boys love the river, I told her."

"Uh, yeah." Mitch's bladder called for attention and he pressed his legs together. "Is, uh, something wrong?"

Christian shook his head, a quick, birdlike gesture that somehow carried undertones of violence. "Oh, no. But it's almost time to start cleaning up, and you promised to help."

"Time to...?" Mitch looked at his watch. *Four-thirty? I must have fallen asleep. But I don't remember….*

All the false pleasantness disappeared from Christian's voice, and his eyes narrowed. "You do intend to help, don't you?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. Let me put my shoes on and I'll be right there."

"I'll wait," the Reverend said. "I wouldn't want your sister to see me come back without you. She might fear the worst."

Unsure whether he should be relieved or worried, Mitch slipped on his sneakers and followed the Reverend back to the church, still confused as to how almost four hours could have slipped away.

They were still several yards away from the back entrance when they heard the first angry shouts.

"What's going on?" Mitch asked.

"I don't know," Christian said, but something in his expression made Mitch think the man knew *exactly* what they'd find when they went

downstairs.

A dozen possibilities flashed through Mitch's head as he hurried down the steps, careful not to get too close to the evil thing disguised as Cyrus Christian. Even so, he was dumbfounded when he entered the room and found himself with a ringside seat to a riot.

Food flew through the air as men and women, many of them old enough to be grandparents, attacked each other with fists, feet, and even teeth. A few stabbed at their victims with plastic utensils. Several tables had been overturned, and at least a dozen bodies lay motionless on the floor.

Mitch watched in stunned amazement as an elderly woman in a conservative suit splashed hot coffee across the face of an even older woman who was trying to hit her with a walker. Next to the octogenarian combatants, a heavy-set woman in her fifties was busy smashing her husband's head into a tray of brownies.

Screams of rage mingled with cries of pain and bellowed curses as more people joined the melee, sucked into the maelstrom of violence expanding throughout the room.

Tearing his eyes away from the inexplicable uprising, Mitch saw a look of pure contentment spread across Cyrus Christian's face.

Hot anger filled Mitch, and he yanked the Reverend's sleeve without thinking. "Do something!"

Christian's head snapped around and Mitch retreated from the man's suddenly hateful gaze.

"How dare you.... Oh, yes, you're quite right." The malevolence drained away, leaving the man's face as close to human as Mitch had ever seen it. He turned and strode into the fight, calling out for people to calm down and leave each other alone. As he walked, he touched people's arms and shoulders; each time he made contact, the person immediately stopped fighting and sat down, a bewildered expression on his or her face.

Like a black-coated Moses, Christian made his way to the center of the disturbance, parting the crowd before him and leaving an unnatural calm in his wake.

Mitch wanted to see who'd started the fight, but at the same time he was afraid it would turn out to be Danni. He imagined her on the floor, her skull crushed. His fear turned to relief when he spotted her across the room, using her pocket book to keep three people from stealing the bake sale cash box. Each time one of them tried to reach for it, she swung the heavy bag, smacking hands and heads with equal glee.

Detouring around the fringes of the brawl, Mitch made his way to

his sister. "Danni! Stop it. The fight's over. Reverend Christian is here."

As soon as he said the Reverend's name, all three would-be thieves backed away. One of them started to run for the door, but Christian's voice, than any Sunday sermon, stopped the man in his tracks.

"Robert Metzger! Is this how you show your faith?"

The last of the crowd stepped aside and Christian emerged, his face calm but his eyes afire.

"N...No, Reverend...I, I thought the girl was trying to steal the money."

Christian drew closer until he was almost nose-to-nose with his quarry. Metzger tried to step back, but two parishioners grabbed his arms. Others stepped forward and took hold of the two women who'd been with Metzger.

"I can see into your heart, Robert. I can see the truth behind your lies."

"Reverend, no, I—"

"Silence! The Gods do not tolerate disobedience, Robert. For your acts there must be punishment, and blood. Come closer, Robert. It is time to face your penance."

The man bowed his head, and Christian reached out with one hand, his fingers curled into talons. Mitch almost cried out, thinking the Reverend was going to pluck the man's eyes out or maybe shove his fingers right into the man's head, but Danni gripped his shoulder.

"Stay still, Mitch. This isn't your affair," she whispered.

He looked up and felt his stomach do a sick somersault at the cruel smile she wore. It reminded him of the drawings in his history book, the ones of the crowds who watched witches get executed in Old Salem.

Mitch returned his attention to Reverend Christian and saw with some relief that all he was doing was gripping the man's face, the way a grandmother might grip a child before planting a big, lipsticky kiss.

Only Christian didn't kiss Robert Metzger. Instead, he spoke a single sentence.

"For you sins, you shall enter the river at midnight, and wait for the Gods to decide your fate."

Metzger's eyes grew wide, and a tear ran down one cheek, but he nodded. Christian let go and repeated his delivery of penance to the two women. When he finished, the three of them slowly walked away, their bodies shaking with barely-controlled sobs.

Christian turned toward Danni and Mitch.

Oh, God! He's going to touch me! A whimper escaped Mitch's throat and he tried to push away, but Danni held him tight.

"Danni. Mitchell. Would you please get some people to help you clean this mess up? And then afterwards, I'd like to see the two of you in my office for a brief chat."

"Of course, Reverend," Danni said.

Mitch let out his breath in a loud gasp as Christian nodded to them and walked away.

Danni poked him in the arm. "You heard the man, Mitch. Grab a broom and start sweeping."

Chapter 23

"This is as far as I can take you," the truck driver said, giving John Root an apologetic grin. "Can't navigate a big rig through residential streets."

"You've taken me farther than you had to, and I thank you. Have a safe trip." John stepped off the runner and shut the door, thanking God for delivering someone willing to pick up a stranger.

I'm back in town earlier than I expected. Hopefully I'm not too late to—

John's thoughts crashed to a stop as he stared down at Hastings Mills. Smoke rose from what looked like several house fires. The wails of police sirens and fire engines mixed with the howls of dogs in an evil chorus that battered John's eardrums and sank needle-sharp teeth into his heart.

Hurry, John Root. There's folks depending on you.

John nodded to his mother's voice in his head. Holding one arm against his side to keep his precious bottles of Holy Water from banging together and breaking, John headed into town as fast as he could walk.

"Please, sit down." Reverend Cyrus Christian motioned to two chairs in front of his desk.

Danni sat down, her face expressionless. Mitch hesitated, then sat next to her before anyone noticed his nervousness. John had said to act as if everything was normal, but that was getting harder by the hour.

A quick glance at his watch showed it was almost six. Where was John? Had he given up on them after Danni threw him out?

Mitch's anxiety grew worse as Christian locked the door and closed the blinds. "What's going on?"

"Hush, Mitch," Danni said. "The Reverend has something to tell us."

"I do, indeed." Christian took a small envelope from his desk and opened it, poured a small amount of black powder onto his hand. "Danni,

do you know what this is?"

Danni leaned forward. "No, I—"

With a sudden exhalation, Christian blew the powder into Danni's face. She coughed once and then her eyes rolled back in her head and she slowly slid from the chair onto the floor.

Mitch jumped up, torn between running for the door and helping his sister. "What did you do?"

The Reverend came around the desk, his coal-black eyes glittering with insanity. "Nothing compared to what I'm going to do to you, you little shit. You've been a thorn in my side for too long, boy, and today's the day I remove you for good."

Mitch bolted for the door, forgetting in his terror that it was locked. He was still fumbling with the handle when the back of his head exploded in pain. His knees buckled and he fell to the carpet. Before he could catch his breath, strong hands grabbed him and dragged him back this chair.

"I have plans for you, boy. But first, you get to watch what I do to your sister."

"Leave her alone!" Mitch pulled free, but before he could get to his feet, Christian delivered a backhand slap that turned his legs to rubber.

"We'll have none of that." The Reverend snapped his fingers and a coil of heavy rope appeared in his hand. Paying no attention to Mitch's cries for help, Christian tied him to the chair, legs, arms, and chest. When he finished, the only things Mitch could move were his feet and head.

Mitch shouted again and Christian shook his head. "Normally I'd let you scream all you want. I've made this room completely soundproof to the outside world. I could shove a stick of dynamite up your ass and splatter your insides across the walls, and no one would hear a thing. However," he said, removing something from his desk drawer, "today you might distract me at the wrong time. So let's just shut you up."

Christian whispered something and opened his hand. A black butterfly fluttered into the air, made a small circle, and then headed right for Mitch's face. Mitch tried to turn his head, but the butterfly touched down on his lips like a feathery caress.

Mitch opened his mouth to yell, and all that came out was a soft whimper. Its job done, the butterfly flapped its wings one last time and disappeared.

"Much better." Christian lifted Danni onto her chair. Her head hung down, but she didn't fall back onto the floor. "Don't worry, though. I'll give you back your voice soon enough. I'd hate to miss a single note of

agony when I strip the flesh from your bones."

This can't be happening, Mitch thought, twisting futilely against the ropes. *John wouldn't let it. It's a dream. I'm still asleep down at the river.*

Ignoring his efforts to escape, Christian took a large, black book from a drawer and began to read from it. The words didn't make sense to Mitch; a lot of them weren't even in English. But their effects were immediate: the lights dimmed and the air filled with the stink of rotten eggs. *Sulfur,* Mitch remembered from his science class. Each time Christian turned a page, a heavy wind whipped through the room, scattering papers and tousling Danni's hair.

Christian raised his hand and spoke in a louder voice:

> Denizens, hear me! So-holoths, hear me!
> Feeders in the deep, hear me! Make me your vessel,
> so that I can share the vile pleasures of this one's
> flesh with you! Fill me with your foul corruption,
> share my space in this plane. Hear me now, as I call
> upon you to gain from my depravities! Come to me!
> Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl!

With the last syllable hanging in the air, Christian's shirt split open and a mass of greenish-brown tentacles burst from his pale chest. Rows of tiny mouths covered the bottoms of the appendages, with jagged teeth showing inside the puckered openings. At the rounded tip of each gruesome member was a pus-yellow eye surrounding a red pupil.

At the sight of the tentacles, Danni's eyes went wide and she shrieked, the muscles in her neck standing out like steel rods under her skin. Mitch screamed as well, but only in his head, as Christian stood up, the five-foot-long rubbery limbs squirming and twisting around each other like angry snakes.

Christian's lips curled up in a dreadful parody of a smile. "Where is your Jesus now, you pathetic twat? Cowering like a virgin on her wedding night? He knows he is no match for my Gods. They grow stronger each day, each hour."

One tentacle reached out and stroked Danni's arm; when it withdrew, two circles of red stood out on her flesh, tiny droplets of blood beading up around each one.

"And your sacrifice will make them stronger still."

Mitch closed his eyes, wishing he could stab something into his ears

so he wouldn't have to hear his sister's final cries. As Christian started laughing, one thought kept running circles in Mitch's head.

John, how could you let this happen?

* * *

It took John an hour to reach the church. He'd had to stop at Danni's house and get three items he needed and then dash all the way across town. Chest heaving, he knelt by the rectory door and removed several objects from his jacket pockets: three flasks of Holy Water, a lock of Danni's hair, and something he'd felt most uncomfortable about stealing, a soiled feminine pad from the bathroom waste can. But blood was always best if you wanted powerful magic, and he'd had been unable to think of any other way of getting some.

The final object was a wooden cross, strung on a rawhide lace. It had been given to him decades earlier by a priest whose life he'd saved. According to the priest, the cross was centuries old, hand-carved by Pope Clement XI and thrice blessed by succeeding Popes. It had been passed down through the priest's family for generations and was rumored to have the power to repel evil intentions.

With everything he needed laid out before him, John slipped the cross over his neck and began the spell designed to cleanse Danni and at the same time strip away Christian's evil powers.

Cyrus Christian paused, his face contorting in sudden pain. The alien tentacles, which had been busy tearing away Danni's clothing, twitched sharply and drew back.

Root. He's nearby. He thinks his magic is stronger than mine? Very well, old man, we'll see about that.

"Tempest growing overhead, filled with the hatred of the dead…."

John gritted his teeth against the sudden pain of what felt like a dozen claws piercing his flesh. The Trickster was mounting a counter-attack; now it was a race to see who finished first. He sprinkled more Holy Water on Danni's hair and blood and prayed: "Blood of the Lord, Blood of the Living…."

Cyrus Christian wanted to laugh. Root's purpose was obvious; just as obvious was the fact that the old fool would never complete his spell in

time. Smiling, Christian began the last section of his own incantation.

John felt the dark powers growing inside the church and knew he only had one chance. He had to skip to the end of the spell and hope for the best. Raising his hands and face to the sky, he shouted the final line: "Cast away the darkness and let the power of Evil be swept away!"

Christian looked up in surprise as thunder roared overhead. "No! He wouldn't dare—"

Bright light filled the room and the building shook. Books flew from the shelves and the ceiling lights exploded. The alien tentacles emitted high-pitched squeals and drew back into his chest.

Christian lifted the ancient tome and prepared to recite the last lines of his spell. But before he could speak, a bolt of golden lightning crashed through the window and struck him in the chest, knocking the book from his hands and sending him flying across the room.

John slowly rose from the ground, his vision filled with purple afterimages from the multiple lightning bursts that had struck the church. The force of Christian's evil energies was gone, although he had no idea for how long.

Danni and Mitch. He had to get to them before Christian could mount another spell. John staggered through the back entrance and found himself in a short hallway with several doors. The first two led to a small kitchen area and a bathroom. The third looked to be a secretary's office.

The fourth was locked, but he noticed a wisp of smoke trickling out from beneath it. With a cry, John shouldered the door open and burst into the room.

Smoke rose from charred marks on the carpet. Cyrus Christian was curled in a fetal position on the far side of the office, his clothes torn and smoldering. Danni lay naked on the floor next to an overturned chair. Mitch was tied to a second chair, his head slumped forward, his eyes closed. Neither of them moved, and for a moment John feared the worst. Then he saw Danni's chest slowly rising and falling.

John hurried to Danni and wrapped his jacket around her. As he did so, he noticed the red rings scattered across her body, some still oozing blood.

He opened himself to one of the Old Ones.

Things had progressed further than he'd thought, if Christian could

already wield that kind of strength.

Danni moaned, and John helped her to a sitting position.

"Are you all right?"

She stared blankly at him for a moment, and he feared his spell might not have broken Christian's connection after all. Then she blinked and her face came alive.

"John? Thank God you're here! It was horrible. He was going to--"

"Hush." John put a finger to her lips. "I can imagine what he was going to do. But we don't have time. He'll wake soon, and we need to get you and Mitch out of here. Help me untie him."

Despite the tears running down her cheeks, Danni nodded and started working on the ropes binding Mitch's feet while John took out his pocketknife and hacked at the ropes around the boy's arms and chest.

Mitch woke up just as they finished freeing him.

"What...?"

John shook his head. "Later. You and Danni have to get out of here."

John helped Danni up and half carried, half dragged her to the door, pushing Mitch ahead of them with his shoulder. When they reached the hall, he shifted her weight to Mitch, who staggered and only kept himself on his feet by pressing his back to the wall.

"Mitch, get her as far away from here as you can. I'll be out in a minute." Before the boy could say anything, John closed the door on him. His plan was to finish Christian off once and for all, but when he turned around, his nemesis was already climbing to his feet.

"All you've done is postpone the inevitable," Christian said, raising his hands. "In a moment, you and the boy can both watch as Miss Anderson feeds my Gods with her body and soul."

His back to the door, John spread his arms and prayed the old priest hadn't exaggerated the powers of the ancient cross. "Come then, Coyote. Let us see what you can do."

"I'll roast your bones for dinner!" Christian shouted. *"Ab-Durhad! Malefica prisinium ya-no-tho-mae-ta! Cladig ru-ni-ya! Abhorum!"*

The Preacher brought his hands together in a clap that resounded like thunder and shook the walls of hard enough to send cracks racing across the plaster. The windows imploded, filling the air with razor-sharp shrapnel. A bolt of impossibly black lightning arced across the room, heading right for John's the chest, while Christian howled mad laughter.

John remained expressionless as a second explosion occurred

inches from his body and the dark lightning reversed direction, striking Christian in the stomach and knocking him to the floor, his eyes wide with shock and flames rising from his clothing.

John clutched at the doorknob as all the strength left his body, burned away by the effort it had taken to repel Christian's attack. The ancient cross crumbled to ash and fell to the floor. He took several deep breaths, wiped a rivulet of blood from his face, got his shaking legs under him, and stumbled into the hallway, shutting the door behind him.

Mitch had managed to drag Danni almost to the back exit. Keeping one hand on the wall for support, John hurried to join them.

"Mitch, listen carefully." John paused as his vision dimmed momentarily. He took a breath and continued. "I'm going to bring Danni's car around. Get her outside. I think we've got a few minutes before Christian is a danger to anyone, but we can't be sure."

Without waiting for an answer, John exited the church and made his way across the parking lot to Danni's Mustang. A quick swipe of his hand under the back bumper was all it took to locate the spare key she kept there in a magnetic case, for emergencies.

I think this qualifies, he thought, as he collapsed into the driver's seat. His vision blurred again and for a moment he saw doubles of all the gauges. Then his sight returned to normal and he fumbled the key into the ignition.

Gotta hurry. I'm barely going to make it.

When he reached the back of the church, he drove up onto the path and then across the grass to the door just as Mitch emerged, his sister clinging to his shoulder. Together they muscled a semi-conscious Danni into the backseat and John put the car in gear, kicking up dirt as he floored the gas pedal and sped out of the parking lot. The ten-minute ride to Danni's left him weak and shaking, but only after they got inside and put Danni in her bed did he allow himself to collapse onto the couch.

"Is Christian dead?" Mitch asked. "Did you kill him?"

John tried to speak but he couldn't muster the energy. Instead, he shook his head. Once again, he'd failed to bring down the Trickster. His only consolation was that it would take days for Christian to regain his strength. During that time, he'd pose no real threat to them.

And that will give me time to recover and find another way to destroy him.

A smile formed on John's lips.

Then he passed out.

Cyrus Christian slowly pulled himself from the floor. Every inch of his body felt bruised and battered. Several parishioners were staring through the missing windows, but he paid them no mind. The most important thing at the moment was retrieve his grimoire and hide it before someone else came across it. He found the book under his desk and quickly dropped it into the bottom drawer. Then he looked around the room, surveying the damage.

Damn John Root to Hell! He's set me back by days. I—

He paused as he noticed something on the door. A closer look revealed streaks of blood on the knob and wood.

I wonder....

Christian dipped a finger into the blood and brought it to his tongue. Not Danni Anderson's, which he'd tasted through the mouths of the Spawn. No, this was older. And male.

The blood belonged to John Root.

"Hallelujah and praise the Devil." Using a piece of paper from the floor, Christian wiped up as much of the blood as he could, then carefully folded the paper and locked it away with the grimoire.

"Now we'll see who has the power, John Root. I have your blood."

And blood is always best for magic.

Chapter 24

John opened his eyes to bright sunshine streaming into his bedroom, warm and comforting against his face. It took him a long moment to figure out what the other sensation was.

A cool breeze blowing across his skin from the open window.

Forcing his body into movement despite his protesting muscles, he got out of bed and looked outside.

Large patches of blue fought the omnipresent black clouds for dominance of the sky. Tree leaves fluttered as the gentle wind flowed around them, and for the first time in days the air didn't drip with humidity.

If he hadn't known better, John would have sworn Hastings Mills had returned to normal.

"Hey, John! 'Bout time you got up!"

John glanced down and saw Mitch standing in the yard, a familiar red plastic bag in his hands. The sight of the sack sent John's stomach rumbling. The only place in town that used red plastic bags was Gustavson's Deli.

Which meant fresh sweet rolls and coffee for breakfast.

"I'll be right down," he called to Mitch.

"Better hurry. Danni said she was gonna eat yours if you slept any longer."

John didn't waste time replying. When it came to food, Danni Anderson rarely delivered an idle threat. He pulled on his pants from the previous day, reached deep into his black bag to retrieve a clean t-shirt from his own house, and then headed for the stairs, not even bothering with shoes or socks.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Danni greeted him. She was pouring orange juice while Mitch doled out the coffees and rolls.

"What time is it?" John asked.

"Almost ten. I've never known you to sleep so long."

Danni's tone was bright and cheerful, but one look at her face and John knew it was an act. Dark smudges hung below her eyes and her smile didn't make it past her lips.

"The last few days have been...trying...on all of us," John said, grabbing a cheese Danish from the plate. "But before we discuss any of it, I suggest we eat."

"Sounds good to me." In contrast to his sister, Mitch looked honestly happy.

Perhaps it's because no harm came to them, John thought. Then he noticed the way the boy was looking at him and a familiar knife twisted in his guts. *Hero worship. It was bad enough before. But now I've saved them from the big bad monster.*

The problem with hero worship was, sooner or later all heroes fail.

Like I did yesterday. They don't even know; they think I went there to save them. But by saving them, I lost the bigger battle.

Of course, there hadn't been any choice. That was the drawback to being on the side of good. If you started sacrificing people to achieve the final goal—giving up the pawns to capture the king—eventually you ended up no better than the evils you fought against.

Suddenly, John didn't feel so hungry. But he ate his Danish and drank his coffee just the same, savoring the double mule-kick of caffeine and sugar.

And when breakfast was over, he told them everything.

Beginning with his great-grandfather.

"So, you're telling me that your family has been trying to stop this...Trickster, for over three hundred years?" Danni asked, her skepticism unmistakable in her raised eyebrow and incredulous tone.

John nodded. "Give or take. After he destroyed our town, much as he's doing to yours, my grandmother vowed to put an end to his mischief. Of course, that is not my exclusive job, nor am I the only one in the world who opposes the Other."

"I don't get it. What are you, some kind of supernatural policeman?"

"No." John rubbed his forehead, trying to think of the best way to explain what he—what his family—had always done. "Let me ask you a question. Have you ever heard of country magic?"

"I've heard of country-fried chicken," Mitch said with a sly grin.

He'd been silent up to that point. "They make it at Cracker Barrel."

Probably because he's already seen some of what I can do, and more of what the Ancient One can do. He already believes; for him, the rest is just filling in the blanks. But Danni, she's an adult, and this is all new to her, despite what happened at the church.

"Hush, Mitch," Danni said. "No, I haven't. What is it?"

"I guess you could say it's like voodoo. It's got bits and pieces of religion and spells and herbal magic from all over. Down in the Carolinas, we got it from the Native Americans, plus the slaves, and we added in anything that came over from Europe with our ancestors."

"Are you talking black magic? Sacrifices, drinking blood?" Danni looked shocked to think John might be involved in anything so violent.

"Some people use it that way," he admitted. "But my family has always steered clear of the dark magics. There's a price to pay for using them; each spell eats away a little piece of your soul, until there's nothing left."

"Is that what happened with Reverend Christian?" Mitch asked.

"No." John gave an emphatic shake of his head. "The thing you know as Cyrus Christian is just a shell; inside lives a being composed of dark energy. He is a servant of Chaos. The Trickster is known by many names. Coyote. Kupua. Kokopelli. Amaguq. He exists to bring disorder and sorrow to the world."

"Why?" Danni posed the question before her brother could.

"To prepare the way for the Elder Gods to enter our dimension. Eons ago, humans fought a battle with the Old Ones and used their magics to banish the Gods back to the outer realms. Since then these creatures—call them Gods, or demons, or even aliens—have been trying to return."

"You mean, if you don't stop Christian, he'll open the doors for these things? How bad are we talking?"

"I'm thinking really bad," said Mitch, obviously remembering his encounter with the Hellhounds.

"Mitch is right. That thing you saw coming out of Christian's chest was but a tadpole compared to the monsters lurking on the other side of the Barrier. The ancient texts describe them as unspeakably horrible and larger than the greatest whales. Their servants and offspring are frequently referred to as demons in religious writings; thankfully, it takes a lot of energy to open the Barrier even a crack, which is what Christian did in his office yesterday. To let through an Ancient requires much more power than Christian has amassed. Yet."

"You still haven't answered my questions." Danni pointed a finger at John. "Is Christian going to open this barrier thing if you don't stop him? And, why does it have to be you?"

John shrugged. "Today, or this week? No. Eventually? Quite possibly, if he's not stopped. How long that will be, I can't say. Ten years? Twenty? A hundred? He gains power from the chaos and sorrow he causes, and sooner or later he'll gather enough to open the gates more than just a crack. And then..."

"Hell on Earth," Mitch finished.

"Yes. As for why me, my family has always used our powers to help those in need. Most times that's just coming to the aid of someone who's sick or perhaps troubled by something science can't explain. In this case, I'm both helping humanity in general and righting a wrong done to my family."

Danni cocked her head slightly and stared at John. "What happens to you if you succeed in stopping Christian?"

"What?" John flinched, taken aback by the question. "Well, I'll just continue to do what I've always done."

"That doesn't—"

John held up his hand. "Please, no more questions for now. I'm still rather exhausted. I'm going to get some more sleep."

"You're avoiding something." Danni's gaze bore into him like two lasers.

"No, I'm really tired. Honest." He rose from the table and headed upstairs before she could say anything else.

He hated lying to her, but the truth was, he knew where her questions were leading, and he wasn't prepared to deal with them. He had to focus all his thoughts, all his energies, on finding a way to stop the Trickster.

Much as he regretted it, there was no time to waste on thinking about staying on in Hastings Mills after he was finished.

* * *

Cyrus Christian spent the next two days gathering his strength. He excused himself from the daily functions of Perpetual Hope Church by claiming he had a bit of a summer cold, leaving his quarters only to preside over scheduled masses.

He placed Billy Ray Capshaw in charge of repairing the damages

from the bake sale riot and what the locals were calling 'the most freakish electrical storm' in town history. The rash of violence that had swept the town over the past several days was blamed on the heat wave, with most people attributing the change in people's personalities to 'too many goddamned electrons and whatnot in the atmosphere.'

The ability of humans to rationalize almost anything never ceases to amaze me. Christian sat at his desk, contemplating the scrap of paper soaked with John Root's blood. He'd been staring at it for over an hour, trying to decide how best to use it.

He tapped his fingers on the desk. Ideally, it would become the basis for some particularly violent and fatal spell; unfortunately, trying to harness that much power in his present state might render him incapable of completing the invocations he planned on working at the town fair, the ones that would bring all of Hastings Mills to its knees. And as much as he'd rejoice in seeing John Root gutted and hanging from the church spire, he had to think of the big picture. That meant finding another, less taxing, way of nullifying the mage.

Christian paused. It was obvious the man had some kind of emotional ties to the Andersons. And while he'd surely placed spells of protection over both of them by now, his magics would only protect them from physical and supernatural harm; such spells rarely defended their targets from mental abuse.

Or kidnapping.

Stealing the boy and locking him away somewhere wasn't placing him in peril, so Root's wards shouldn't be activated.

He opened his grimoire and flipped through the pages until he found the correct spell. He smiled as he read through the instructions. Even in his weakened state, the calling of a few imps was child's play.

Twenty minutes later, four miniature demons waited inside the simple pentagram and circle he'd laid out on the carpet. Only a foot tall, their arms and legs were too long for their bodies, and they had long, black talons and bat-like wings. Their faces were grotesque, twisted parodies of human features.

"Find the one called John Root," Christian told them. "And when you do, bring to me that which he holds most dear."

One of the imps hissed and held out a hand, extra-jointed fingers extended outward.

With a nod, Christian tore the blood-soaked paper into four pieces and dropped them into the circle, careful not to touch his flesh with that of

the imps waiting impatiently within. To do so would free them into the world unbound and beholden to no one. The last thing he needed was to be attacked by the vicious little demons while he slept.

The imps grabbed the paper scraps and gobbled them down, emitting hisses and moans of pleasure. Then, with a loud pop like a punctured balloon, they disappeared.

Christian returned to his desk and began working on his sermon for the next day.

Now it was just a matter of time.

John Root tossed and turned on his bed, unable to break the clutches of the dream he'd fallen into. Even in his sleep, he knew he was dreaming, but each time he felt close to waking, the dream—more properly a nightmare—carried him off to another memory from his past, transformed by his subconscious into vaguely hallucinogenic images.

He ran down a rural road in Virginia, pursued by the ghosts of more than twenty Civil War soldiers who'd never stopped guarding their town against the Northerners. Unlike in real life, John couldn't free the angry spirits from their earthbound status, and now they were out for blood. One of them raised its rifle, and—

He was crouched behind an ancient cypress tree in a Florida swamp, outside of Kissimmee, Florida. Several yards away, a tall, hairy creature shuffled through the shallow waters. John had been called in by the locals to put an end to the beast's destruction of their fishing boats, outhouses, and storage sheds. In 1941, when he'd actually accomplished this feat, he'd simply lured the creature deeper into the Everglades and placed wards around the swamp's boundaries to keep it from returning. But in his dream, as he moved into the open to confront the brute, a second one suddenly stepped out from behind another tree and came at him, its proto-human face twisted with rage. John turned to run but slipped on the slimy bottom and—

He found himself in his own home, on July seventh, 1922. The date was imprinted in his brain in giant red letters, the most horrible day he'd ever lived through. Just as he had that afternoon, he sat on his living room floor, cradling his dying wife and child in his arms. Their blood flowed over his hands and into his lap as their final breaths hissed out of half-open mouths. Outside, the angry cries of the men who'd murdered them—ignorant marsh rats, too stupid to know John's mother had saved their lives by ridding the town of the Trickster's evil presence—filled the air as John fought to keep himself from extracting the vengeance his heart

desired. "Clara," he whispered. "Jack." He wanted to say more, but the words caught in his throat. Then Clara opened her eyes, eyes as lifeless as stones, and spoke. "John, you—"

"—have a job to do." John stood before his dying mother, her broken, twisted body laid out on her bed. John had carried her there himself, after he'd dug her out from beneath the remains of the church the Trickster had collapsed on her. "It is up to you, now, son. Find him. Put an end to this."

"But how?" he asked.

"Use what is inside you, the one thing you have that he doesn't. That is your strength, my son. Remember, John...."

"John? John!"

John sat up with a cry, drawing a frightened gasp from Mitch, who'd been standing next to the bed.

"Jesus, John, you scared me. Danni told me to get you for dinner, but you wouldn't wake up."

"I... I was dreaming," John said, in a voice that shook almost as badly as his hands. His heart pounded painfully against his chest.

"That must have been some dream." Mitch sat down at John's desk. "You were rolling around the bed like a fish out of water."

John ran his hands through his hair and took a deep breath. "It wasn't pleasant. But sometimes dreams help you work through problems, if you know how to interpret them correctly. And I think mine may have given us the answer we need."

"Cool, 'cause I've got news that might help you, too."

"Good. Tell me at dinner. In the meantime, bring me my bag, will you? I need to find something."

"Sure." Mitch went over to the closet. "Where is it?"

"It should be right there."

"It's not."

"What?" John got up and joined Mitch at the closet. "It was there this morning. I put it there myself."

Mitch bent down and looked under the bed, then behind the bedroom door. "Are you sure? Maybe it's downstairs."

"I'm positive. But we'll look anyway."

Fifteen minutes later, John joined Mitch and Danni in the kitchen, after checking the entire house a second time.

"Where could it have gone off to?" Danni asked.

John shook his head. "There's only one person who knows how

valuable it is, who would dare steal it."

Danni's eyes narrowed. "Christian."

"Yes."

"But how? No one's been to the house all day."

John shrugged. "He's a powerful practitioner of the dark arts. There are dozens of ways he could have taken it, without ever leaving the church."

Mitch looked troubled. "What was it you needed? Maybe we can get it in town.

"No, I—" The full impact of Christian's thievery hit home as John realized there was only one way to get the items he needed.

"I have to go home."

Cyrus Christian looked up as the harsh stink of burning sulfur filled his office, accompanied by the pop of rapidly displaced air. He turned to his pentagram, expecting to find the child, Mitch Anderson, or possibly the boy's sister, Danni, in the clutches of his imps.

Instead, the miniature demons capered around an ordinary-looking black physician's bag. Frowning, Christian rose from his seat, prepared to punish the imps for failing.

"I said I wanted what Root holds dearest to—"

Christian stopped as he realized what the bag might be.

"Well, and perhaps a 'well done' is in order, my friends."

The imps danced and jumped as Christian carefully picked up the bag and stuck his arm inside, further and further, with no sense of bottom. He remembered...

Sarah Root, dogbitch-mother to John Root, dipping her hand into a similar looking bag—the same one, perhaps?—and withdrawing several jars and flasks much too big to have been inside. He'd been watching her from behind a tree, keeping tabs on her as she prepared a spell to drive away the poltergeist he'd set loose in the town church, one of his first acts when he'd come to town.

Christian smiled as he withdrew his hand. *Now I can cause John Root some real trouble.*

He placed the open bag back in the pentagram and looked at the imps. "I have one more task for you..."

Part III

He brings the storms that hide the truth,
He makes the mothers cry in sorrow,
He holds the fire in his eyes,
When the Stranger comes to town.

- The Stranger, undated Southern folk myth

Chapter 25

At the same time John Root pondered the latest obstruction in his path, and Cyrus Christian cackled mad laughter while his demons climbed into Root's traveling bag, Doris Hoke entered the Shear Heaven Salon on Main Street, tiny beads of sweat already forming on her forehead.

There's no understanding this crazy summer weather, she thought, as she approached the reception desk. *Ten minutes ago it was mild and breezy, and now it feels like another heat wave is coming on.*

Inside was no better, hot air from numerous blow dryers combining with the wet hair of the patrons to create a climate more suited to a tropical rain forest.

"Hi, Francie, I'm here for my six o'clock," she said to the girl at the desk.

Francie Gomez, who'd worked at Shear Heaven for almost ten years, looked down at her schedule. "Sorry, Doris. I don't have you listed. You'll have to come back tomorrow, we're booked solid tonight."

Doris frowned. Francie didn't look or sound the least bit sorry, but Doris let it pass. "I've had a standing six o'clock for years. You know that."

"Yeah, but if it's not in the book, it doesn't matter. No walk-ins, that's the rule."

"I'm not a walk-in, goddammit! I have an appointment."

"Not according to the book." Francie turned away. "Sorry."

This time Doris didn't let it pass. With a cry, grabbed Francie by her hair and slammed her face onto the desktop.

"Check your book again, you fucking cunt!"

Wham!

"Do I have an appointment now, you whorebag slut?"

Wham!

Doris lifted Francie's head for a third blow; blood poured from Francie's mashed nose, and two of her front teeth swam in a pool of crimson on the blotter.

A loud bang echoed through the salon. Doris let go of Francie and stumbled backwards, a red stain spreading in the center of her chest. She fell over without uttering a sound, one hand toppling a shelf of hair-care products to the floor.

Francie Gomez looked up and tried to speak. "Ungh…ooo...elp me."

Sharon Horowitz aimed her pistol at Francie's head and fired another shot, splattering brains and pieces of skull across the wall. Then she put the gun back in her purse and sat down in her chair, where Marjorie Heppelwhite waited to finish the perm she'd been working on.

"You know, you come here for a little relaxation, and someone's always got to ruin it," Sharon said to Marjorie. Around them, hairdressers and customers nodded and returned to their previous conversations.

"Ain't that the truth?" Marjorie rolled another lock of hair around a curler. "I was just tellin' my sister the other day...."

Millie Jacobs walked into The Laughing Wok just after six. A long line waited at the counter. Li Mingh, the owner, simultaneously took a customer's dinner order, answered the phone, and shouted rapid-fire Cantonese at the four cooks in the kitchen.

No one paid attention as Millie ducked around the end of the counter and into the kitchen. It was common for customers to grab their own soft drinks from the cooler when the take-out restaurant was busy.

By the time anyone realized she wasn't getting a soda, Millie had already picked up a steaming, oversized wok with both hands. The roasted meat smell of her burning flesh blended in with the odors of fried pork and chicken. Unaffected by the hot metal melting through her palms, she tossed the pan of boiling-hot chicken and cashews onto Li Mingh's back, burning several of the nearby customers in the process.

Li Mingh screamed and fell to the floor, rolling on the tiles in a vain attempt to stop the unexpected agony. Li's two brothers, Chen and Robert, tackled Millie, all three of them falling on top of Li and causing him to shout again as his arm snapped under their combined weight.

When the police arrived, Li's brothers and several customers had already chopped Millie Jacobs into pieces and were busy stuffing the parts into the deep fryer.

One customer was later quoted as saying, "You mess with people's meals, you're gonna pay the price."

* * *

As John Root passed the sign proclaiming "Now Leaving Hastings Mills. Be Sure to Come Again!" he felt a sharp pain in his stomach.

Guilt. I'm doing the right thing, but it feels like I'm abandoning them, running away.

Telling the Andersons he had to return to South Carolina was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. Mitch had cried and Danni had looked on the verge of tears herself, even after he'd explained that without the items stored there, he would never be able to prepare the spell to stop Christian.

Danni had generously offered her car, and he'd accepted. He'd be far safer driving than taking a plane, even if it took longer. It would be too easy for Christian to twist a pilot's mind and crash the aircraft.

Before leaving, John placed protective wards around the house and warned Danni and Mitch not to leave for any reason until he returned. Then he pulled Danni aside and told her that if he wasn't back in four days, she should take Mitch and get out of town as fast as she could.

"Where will we go?" she'd asked.

"Anywhere," he'd said. "Just leave. Before things get out of control."

He hadn't bothered explaining what out of control meant. He figured she had a good enough idea, based on what she'd seen in Christian's office.

Driving south on Route 17, he found himself repeating the same thought over and over.

Please, God, watch over them while I'm gone.

* * *

"Thank you for coming, Billy, I know you're busy. Have a seat."

Billy Ray sat down across from Reverend Christian. Spread across Christian's desk was a map of Riverside Park, where the fair would be held. Before Christian even started talking, Billy Ray noticed there'd been changes made to the plans. Even more so than before, the layout of the booths and concession stands appeared to be a series of concentric rings that spiraled in to the grandstand in the center.

"You rearranged some things," Billy said, tapping the map.

"Final adjustments. How is the setup going?"

Billy Ray shrugged. "On my end, everything's right on schedule. I can't speak for the individual booth owners." Billy Ray had spent the past two weeks prepping the park for the coming fair, working from the original plans Christian had provided.

"I'll remind everyone during this week's Mass announcements," Christian said. "But in the meantime, let me show you the modifications to the layout."

Billy Ray looked closer at the plans. For a moment, the pattern seemed to come to life on the paper, the corkscrew design spinning slowly toward the center point like an endless whirlpool. A dizzy sensation filled his head and he had to grab the table to keep from falling forward.

Into the pit.

Billy Ray rubbed his eyes. Where the hell had that thought come from? When he looked again, the paper was motionless.

"Is everything all right, Billy?" Christian's lips turned up at the edges, as if entertained by Billy Ray's momentary nausea.

"Yeah... I just... sometimes looking at that map makes my head weird."

"Good." Christian folded the paper and handed it to Billy Ray. "Make sure you get it exactly right, Billy. This is most important to me."

Billy Ray averted his eyes from the Reverend's face; he hated when the preacher went from weird to downright scary. Something seemed to happen with his eyes, like they turned into black holes just waiting to suck you in. On those occasions, Billy Ray often found himself squeezing his knees together like a little boy desperate to pee.

"No problem. I'll double-check everything." He turned to leave but Christian cleared his throat, stopping Billy Ray in his tracks.

"Triple check, Billy. And then check again."

Billy Ray nodded and hurried from the office, his stomach flip-flopping and sweat beading on the palms of his hands.

Jesus, I'll be glad to get the fuck away from this place.

His original plan for the evening had been to grab dinner somewhere and then return to his makeshift sleeping area in the basement. But now he felt the need for a few beers to calm his nerves. He changed his clothes, doing his best to avoid looking at the cabinet where more than eight thousand dollars now sat, according to the latest church fund announcement, and went back outside.

Goddamn, this weather sucks! The brief respite in the tropical hell

they'd been having all summer had been like a heaven-sent gift; now the heat had returned with a vengeance, meaning tomorrow would be another day of chugging Gatorade while he worked, just so he wouldn't die from dehydration.

All the years I've lived in upstate New York, I don't remember ever having a heat wave this long, or this...powerful.

A sudden thought brought Billy Ray to a stop.

It's been like this since Reverend Christian came to town.

Could he be the cause?

He wanted to dismiss the notion as silly, but too many strange—and frightening—things had been happening in Hastings Mills, and more than a few led back to Christian somehow. The way the man always seemed to know what you were up to. His weird sermons.

His eyes.

Billy Ray turned and looked back at Perpetual Hope Church, now over a block behind him and almost lost in the last rays of the sun. A lone figure stood at the top of the stairs. The figure lifted one hand and waved.

"Big day tomorrow, Billy Ray. Don't stay out too late."

The figure turned and entered the church.

Did he just speak inside *my head?*

Right then, Billy Ray wanted to run. Run as fast as he could, just get the hell out of Hastings Mills forever, get as far away from the crazy weather and psychic priests as he could.

You're imagining things. He's a major freak, but that's all. Stop acting like you're in a fuckin' Stephen King novel.

He forced his feet to back into motion, continuing down West State Street at a normal pace. He wasn't leaving without the cash, that was for sure. Not after all he'd been through. What, waste all that time only to start over again two towns down the highway, without a dime to his name? No way.

Billy Ray pushed open the door to Al's Club 17, a college hangout during the school year but a favorite of the locals during the summer, thanks to its cheap tap beer and extra-hot chicken wings.

"Gimme a pitcher of Pabst and a dozen wings," Billy Ray told the bartender. While he waited for his food, he considered his options for how to snatch the money from the basement and get away with his skin intact. There had to be a way.

Outside, two pedestrians bumped into each other and immediately started throwing punches while their wives cheered them on. A chill ran

through Billy that had nothing to do with the air conditioning.

Jesus, just let me get through the next couple of weeks.

* * *

John Root crossed the border into South Carolina eleven hours after leaving Danni Anderson's house. He'd driven straight through, stopping only for gas and bathroom breaks, both of which had been more frequent than he'd planned, thanks to the Mustang's poor mileage and too many ice coffees along the way.

Now, with close to a hundred and fifty miles still to go, John felt the need for something more substantial than stale coffee and even staler donuts. When he saw the sign for an all-night truck stop, where a sign proclaimed "Best chicken-fried steak in all the South!" he pulled in, his stomach already rumbling at the thought of real Southern cooking.

"What kin I get ya, sweetie?" the waitress asked, as he claimed one of the round padded stools at the counter. Like so many waitresses in so many other truck stops John had visited, she wore her bleached-blonde hair in a fat beehive that had two pencils sticking up like antennae, chewed gum with an audible *snap-crackle-pop*, and looked older than she should in the unflattering glow of the fluorescent lights.

"Scrambled eggs, grits, and a coffee," John said, without even glancing at the menu.

"Comin' up." The waitress, whose nametag read, appropriately enough, Marge, gave him a half-hearted smile before walking away to get his coffee.

John glanced at his watch. Still too early to call Danni and Mitch. He'd worried about them the entire drive but had refrained from calling, figuring that checking in on them too often would only add to their anxiety at being alone. Plus, as the hours had passed without any signs of interference from the Other, John had relaxed just a little.

Maybe he's still too weak to do anything. After all, I've no idea how much I hurt him.

Marge approached, a steaming cup of black coffee in one hand and several containers of cream in her other.

"Here ya go." She set the coffee down without spilling a drop.

"Thank you."

Instead of walking away, she stayed in front of him, chewing her gum with her mouth open.

Snap-pop.

"They're already dead, you know."

John froze in the act of pouring sugar into his cup. "What?"

"The brat and his slut-bag sister. They're dead." *Snap-pop.* "He killed them the minute you hauled your sorry ass outta town, Johnny-boy."

Snap-pop.

With an inarticulate cry, John jumped off the stool and stepped backwards. His foot caught on the stool's post and he fell, arms windmilling but finding nothing to grab onto. Fireworks exploded as his head hit the hard tile, and the room went dim.

They can't be dead! Not now! Not when I'm risking so much to save them!

Cyrus Christian's voice filled his head. *"You're wrong, mister. They're dead, mister. Hey, mister. Hey—"*

"Mister? Hey, Mister? You okay?"

John opened his eyes. Marge's face hovered over him, a look of concern spread across it.

"Get away!" John pushed himself back with his hands and feet, sliding across the floor until he hit a display case filled with desserts.

He looked around. Two truck drivers and a teenage boy, the only other patrons at the counter, were all staring at him. A tall Hispanic man in a white cook's outfit had come out of the kitchen and stood next to Marge.

"What the hell's goin' on?" the cook asked.

Marge shrugged. "He was drinkin' his coffee and all of a sudden he screamed and fell off his stool."

"She's right, Leon," one of the truckers said. "I seen the whole thing."

The cook—Leon—approached John and crouched down. "What's your problem, fella? You on drugs or somethin'?"

"No." John shook his head. "No, I... I saw something." It was the first thing he could think of, and he was desperately trying to come up with what he might have seen to cause such a reaction when Leon supplied the answer for him."

"Shit." The cook lowered his voice. "What was it? A roach? A mouse? Don't tell me you saw a goddamn rat. I can't let no one hear that, I'll lose all my business."

John swallowed, took a deep breath, and prepared to do something he hated.

Lying.

"It was a... a roach. A big one. It ran up the wall by the coffee

machine."

"Fuckin' A." Leon stood up and raised his voice. "Fella saw a roach, that's all. Marge, put a bait box behind the coffee and leave a note for Carmela to call the exterminator tomorrow."

Leon held out a hand stained from cigarettes and scarred from grease splatters. "Don't worry, fella. They don't never get into the food."

"Jest make sure you check the lumps in your gravy," one of the truckers said with a laugh.

"Shut the hell up, Floyd," Leon shot back, scowling.

John let the man help him up, and he sat back on his stool. While the others joked about roaches in the kitchen, he mentally chastised himself for falling victim to Christian's glamour. The fact that he hadn't seen through the illusionary spell meant he was more tired than he'd thought, an easy mark for anything Christian might try.

Worse, it meant his old enemy knew exactly where he was, and where he was going.

And that Danni and Mitch were fair game.

Chapter 26

Cyrus Christian raised his arms over his head. “My brethren, the time approaches! In far R’lyeh, Cthulhu waits for the doors to open! He waits—but not patiently, no, *never* patiently—for the time when the Deep Ones shall rise again and their kingdom cover the world. And you, his servants, must make ready for him. For He has told me you are the paving stones and I the paver, to forge the way for the Old Ones to return. Praise Cthulhu!”

“Praise Cthulhu!” the congregation shouted back at him. “Praise Cthulhu!”

Christian kept his hands aloft, allowing himself a moment to soak in the power the crowd was unwittingly broadcasting, waves of energy that filled him like water filling a chalice, repairing the invisible—but all too painful—damages wrought by John Root just days ago.

“Go forth now, good people. Carry the Word into your homes and spread it amongst your neighbors. Be as the virus within the body, the mold upon the wall. Spread the Word more each day, until you overwhelm the unbelievers with the unstoppable power of the Gods. Bring them to me, those who have not yet heard the call, and help me shape their souls for a better purpose.”

He lowered his arms and leaned forward against the lectern; across from him, five hundred bodies mimicked his action.

“But beware,” he said in a softer voice. “For there are those in our community who refuse to believe, who mock our ways, our Gods. Look around. See who fears to enter our House. Find them, for they are the snakes in the grass, the scorpions in the shoe. They want to bring us down, take away our faith. But will we let them?”

“No!” cried the assembled throng.

“No!” Christian said, his voice rising above theirs. “For we will not be denied!”

“This is our time!” the crowd responded.

"Go!" Christian pointed toward the doors. "Go and spread the fury of the Gods!"

"Praise Cthulhu!"

Christian stepped away from the lectern and nodded as the people rose and headed out of the church, faces twisted in angry masks of righteous determination. He watched them for signs of hesitation or fear, signs someone was resisting his subversion of their minds.

He saw none.

In the empty church, the sigils of Chaos were evident everywhere, beginning with the eight-foot-high wood-and-plaster crucifix that overlooked the church from behind the altar. Gray slime streaked the once-clean surface, and patches of mildew created demented Rorschach patterns on the wall around the cross. On the altar, the linens lay in moldy tatters and the chalice looked as if an archeologist had just unearthed it from an eons-old burial ground.

Christian breathed deep of the musty, dirty smells of rot and decomposition, savoring each spore of decay. Gone were his fears of faltering in his ultimate goal for Hastings Mills. The absence of John Root played no small part in the resurgence, as there was no longer an opposing force of good within the town's borders.

I wonder if he knows how much he's hurt his own cause just by leaving. And for what? Some herbs and potions that in the end will matter no more than a fart in a tornado.

The phrase, which he'd overheard that cretin Billy Ray Capshaw say one afternoon, pulled a hearty chuckle from his chest, a true expression of humor he rarely allowed himself.

Outside, six crows fell dead from the sky onto the front steps of the church.

* * *

Angela Parisi stopped short as she entered her living room. The sight of her good-for-nothing husband sitting on the sofa in a stained t-shirt and ragged boxer shorts, eating cheese puffs and getting sticky orange powder all over everything, was a bucket of cold water on the inspired feelings she'd carried with her since leaving church.

"What the hell are you doing?" She put as much venom in her voice as she could, thinking it might cut through the layers of sloth he'd built over the years.

"Huh?" George looked up at her with his mouth open, exposing teeth coated in orange paste. "I'm watchin' the game, same's I was when you left." He shoved another fistful of snacks into his mouth.

Angela pursed her lips and frowned. Each *smack-smack* of his lips sent acid-coated needles into her skull. "I don't suppose you're planning to move your lazy ass and fix the back steps, like you said you would."

George sipped a beer, his eyes never leaving the TV screen.

"Well?" Angela asked.

With a sigh, he looked away from the game. "I said I was gonna do it, and I will. Soon as it cools off. It's too hot out right now."

"That's been your excuse for the past month."

He shrugged. "Can't help it if it's been a bad summer."

Unaware she was clenching her fists so hard her nails had pierced the skin, Angela fought to keep from screaming. No reason to broadcast their problems to the neighbors. "I suppose it's too hot to get a job, too?"

George wiped his hands on his t-shirt, leaving neon-orange tracks across older, yellow stains. "Summer's a tough time to find work, babe."

"You're a mechanic, for R'Lyeh's sake! There's always work!"

"Whatever." He turned away from her. "Give it a rest, will ya? I'm tryin' to watch the game."

Angela opened her mouth to tell him where to put his game, and then remembered Reverend Christian's closing statements. *Snakes in the grass.*

Those who didn't believe.

George never goes to church. That's the real *problem.*

Without another word, Angela left the living room. She doubted George even noticed. She went to the kitchen, where she slid her largest knife from the cutting block, a nine-inch blade they only used for carving holiday roasts and turkeys. A reflection in the polished steel caught her eye. Not her own face, but rather Reverend Christian's, his black eyes filled with determination. His mouth opened and closed, and she stared hard, trying to read his lips.

"Spread the fury of the Gods."

Yes. It was time for George to make a choice.

Returning to the living room, she stood behind her husband. "George, I think you should go to church with me from now on."

Without turning his head, George uttered a short laugh. "Church? That's your thing, honey. I ain't stepped foot in that place since we got married, and that's how it's gonna stay. I got better things to do on a

Sunday afternoon."

"This is your last chance." She raised the knife.

"And this is your last chance to leave me alone, for Chrissake."

"So be it."

Angela plunged the blade into the side of his neck, stabbing as hard as she could, putting her shoulders into it. George let out a wet, choking cry and dropped his beer into his lap; blood spurted out and mixed with the beer, creating a red foam that covered his shirt and waist. Angela twisted the knife, severing tendons and causing his head to flop to the side. She gave it one more turn and then pulled it free, revealing a gaping hole that exposed grayish tubes and thick muscle amidst the geysering blood.

For a moment she stood there, wondering what to do with George's twitching, jerking body. Then it came to her. The Women's Auxiliary potluck dinner was next week. She let go of the knife and went to the cabinet where she kept her recipe book.

"Let's see," she murmured to herself, oblivious to the red smears she was leaving on the pages. She flipped to the instructions for pulled pork. "Place three pounds of pork into crock pot and cook on low for eight hours."

Angela glanced at George's body, which lay twitching on the floor like a beached whale.

"I think I'm going to need more crock pots."

Ken Olsen crossed the parking lot toward the entrance to Rosie's Diner, wondering how in the hell it had gotten so hot between his last stop and Hastings Mills. As he opened the door, he braced himself for the welcoming rush of cold air from the diner's air conditioning.

Instead, a wave of stifling heat washed over him, riding on twin wings of grease and body odor.

Doing his best to ignore the unwelcome atmosphere, Ken headed for the cashier's counter, where Millie, the usual Sunday clerk, sat on her stool, cleaning her long fingernails with a letter opener. He always tried to be nice to her; she reminded him of his own daughter, too chunky for her height, but with a pretty face just waiting to blossom.

"Hey, Millie. Is Rosie around? I got a delivery."

Millie rolled her eyes, let out a sigh, and put down the opener. She stared at him long enough that he started to grow uncomfortable, wondering if he'd done something to offend her the last time he'd been by.

Finally, after what seemed like a full minute of silence, she opened her mouth.

And spat a huge gob of stringy saliva on his shirt.

"There's a delivery for ya," Millie said, and then let loose with a vicious laugh.

"What the...? Millie, what the fuck's your problem?" Ken grabbed some napkins and wiped at his shirt.

"Hey, don't go talkin' to Millie like that," a rough voice said.

Ken turned and saw three burly men getting up from their booth. "Did you see what she did? She spit on me. I don't need that shit."

One of the men stepped forward. Ken expected him to continue the argument, or perhaps even say something to the belligerent counter girl. So he was caught completely unawares when the man lashed out with a softball-sized fist. Stars exploded in Ken's head and he crashed into the counter, knocking over a tip jar and a basket of mints in the process.

"Maybe that'll teach you keep yer mouth shut."

Ken held onto the counter with one hand and rubbed his bruised jaw with the other. His first thought was to swing back; the other man was larger, but didn't look to be in great shape. Then he saw the way fellow's two friends had tensed up, fists clenched and eyes narrowed, and he understood he'd be fighting three against one.

"All right, I'm leaving. I – FUCK!"

Hot fire flashed through Ken's hand. He pulled his arm away from the counter. Millie's letter opener stuck straight through his palm. "Jesus Christ! What—"

Something hard hit him in the stomach, doubling him over. As he gasped for air, he saw a blue shape heading for his face. He tried to turn, but the knee caught him dead on, splitting his lip and knocking his nose to the side with a *crack* that seemed to echo in his head.

Ken collapsed to the floor, struggling to draw a breath past the blood pouring from his mouth and nose. A dusty steel-toed workbook came down on his elbow, and once more the sound of breaking bones filled the air. Someone grabbed his head and smashed it into the glass of the counter front. The same hands pulled him out and threw him against the wall. He tried to crawl for the door, but two pairs of legs, looking as wide as tree trunks in their faded denim, blocked his way.

"Hey, Mister," a voice said.

He looked back and saw Millie standing beside him, her foot raised in the air. Before he could say anything, her three-inch heel came down on

his back, all her considerable weight behind it.

When the plastic spike penetrated his kidney, Ken found the air to scream.

Cyrus Christian leaned back in his chair and inhaled deeply of the loathsome energies swirling through Hastings Mills. Like fertilizer on plants, they saturated people's darkest thoughts and allowed rage, jealousy, hatred, and fear to blossom into murder, rape, and violence.

Things are finally coming to fruition. The roots of Chaos had taken hold, and now they were sprouting infectious vines of black and red.

Time to take care of some unfinished business.

It hadn't been hard to locate the Anderson bitch and her cowering brother. Holed up in their house like mice behind a wall, hiding from the big, bad cat waiting on the other side. As he'd expected, Root had cast wards all around the house. As long as they didn't leave, the Andersons were safe. And neither Christian nor anything he might call from the Otherworlds could enter.

But there were ways around that problem.

The Reverend laughed. Sometimes the best solution was the easiest. He took out his grimoire and searched through the pages until he found the spell he needed.

Simple, but oh so effective.

* * *

Danni Anderson was pouring a glass of ice tea when something struck the house with a loud *bang,* causing her hand to jerk and sending ice tea across the counter.

"What was that?"

"I dunno." Mitch got up from the table and moved toward the front window.

"Wait!" Danni hurried after him, drying her hands on her shirt. "Remember what John said."

Mitch rolled his eyes. "He said don't open the doors or windows. As long as we stay inside, nothing can hurt us, right? So it can't hurt to look out the window."

"That's what John *said."* Danni trailed behind. "But what if he's wrong?"

"He.... Holy crap!"

Danni pushed Mitch aside and peeked between the curtains. At least ten people stood in front of the house, making piles of stones on the ground. "What are they doing?"

Her question was answered a moment later when one of the trespassers hefted a golf-ball sized rock and threw it at the house.

Bang!

"Assholes!" Danni went to the front door. "Who the hell do they think they are, coming here and–"

"Danni, no!" Mitch slapped her hand just as she was reaching for the doorknob. She turned, an angry retort on her lips, and then one hand flew to her mouth as she realized what she'd almost done.

"Shit. I got so pissed I forgot."

Mitch nodded. "I think that's the idea."

Danni's eyes narrowed. "Fine. We'll deal with them another way. I'll just call the police." She grabbed the phone.

"I wouldn't bother," Mitch said. "One of the guys out there is wearing a police uniform."

Danni put down the phone, a nervous expression on her face. "It doesn't matter. The phone's dead."

"They probably cut the lines. I hope they don't—" He stopped as the ceiling fans went off. In the kitchen, the refrigerator clicked a few times as its motor shut down.

"The power's out." Danni tried a light switch, turning it on and off several times before giving up.

"That's what I was afraid of. They're gonna try and sweat us out."

Danni looked at her brother, saw her nervousness reflected in his frown. "Don't worry, we'll get through this. Let's have some ice tea while there's still ice." She put her arm around his shoulder and guided him away from the window.

Another stone banged against the house, and they both twitched.

John, where the hell are you?

John Root stood at the bottom of his basement stairs and surveyed the destruction Christian had wrought. It was worse than he'd imagined. Entire shelves turned over. Broken bottles, jars, and flasks covering the floor, their contents congealing in multi-colored puddles on the cement. The air reeked from the combination of herbs, oils, and solutions.

As he stared at his ruined storage room, a sick, angry knot formed in John's stomach. *Over two hundred years of collected herbals and potions. The ingredients for every spell known to the Root family. Ruined.* Many of the items would be almost impossible to find again: talismans from other countries, ancient artifacts, waters from a dozen different healing springs.

Before he could begin gathering what he needed for his confrontation with Christian, he had to put the basement into some semblance of order, before everything was lost to cross-contamination or rot.

More time wasted, time he didn't have.

Time Danni and Mitch didn't have.

With a heavy sigh, John Root picked up his broom and started sweeping the broken glass into piles.

Chapter 27

The sudden cessation of noise startled Danni into complete wakefulness. For the past several hours, the crowd gathered outside her house had kept up a constant barrage of stones that clattered and bounced off the roof, walls, and windows like the world's worst hailstorm.

When bombardment ended, she ran to the nearest window to see what Christian's mind-zombies had in store for them next.

"What's wrong?" Mitch asked, rubbing his eyes. He'd drifted off earlier, just as the sun began its evening descent. They'd both been lying on the kitchen floor in an attempt to stay cool as the temperature in the house crept into the nineties.

"Something's going on outside. The people are leaving." It was true. They were walking away from the house and getting into their cars.

Mitch went to the back door. "Maybe they realized they couldn't scare us out?"

"Maybe," Danni said, but the idea didn't ring true. Hell, Christian's plan had almost worked, especially when stones started hitting the living room window. She and Mitch had both screamed, afraid that if the glass shattered, John's spell would be rendered useless. It had taken several frightening minutes for them to realize that the spell also prevented the glass from breaking.

However, even knowing they were safe hadn't kept the machine-gun-like noise from getting on their nerves. As the crowd outside grew from ten to twenty and then more—surrounding the house on all sides—the primitive assault had grown louder and more ferocious, a never-ending volley that made talking almost impossible and frayed their nerves to the breaking point.

So Danni doubted Christian would give up so easily; he had to know the effect of the attack on them.

Which means he has something worse in store.

As the silence stretched on, Danni went from window to window,

peering into the dusk-shadowed yard for any signs of movement.

Ten minutes after darkness claimed the property, the battery-operated motion lights over the front porch went on.

"Something's out there," she whispered to Mitch.

"Are the people back?"

Danni shook her head. "No. There's no cars. And I don't see – *SHIT!*" She stumbled back from the window.

A grotesque face pressed against the glass, leering at them with misshapen eyes and jagged teeth. A second cat-sized creature joined it, twin to the first and somehow even more hideous because of the green slime that dripped from its open mouth. Long, black claws scraped against the window with the sound of fingernails on a blackboard, sending painful shivers up Danni's spine.

Noises reached them from all parts of the house, wet thumps against windows, walls, and doors. Just when Danni thought it couldn't get any worse, a new sound started, a chorus of wailing and moaning as the demonic creatures howled their displeasure at being unable to breach John's wards.

A loud crash from the roof startled a gasp from Danni and made Mitch jump. More thuds and bumps came from overhead, and Danni pictured demons falling from the sky like the proverbial rain of cats and dogs.

"Back into the kitchen," Danni said, turning her back on a hideous, beagle-sized monster that was masturbating its three penises at her and laughing.

Mitch shook his head. "It's just as bad in there."

"I don't care. At least the windows are smaller. We can open the basement door; that'll cool the room off a little, too."

"Okay, kitchen it is." Mitch said, as he picked up the seat cushions from the couch.

"What are you doing?"

He glanced at her, his face pale in the dim light. "I'm gonna put them over the windows. At least we won't have to look at those...*things*, and they won't be able to see in, either."

"Good idea." Danni gathered some pillows in her arms. "And we can sit on these. More comfortable than the floor."

"Now you're thinking, sis." Mitch gave her a smile, and she returned it.

What an amazing kid. I don't know where his smarts came from, but I'm

glad he's got them. She thought about everything they'd been through over the past few weeks, marveling at his resiliency. *He's tougher than he looks, too, even if he doesn't know it yet.*

Once they had the pillows in place, Danni opened a drawer and took out some candles. "Let's have a little light, whattya say?"

Mitch shrugged. "Sure. And we should probably have something to eat, too."

Although way too nervous to have much of an appetite, Danni nodded. "Okay. What do you want?"

He gave her a sly grin. "With the power off, we should really eat the things that'll go bad first."

"Like the cold cuts?"

His smile grew wider. "Actually, I was thinking more like ice cream."

Danni laughed. "We wouldn't want that to go to waste, would we?"

"It is awful hot."

She shook her head. *Did I say smart? How about* too *smart?* "Get some spoons, little bro. Tonight we pig out."

She was reaching for the freezer door when the unexpected sound of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony burst into life, causing her to jump and Mitch to drop the spoons he'd been bringing to the table.

Even as she recognized the sound of her cell phone, Danni's heart still thumped fast and hard.

"Who is it?" Mitch asked.

Relief surged through Danni as she checked the caller ID on the screen.

"It's John."

* * *

John Root hung up the phone and then stood for a long moment, staring at the old-fashioned rotary phone on his kitchen wall. He hadn't expected Danni to react well to the news that he'd be delayed in getting back to them, but he'd been surprised by how upset she'd been.

Why should that surprise you, John? She and her brother are trapped in a house with no power, surrounded by demons. And you're surprised she's on the edge of hysterics?

All of that was true, but he sensed there was something more to her

sobbing tears than just fear, that Danni's distress was partly due to the fact that she cared for him, and not just as a friend. And while he didn't want to admit it, he harbored the same feelings for her, which made him feel even worse, because he couldn't allow anything to happen between them. Once he dealt with Cyrus Christian, he'd have to leave Hastings Mills. Probably forever. It wasn't his lot to enter into a relationship with someone from the ordinary world.

Danni's world.

Put it out of your mind. Focus on what you need to do.

Yes. First things first. Take a careful inventory of what was left in the basement. He'd cleaned the worst of the mess; now it was time to see if he had everything he needed to accomplish his task. Do what he came to do, then worry about the rest after.

Especially since there might not *be* an after, not if he failed in his task.

Can't think like that. His mother always used to say, "You have to think positive in order to achieve anything of value."

"Where's your mother now, John Root?"

John turned and looked around the kitchen, certain someone had spoken the words aloud. *No, it's just my subconscious again, playing Devil's advocate in Christian's voice.*

Unless.... Had his old enemy managed to get inside his head again? It shouldn't be possible. Not here, not in his own home. But he was tired; he hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours. Perhaps....

No. The wards are still intact around the house. I'm protected, just like Danni and Mitch are protected.

But for how long?

"Get your body in gear, John," he said to himself. This time it worked. He returned to the cellar and started going through the shelves, pen and paper in hand, organizing things in their proper order, gathering what he needed, and writing down what he didn't have.

It was going to be a long night.

Danni Anderson yawned and twisted her body back and forth, trying to work the kinks out. After a long, sleepless night spent on the kitchen floor, she felt sick and exhausted.

She looked down at Mitch, who still lay on the floor, his face buried in a pillow.

"You all right, little bro?"

Mitch opened his eyes and gave her a wan smile. "I guess. When do you think John's coming back?"

"I don't know, buckaroo," Danni said, unconsciously reverting to the nickname she'd had for him when he was a toddler. "I'm sure he'll call us when he's on the way. But at least we've got some good news."

"What?"

"Those...*things* are gone. Not a sign of them anywhere. They must hate the sun—"

BANG!

They both screamed at the sudden noise from the front of the house. "Stay here," Danni said, and ran to the living room.

Two cars sat in the front yard. Three men and an old woman were gathering stones. More cars were already pulling into the driveway.

"They're back, aren't they."

Danni nodded. "But remember. They can't hurt us. All they can do is make noise."

Bang! BANG!

Mitch twitched as each stone hit the house. Watching him, Danni knew there was no way either of them could make it through another day of the unending battering.

"Change of plans," she said, grabbing him by the shoulders and pushing him into the kitchen. "We're moving downstairs." He started to protest, but she kept talking over his objections. "We're taking everything we need down there with us. Blankets, chairs, food, water, candles, flashlights, you name it. Get it all together. Don't forget pillows. Bring books if you want them."

"What about when we have to go to the bathroom?"

"Well, obviously we'll come upstairs for that. But only then. We're going to stay down there until John comes home."

As Mitch ran upstairs to get more blankets, Danni paused in the middle of filling a plastic jug with water, surprised at her own choice of words.

When John comes home. Not when he comes back.

When he comes home.

Unwilling to analyze the emotions behind the words, afraid such an examination might bring bad luck, she focused on filling the jug.

John splashed water on his face in an attempt to clear his head. It had taken all night to work his way through his stock. Through fate or perhaps the hand of God, his list of missing items had ended up much smaller than he'd expected. Rosemary, which he'd already purchased at the local grocery store. It was the one other item, dirt from a family plot, which presented a problem.

Bright yellow sunlight streamed through the bathroom window. On any other day it would have filled him with a warm, comforting feeling; one of the reasons he loved the old house so much was that it got sunlight throughout the day, creating a happy, homey environment that made sad feelings almost impossible.

But today all it meant was delay. Cemetery dirt was only effective if collected after sunset, which necessitated a full day wasted while he waited.

Another day trapped in the house for Danni and Mitch.

How long could they take it? The heat, the supernatural attacks, being cut off from the world. How long before one of them cracked under the pressure and opened a window for a breath of fresh air?

What if Christian sent a cop to their door, or a delivery person? Would they have the strength not to answer?

With more than thirteen hours until sunset, John decided to put his time to good use. Gas up the car. Food and water for the ride, to cut down on stops. And then a few hours sleep.

As he packed the car, he added one more thing: a special talisman he'd made during the night, just for the ride to New York. If it worked, it would shield him from any police.

He intended to drive very fast.

The sun balanced on the edge of the horizon when John entered the cemetery. Three rows of headstones, six to a row, made up the whole plot. Four generations of Root men and women, as close in death as they'd been in life.

John opened a plastic bag and sat down between the graves of his mother and father. Less than fifteen feet away lay his wife and son, but although more than seventy years had passed since their deaths, he still couldn't bring himself to touch their graves.

When will the pain go away? He'd accepted his mother's passing; it still angered him, and sometimes brought tears to his eyes, but it didn't conjure the emotional turmoil brought on by thinking about Clara and Jack.

Was it because his mother had given her life trying to rid the world of evil, instead of simply being an innocent victim of it?

"Such gloomy thoughts, John. This isn't like you."

Mother?

"Of course. I know why you're here, son, and I won't keep you. You've got work to do, and not much time to do it. The Amaguq grows stronger every day."

I know. And I'm not sure I can defeat him.

"Believe in yourself, John. You hold great strength inside you. You just have to use it correctly. Remember, the greatest carpenter in the world cannot build a table without the proper tools."

I have the tools. Or, at least, I will once I leave here.

"Yes." He felt her nod inside his head. *"But do you know which ones to use?"*

"What?" It wasn't the response he'd expected.

"Look inside your heart, my love," a new voice said.

John's heart stuttered and jumped. *Clara?* Tears ran down John's cheeks at the sound of his wife's voice.

"We're all here, John. Watching you, praying for you."

Clara, I...I miss you so much. It's been so long....

"I miss you, too. We all do. But do not grieve for us. Things are not the same for the dead. We...we have each other, and we have the comfort of knowing we'll be reunited one day with those we left behind. For the living, death is a dark mystery filled with fear. For us, it is simply a...another place. A temporary separation. Remember that, my love. Someday, when your work in your world is done, your family will be waiting for you."

I love you, Clara.

"And we will always love you. But do not let that stop you from finding happiness in your world. Without it, you're not as strong as you could be. Love is your greatest power, John. Accept it. Give it. And use it."

I don't understand.

"You will, son," his mother said. *"But we cannot talk any longer. Take what you need and be on your way. When you have defeated our enemy, come to us and we will speak again."*

Wait—

A sound like a door closing reverberated in John's mind. He called out to his family, but no one answered.

Goodbye, then.

He opened his eyes, unaware he'd closed them. Cold tears dampened his face. In the dark of full night, the cemetery was unnaturally

still, as if the spirits of his family had ordered the birds and insects to cease speaking as well.

Perhaps they did. Who knew what kind of power the dead had? He glanced at his watch, saw he'd been sitting in the graveyard for over an hour.

Time for me to be on my way.

He scooped several handfuls of dirt from his mother's grave, sealed the bag, and dropped it in his jacket pocket. If all went well, he could be back in Hastings Mills by lunchtime the next day.

When he got into the Mustang, he took a deep breath. For the first time since he'd left Danni and Mitch, he felt his resolve returning, and with it his confidence.

"Thank you," he whispered to his family.

As he pulled away, he felt them smiling.

Chapter 28

John Root pressed himself against the wall of the gas station, trying to avoid the rain that had gradually grown from a drizzle to a full-blown downpour over the past thirty miles. He'd made several attempts to get through to Danni, but the house phone was still out of service and no one was answering her cell.

Not a good sign. I really need to—

A man appeared, his clothes the same gray as the rain. "Don't bother," the man said, nodding his head toward the pay phone.

"Is there something wrong with the service?" John asked. He shivered, but not because of his wet clothes. Behind the stranger, the pumps were empty except for John's car.

"The service?" The man laughed. "Ain't no service in Hell, John. You should know that."

Before John could respond, the stranger melted away, his clothes and body flowing into oily gray puddles that blended into the water already pooling in the parking lot.

"That'll be forty-three even."

John jumped at the voice behind him, but it was only the gas station attendant looking at him, an odd expression on his face. John realized he'd been staring at the ground, his mind numb from watching Christian's apparition dissolve.

"Sure," he told the attendant, and followed him inside. After he paid for the gas, he wandered through the mini-mart, picking up candy bars, pouring a cup of hot coffee, drinking it, and pouring another. He told himself he was just taking time to dry off and warm up before continuing his trip north. But deep inside, he knew the real reason for delaying getting back into the car.

He was terrified.

What if he sends a phantom truck at me? Or puts a herd of deer in the road? That's all it would take to make him swerve into oncoming traffic, or

over the side of an embankment. Christian had the power, even at this distance, to create any illusion he wanted.

And I've got nothing but hastily-made charms and potions.

That's more than Danni and Mitch have.

John gritted his teeth, ashamed he'd been worrying about his own skin while two people he cared about were in danger.

"You can't leave them alone. Christian will find a way through your spell, given enough time. You can't let that happen."

I could die.

"There's worse things than dying to save the people you love."

He imagined his mother frowning her disapproval at him. Better to die trying than to let people get hurt or killed because of his indecision.

John tossed his cup in the trash and headed out to the car.

* * *

Danni woke just as pre-dawn light transformed from black to gray. Not for the first time, she wondered why people bothered to put in basement windows that were so small you couldn't fit anything larger than a shoebox through them. They didn't provide enough light to see by, and they certainly weren't decorative.

The damn things don't even open.

Holding back a groan as she rose from her makeshift bed of blankets over cement, she prepared to slip past the still-sleeping Mitch and head upstairs to the bathroom.

A sudden change in the light stopped her in her tracks.

Something's outside the window.

Any other day, she'd have assumed it was just a neighborhood cat or dog strolling by. But these weren't normal times; anything could be lurking outside the house. Ducking quickly to one side so she was out of view from the window, Danni counted to ten and then peeked up at the small square of glass.

Two distinctly un-human feet were just visible in the dim light. She wasn't even sure if she should call them feet. They looked more like the paws of the monsters in the werewolf movies Mitch loved to watch. Long and hairy, with equally oversized toes that ended in curved, black nails like a hawk's talons.

She wanted to believe it was only a dream. Werewolves didn't exist.

And hellhounds don't attack little boys. And preachers don't cast evil

spells on people. This ain't no dream, Danni!

Her feeling of disconnect from the real world grew worse when one of the feet started tapping on the ground, the way an impatient person will do while waiting in line at the grocery store. She pictured the werewolf standing there with its arms crossed, biding its time until she or Mitch was foolish enough to go out.

She was still trying to decide what to do when the feet disappeared, only to be replaced by something far worse.

A face straight out of Hell.

As horrible as it was to look at, she couldn't pull her gaze away from the terrible visage staring in. It was repulsively fascinating. Fat, quivering pustules poked through the short brown fur of the thing's cheeks and forehead, each one threatening to burst open and splatter poisonous fluids on the glass. Its teeth were a random assortment of horrors, as if it had pulled tusks and fangs and molars from different animals and shoved them haphazardly into its oversized mouth. A piggish snout sniffed the air, nostrils opening and closing with each breath.

The eyes were the worst. Dark, round, and perfectly human, the twin orbs radiated intelligence and a calculated cunning that assured Danni the thing knew exactly what the situation was in the basement.

Danni didn't have time to contemplate the irony of wishing the creature had only been a werewolf. The reality was so much worse that all she could think about was finding a place to hide herself and Mitch until John showed up.

Except there was no place left to go.

As if it could read her thoughts, the demon turned its head in her direction, even though she knew it couldn't see her, and gave her a big, toothy smile. Then it rose up out of sight.

Danni counted to twenty. When neither feet nor face reappeared, she hurried to Mitch's side and woke him up.

"Get up, little brother. Now."

"Huh?" Mitch rubbed scrawny fists against his eyes and fumbled for his glasses. "What's going on?"

"I don't know. Something's outside, though. I think we better get ready in case it tries to break in."

"Ready, how?" Mitch's eyes, already magnified behind his lenses, went even wider as Danni's words finally cut through his sleep-fuzzy thoughts.

"Find something to use as a weapon. Anything. And stay away

from the windows," Danni added.

"I have to pee."

"So do I. Try not to think about it." *Easier said than done,* she thought. She crossed her legs and concentrated on a mental image of John. *Please be close. I can't take much more of this.*

A wave of water splashed across the windshield with a sound like someone pounding on a bass drum. John's hand twitched on the steering wheel, sending the car dangerously close to the edge of the road. He over-corrected and swerved toward the double yellow lines separating him from the oncoming traffic, the car threatening to hydroplane on the flooded surface. By the time he got the Mustang centered and in control again, his heart was beating in time to the windshield wipers, their rapid *thump-thump-thumps* indistinguishable from each other.

A glance at the speedometer showed he was doing seventy-eight, much faster than prudent considering the drenching rains that had followed him up the coast.

John's eyes felt like someone had rubbed salty beach sand into them, leaving them dry and crusty. He desperately wanted to rub them but he was afraid to take his hands off the steering wheel. Too many times over the past ten hours he'd seen visions of things in the road. Phantasmagorical creatures terrifying for their lifelike details. Each time he'd gritted his teeth and kept the Mustang on course, relying on the fervent hope that no person or animal would be foolish enough to be crossing the highway in such a terrible storm.

So far he'd guessed right each time, as the car sailed through the gray-colored images without so much as a bump. But there was always the chance....

Another shape rose appeared ahead, this time much larger. A car, half on the road and half off, its rear end in the muddy river that used to be a culvert outlet. John fought the temptation to jerk the wheel to the left, where just then a tractor trailer was approaching, its headlights giant white orbs streaking through the semi-darkness of the early morning.

The stranded car loomed larger. If it was real....

It can't be. It's just another trick. God help me, please let it not be real.

But what if it was? He'd only have two options. The first, barrel into the car at better than seventy-five miles per hour, one multi-ton behemoth impacting another. He hoped his death would be instantaneous. Otherwise

he'd be half-alive when the inevitable explosion incinerated him.

The second choice was no better. Cut the wheel to the left and plow into the coming truck, which would be like ramming a locomotive engine. Different scenario, same result.

He had to make a choice.

What if it's the car that's real and the truck that's the illusion?

Gripping the wheel tighter, John closed his eyes and counted to five, praying he'd get past three.

One. Two. Three....

He opened his eyes, unable to stand not knowing.

Clear highway ahead of him. The big rig thundered past on his left, solid as a mountain.

Nice try, Christian, he thought through his relief. *But I'm still here, and I'm coming for you.*

Five miles later the rain stopped and the early morning sun broke through the clouds, as if he'd crossed over some kind of dividing line. The sudden brightness, almost as dangerous as the rain, made him squint, and his foot eased up on the gas for a moment. Then it pressed back down.

This time, John let the speed climb to eighty.

Hold on, Danni. I'll be there in an hour.

Two miles from the Hastings Mills exit, John slowed the car to the posted legal limit. Although all he wanted to do was get to Danni and Mitch as fast as possible, he couldn't take the chance of getting dragged back to the town jail. Even if Showalter and his officers weren't presently under Christian's spell, the man was likely as not to pull John over out of spite or sheer cussedness.

The moment John passed the town line, he felt a change. The pleasantly warm summer air turned oppressively hot and humid, and almost immediately he found himself laboring to breathe.

An agonizingly slow ride through the northern part of town showed Christian's presence was as strong—perhaps even stronger—than before. All the lawns were brown and dead. Several houses had broken windows. The streets and playgrounds sat empty, save for one small boy kneeling in a basketball court, methodically burning patches of fur off a kitten.

Each passing minute increased John's anxiety. Were they still safe? Had his wards held? What kind of dangers would he have to fight his way

through to get inside?

So it was a huge relief when he pulled into the driveway and found the lawn empty. No angry mob waiting to stone him. No hellhounds or strange creatures prowling the perimeter.

Wary of a trap, John parked as close to the house as he could and slowly exited the car, a bottle of thrice-blessed Holy Water in one hand and a handful of powdered John-the-Conqueror root in the other.

Approaching the front door, he felt a tingle against his skin that let him know his wards were still there.

"Danni? Mitch?" No one answered him. Stones and rocks of all sizes littered the porch, but although the siding was dented and chipped, none of the windows were broken. He looked through the living room window. Everything appeared normal. He called out again. Still no reply.

John's nervousness returned. If nothing had gotten inside, why weren't they answering? Could Christian have found a way around the protective spell?

The basement! He chided himself for not thinking of it before. It was a logical place to hide while Christian's followers attacked the house. If they were down there, they probably couldn't hear him. Which created a new problem. How was he supposed to get into the house if all the doors and windows were locked?

John considered his options. He could keep calling for Danni and Mitch and hope they heard him. Or, he could simply break in.

The first choice made more sense. But John's nerves were on edge from not knowing if Danni and Mitch were safe.

It's more than that, too. Something's still not right here. Like there's a bomb close by and time's running out.

It was the sense of urgency to get his friends to safety that made up John's mind. He said the words to cancel his wards and then, with a silent prayer he was doing the right thing, he picked up a rock, smashed it through the small window next to the front door, and opened the door.

"Danni? Mitch?"

Chapter 29

John was halfway across the living room when the chimera burst through the door behind him, three hundred pounds of human, pig, bear, and wolf rolled into a single deadly creature. Moving faster than anything so large had a right to, it attacked with a roar that rattled the walls.

John avoided the creature's claws but not a bruising knee that struck him in the ribs. He threw the open bottle of Holy Water at the demon, which bellowed in pain as the liquid burned tiny holes in its skin. John got to his knees and drew his long-barreled Colt .45, loaded with silver bullets blessed by a priest. But the chimera recovered more quickly than he'd expected and charged again just as John pulled the trigger. The shot went wide, and then he found himself buried under the massive beast, fighting to breathe and struggling to keep the thing's claws from his throat.

The chimera raised one arm for a killing blow. John jammed the gun against the creature's chest, knowing he'd have time for only one more shot.

With a silent prayer, he pulled the trigger.

Danni and Mitch gasped at the sound of glass breaking upstairs.

"Danni? Mitch?"

"It's John!" Mitch shouted.

"Mitch, wait!"

Before Danni could stop him, he ran toward the basement stairs. Danni followed, calling a warning to John that was drowned out by a terrible roar that shook the house. A moment later, John cried out in pain and they heard the *thud* of bodies hitting the floor. Danni grabbed Mitch's hand just as he was about to open the basement door.

"Don't! You don't know what's out there."

"We have to help John."

More sounds of struggle reached them through the door.

Something heavy fell over. "We can't—"

Wood exploded over their heads and a fist-sized hole appeared in the door above them, simultaneous with the blast of a gun going off.

"Get down!" Danni grabbed Mitch and pulled him back.

In the living room, something heavy hit the floor. A second shot sounded, and the unseen beast roared again. Then everything went silent.

Danni held her breath and tried to hear over her pulse pounding in her ears. Nothing. Then....

The floorboards creaking over their heads as someone—or *something*—entered the kitchen. The basement door slowly opened. A whimper escaped Mitch's throat and he clutched Danni's arm.

A figure appeared in the doorway.

"Danni?"

"John!" Mitch pounded up the stairs. "You're back!"

"Are you two all right?" John asked, hugging Mitch with one arm. In his other hand, he held a large pistol.

"Yes." Danni wrapped her arms around both of them. "I tried to warn you about that... thing. We saw it outside. But..."

"Don't worry, it's dead." John stepped back, pulling them into the kitchen. "But we need to leave before Christian springs any other surprises on us."

"Where will we go?" Danni reluctantly let go of John so he could keep his gun hand free.

"It doesn't matter. Anywhere. Two or three towns from here should be fine. We'll get you settled in a hotel, and then I'll come back and finish things here."

"I've already got overnight bags packed."

"Good." John steered them away from the living room. "Take the gun and stay here. I'll go get them."

Five minutes later, John was backing the car down the driveway. A flash of anger ran through Danni as she watched her house receding. *Damn Cyrus Christian, whatever he is, for doing this to us. Making us abandon our home. No matter what it takes, I want to see him dead.*

"I know what you're feeling."

Danni looked over at John. His face held no expression, but something in his eyes told her he really did know.

"How?"

A slight twitch of his lips gave away the effort it was taking to keep his face impassive. "He did the same thing to me. Twice, now. Made me

feel unwelcome in my own home. Made me feel... violated, the way people do when they've been robbed. A person's home is supposed to be a sanctuary. What he does... it's like what armies do when they come through a town or village and force everyone to flee."

Danni nodded. He'd put her feelings into words perfectly. "I hate him."

"So do I," Mitch said from the backseat.

"You're supposed to. That's his purpose in our world, to fuel hate and anger and fear and loathing. It's all he knows how to do; it's all he *can* do."

"But why?" Mitch asked. "Why does something like him even exist?"

John shrugged. "People have wondered about evil since... well, since forever. The Bible tells one story. Native Americans have others. Every culture has tales of how Evil came into our world. I don't have an answer. I only know that the great powers in our universe are just like people. Some are very good, some are very bad. Most are in between. Darkness and light, with gray in the middle."

"That sucks."

Danni found herself laughing out loud, and even John managed a lopsided smile.

"Yes, it does, Mitch," John said. "But there's nothing you can do about it except try to be more good than bad, and hope you never encounter true Evil."

"Too late for that." Danni felt her anger returning.

John's sudden intake of breath brought her attention back to the road. She immediately saw the reason for his surprise, and why he was already bringing the car to a stop.

A quarter mile ahead, a police car blocked the entrance to the highway. They already had a car stopped, and two officers were talking to the driver. They were too far away for Danni to see their expressions, but something in their body language told her they weren't in pleasant moods.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I'm not sure." John's eyes narrowed as he watched. "It could be something routine, or it could be...." John's voice trailed off as the two officers pulled their guns and aimed them into the car they'd stopped. A moment later, the *bang-bang* sound of shots fired reached them.

"Oh, my God," Danni whispered. She blinked several times, trying to process the fact that she'd just seen the local police, probably men she

knew and waved to every day, execute someone in cold blood.

"Damn." John hit the gas and spun the wheel, turning the car in a sharp U-turn and heading back the way they'd come.

"Where are you going?" It struck Danni that she'd never heard John curse before.

"We need to get to the other side of town. Fast. Hopefully this was just an isolated incident. Otherwise our time, and the town's, is running out faster than I thought."

Danni asked him what he meant, but he just shook his head and concentrated on driving, taking the back roads rather than Main Street to the south end of Hastings Mills. Near the edge of town, he turned onto an older road that brought them past several farms before winding up a hill. At the top, John pulled over and got out.

"Where are you going?" Danni hurried to join him.

"Look."

From their vantage point, Danni was able see the whole south edge of Hastings Mills spread out before them, including the four corners where Main Street turned into Rural Route 17S and eventually meandered its way to Allenville.

At the intersection, several cars and trucks blocked the road. Men with guns stood by them, looking in all directions.

"What's going on?"

"It's Christian," John said. "He's making sure no one leaves town. He's sealed us off."

"He can't do that! Sooner or later people will talk. Other police will show up."

John shook his head. "He only has to isolate the town for a few days. With Chief Showalter's help, they can come up with some excuse, a chemical spill maybe, to keep people from entering. As for people trying to leave...we've already seen how they'll handle that."

"So we're trapped."

"Yes. But things aren't as hopeless as they seem."

"They couldn't be." Danni took a deep breath. "Sorry. Why not?"

"It means Christian is getting ready to finish things here. It's possible he'll be so busy with whatever he's planning that he won't bother coming after us. After all, he knows we can't leave."

"It's *possible*? That's not very reassuring."

"Nothing's a hundred percent sure." John headed back to the car. "All I can do is prepare us for whatever he might have in store and hope I

can stop him before he brings the whole town to the ground."

* * *

Billy Ray Capshaw's fingers couldn't stop sneaking down into his front pocket and touching the roll of money pressing against his leg with every step. The temptation to just keep walking, past the business district and right out of town, was almost too tempting. The only thing that stopped him was knowing the money he'd collected wasn't good for much more than a bus ticket and a couple of nights in a motel.

Nothing compared to what I can grab after the fair, he kept telling himself.

And then there was that awful feeling he had, that if he took off and didn't get far enough away, Cyrus Christian would find him somehow, and it wouldn't be a very pleasant meeting. No, he needed the more money, if only to put a safe distance between himself and... *whatever the hell Christian is.*

Billy Ray cursed at his thoughts. He tried not to let ideas like that enter his head. He hated sounding crazy to himself, but in the back of his mind was the unnerving suspicion that sometimes Christian could tell what he was thinking.

And if he finds out what's really *in my head....*

Not for the first time, he wished he'd listened to Chief Showalter when the man had told him to get out of town. Now he was stuck in a crazy, fucked-up world where even the goddamn weather didn't act right, and the people were worse.

He'd seen it all day long, as he trudged from one business to the next, exchanging the sweltering heat outside for the frigid stares and barely-controlled violence of the people inside. Every encounter was a repeat of the last. He'd go in and get the cold shoulder from people who looked like they'd be just as happy chopping him to pieces as selling him something off their shelves. Only when they found out he was on business for Cyrus Christian, selling booth spaces and rolls of tickets for the fair, did their attitudes change, become deferential.

Each time, he wondered if there'd be a time when Christian's name wasn't enough to keep someone's temper from exploding. That the next store he entered would be his last, and he'd leave in a body bag, a hole in his head or a screwdriver in his chest. More than once he'd seen someone's hand slip below the counter, only to rise up, empty, as soon as Billy Ray

mentioned Christian's name. He wasn't stupid. He knew plenty of shopkeepers kept a gun or bat hidden under the counter.

And each time he escaped intact, exchanging the stink of sweat and violence for tropical air and the waves of heat rising from sidewalks so scorching you felt it right through your shoes, he fingered the growing roll of money and felt the temptation to get the Hell out of Dodge grow stronger.

Wiping sweat from his forehead and wishing he could stop for a beer, Billy Ray opened the door to Wilhelm's Washers and Dryers and prayed he'd leave in one piece.

"The Old Ones require sacrifices, Billy." Reverend Christian smiled, only this time he had the face of a coyote and eyes as red as lava. "Blood sacrifices. Soon your time will come, along with everyone else in Hastings Mills." Coyote-Christian laughed and howled at the same time.

"Soon, Billy. Soon your time will come."

Billy Ray cried out as he rolled over and fell to the floor.

"Just a fuckin' dream," he whispered, as he waited for his heart to stop pounding. Clammy sweat covered his body, and the urge to piss was so bad he wasn't sure he could make it upstairs to the bathroom, so he ran out the basement entrance dressed in just his old boxers and let loose into one of the rose bushes lining the back of the church. Sweet relief filled him, helping to dull the terror of his nightmare.

When he'd finished, he flicked his cock to free up any loose droplets and then glanced at his watch.

Eleven-fifteen? Jesus. After dropping off the money in Christian's office, he'd taken a long cold shower and gone to bed, intending to take a quick catnap before getting dinner.

Christ almighty, I could use a few beers right now. More than that, though, he craved human company, even if meant just sitting by himself and listening to other people around him having normal conversations.

Back in his room, he pulled on a clean tee and a well-worn pair of jeans. It was still beastly hot outside—*like livin' in fucking Africa*—but he'd always been of the opinion real men only wore shorts to the beach.

The money in the closet called out to him, same as it always did, but he averted his eyes and passed by, doing his best to not even think about it. Then he was outside and choking on the thick, steamy air, trying to clear the last of the dream from his head before he headed down Main

Street.

The significance of the dream wasn't lost on Billy Ray. He might not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, God knew he'd proven *that* more than once, but his mother hadn't raised no idiot, either. That dream had been his brain telling him that if he wanted to get out of Hastings Mills alive, he'd better be ready to grab all the cash he could and get the fuck out of town before Christian put his plan into action. Billy Ray had no idea what that plan was, but it was a pretty safe bet a lot of people were gonna end up dead from it.

He won't do anything before the fair. That seemed pretty certain. So best to stick to his own scheme and take off the night of the fair, when the church would be empty.

A neon Pabst Blue Ribbon sign blinked unsteadily up ahead, and Billy Ray decided it would be as good a place as any to quench his thirst, and hopefully get something solid in his stomach as well. Anything would do; hell, he was so hungry he'd be willing to eat a few of the ancient pickled eggs the old-timers seemed so in love with.

The inside of The Cellar was exactly what Billy Ray expected. A dimly-lit room stinking of old beer, cigarette smoke, and sweat, all underlain with the odors of piss, urinal cakes, and beer farts. The tables and booths were empty; five or six old men, all dressed in well-worn denim shirts and jeans or green Dickies work clothes, sat at the bar, conversing in low tones. No jukebox livened the quiet with raucous country or rock-and-roll. Instead, a small television mounted on the wall behind the bar played CNN with the sound off.

Billy Ray took a seat at the end of the bar furthest from the geezers. Experience had taught him that his long-haired look wouldn't win him any favors from their kind, and he didn't have the money to placate them with a free round, so no sense antagonizing them by through proximity.

The bartender, a tall fellow with a gray crew cut and a belly that threatened to clear the shelves whenever he turned, slowly approached Billy Ray.

"Bottle of Pabst," Billy Ray said, his eyes more on the television than the man in front of him. He was still watching the talking heads mutely summarizing the day's news when a bottle slammed down on the bar, spraying foam across Billy Ray's arm.

"Hey! What's the—" He stopped cold at the angry look on the bartender's face.

"That'll be four-fifty. Drink up and get the fuck out."

Billy Ray slowly took a five dollar bill from his pocket and laid it on the bar, his eyes never leaving the bartender. "What's your problem?"

"You, asshole," one of the old men said, and the others laughed. It wasn't a pleasant sound.

"Look, I just wanna have a beer or two. I'm not here to bother anyone. I'm from the church," Billy Ray added, thinking that might smooth things over.

"We know who the fuck you are." The bartender pointed a sausage finger at him. "That's the only reason you ain't on the floor eatin' glass. Now drink your beer and go, or tomorrow you'll be sellin' tickets from a wheelchair."

This time the old men didn't laugh, just nodded their heads in angry agreement.

No, it was more than just anger, Billy Ray thought as he chugged his beer. They looked furious, as if they'd just caught him stealing their wallets or fucking their wives.

They looked ready to kill.

Billy Ray finished his beer just as the bartender slapped two quarters onto the bar.

"Keep it, asshole," he told the man. He wondered if it was his own temper getting the best of him, or if he was starting to fall under whatever spell held the rest of the town. Either way, he recognized the danger of starting trouble when outnumbered six to one, so he turned and headed for the door before his mouth could say anything else stupid.

As his hand closed on the knob, a sharp sting, followed instantly by another, blossomed on his back. He kept his gaze straight ahead while the two quarters fell to the floor with a metallic clink.

Even after the door closed behind him, the raucous laughter from inside the bar still reached his ears.

"I hope you choke on your pickled eggs, you inbred motherfuckers." Billy Ray flipped his middle finger at the bar, what Tony Lopez would have called a pussy move, since no one could see it, but it made him feel a tiny bit better just the same.

All the way home, anger, fear, and frustration churned inside him, creating a pounding in his head that beat in time to his footsteps. Billy Ray found his hand was shaking as he went to open the church's front door, intending to see if there was anything in the kitchen to drink. *Damn him! Damn all of them! I can't wait to get my ass somewhere normal.*

So great was his distraction that he was three steps into the church

before he noticed the changes.

Cyrus Christian sat on the red felt-covered steps leading to the altar. A pile of broken plaster surrounded him, and the giant crucifix that had hung behind the pulpit since Billy Ray was a child lay on the floor. All the smaller crosses were gone. Billy Ray glanced around. Nothing religious remained on any of the walls.

"Tough night in town, Billy?" Christian's voice echoed across the church. Before Billy Ray could respond, the Reverend continued. "Best not to go out after dark anymore. Hastings Mills is a dangerous place right now."

Billy Ray headed for the basement entrance, no longer interested in anything but getting as far from Christian as possible. His previous anger and frustration were gone, leaving only the fear.

"I'll keep that in mind."

"You do that, Billy. I'd hate to lose you before your work is done." Christian's laughter followed Billy Ray to the back of the church and down the basement stairs, only fading away when Billy Ray lay down in bed.

He was still wide awake when the morning sun rose.

* * *

"So, what's your plan for stopping Christian?"

John looked up from the book he'd brought back from his house as Danni entered the living room. It contained all his family's spells and magical recipes. "Basically, I need to separate him from his magic, either by blocking him from it or removing his ability to use it."

Danni handed him a glass of lukewarm lemonade and sat down across from him with her own glass. With nowhere else to go, they'd returned to Anderson's house, where John had rigged another warding spell around the entire property.

"And you'll do that how?"

John took a long drink and then held the cool glass against his forehead. With the power still out, the air was stifling, even with the windows open. Not a breath of a breeze stirred the curtains, and nightfall hadn't brought any relief from the heat.

"That's what I'm trying to work out. The problem is, no matter what spell I use, I need something that's going to be hard to get."

"What? Maybe I know someplace in town."

"Something that belongs to Christian."

Danni slammed her glass down so hard lemonade splashed out. "Oh, that's just great."

From up in his room, Mitch yelled down to them, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, kiddo. I just dropped something." In a softer voice, she said to John, "And how the hell do you propose we accomplish that feat? Ask him if we can borrow his watch? Or maybe I can distract him and you can pick his pocket, all without us getting killed?"

"I said it would be hard."

"Hard? I'd say impossible. The fair is in one week. That doesn't give us much time."

"There's less time than you think." John tapped the book. "These spells take a couple of days to prepare, so I'd say we have about three days."

"For what?"

John turned and found Mitch standing at the bottom of the stairs, wearing only a bathing suit.

"A miracle," Danni said.

"Actually, Mitch might be our best hope." John braced himself for Danni's reaction. It wasn't long in coming.

"Our best…. Oh, no. There's no way I'm letting my brother get involved in this any more than he already has. We'll figure something out, you and I. But leave Mitch out of it."

"Leave me out of what?"

"We have to steal something from Christian." John stared at Danni as he said it.

"*We* don't have to do anything. I told you. I'll help you. Mitch stays here where it's safe."

"I wanna help."

"And I want this all to be a bad freakin' dream. Wanting something doesn't make it happen. I'm not letting you anywhere near that psychopath."

"Danni—"

"Don't Danni me, John. I'm responsible for him, dammit. I know what's at stake here. If your spell doesn't work, a lot of people are gonna die, right?" She continued on before he could answer. "But not everyone. There's a good chance I can keep Mitch alive, especially if he stays here, where he's already protected by that magic circle of yours. So why should I let him do something that pretty much guarantees his death?"

John sighed. Danni thought she had a grasp of what would happen if Christian succeeded in his plan. But she had no idea... He took her hands, ignoring the tingle that went through his flesh and hoping he could convey the seriousness of the situation to her.

"What Christian intends to do... you're right, a lot of people will die, but they'll be the lucky ones. It's the ones who survive who'll suffer the most. Creatures will hunt them down, force them to endure horrible things. And the town... well, let's just say I've seen what he leaves behind."

"What?" Mitch asked in a hushed voice.

"Most of the buildings destroyed. Most of the people gone. The few who were left, they were hiding inside burnt-out houses and stores, half-crazy and living like wild animals."

There was silence after John finished speaking. Danni slowly pulled her hands from his and clenched them into fists in her lap. Mitch looked back and forth between them, looking like a deer caught between the headlights of two oncoming cars.

John cleared his throat.

"Don't say a word." Danni stood up, her lower lip quivering, tears threatening to cascade over her lower eyelids. She ran out of the room. Mitch stood up to follow her, but John put a hand on his arm.

"Let her go. She needs to work this out by herself."

"But I wanna help. I can talk to her, convince her..."

"This is something she has to decide on her own, Mitch. You're too young to understand, but someday you'll have a family, and hopefully you won't ever be in a position where you have to make a decision that puts someone you love in danger."

"Have you had to make that kind of choice?"

Images flashed in John's head. *Too many times.* "Yes, I've had to make some very hard choices in my life. And I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Sometimes... sometimes life isn't fair."

"This is one of those times. Just like Christian choosing our town." Mitch spat the words out, his eyes blazing with anger.

"That's right. Your sister knows all this. Now she has to accept it and move past." John stood up. "Tell you what. While we wait, let's figure out what to make for dinner."

John was scooping elbow macaroni onto Mitch's plate when Danni came into the kitchen. "Something smells good," she said, giving them a

half-hearted attempt at a smile. Her red, swollen eyes told the true story of how she felt.

"It was either elbows and jar sauce or baked beans and tuna fish." John waved the ladle toward an empty chair. "Get a plate and sit down before Mitch eats it all."

"John...."

"Not now." He spooned macaroni onto her plate. "We'll talk after dinner. There's bread, too, but no butter."

Danni shook her head. "No, let's get it over with. Otherwise dinner will be nothing but awkward silence."

John sat down. "Whatever you decide, I'll abide by it."

"I know." This time her smile was both sad and grateful. "That's one of the things I lo... like about you. But you're right. We have to do whatever it takes to stop Christian." John started to speak, and Danni raised her hand in a stopping motion. "However," she said, her voice harder, "that doesn't mean I want Mitch doing anything too dangerous. Maybe he can, you know, be a lookout or something?"

"Actually, that's the role I had in mind for us. Have you ever heard the military expression 'divide and conquer'?"

Danni and Mitch both nodded.

"What I propose is that you and I create distractions to get Christian and that unsavory handyman of his out of the church for a while. That will give Mitch time to sneak in and take something of Christian's. Anything will do. A pen, a sock, even some hair from a brush. As soon as he's out and safe, we'll meet and return here."

An excited look came over Danni's face. "I think I have a better idea. Hang on a sec." Before anyone could speak, she left the table. A moment later, John heard footsteps on the stairs.

"What's going on?" Mitch asked.

John shrugged, wondering the same thing.

They didn't have to wait long. Danni came right back, a large folder in her hands. "I was pretty sure I still had this," she said, placing it on the table. "It's the volunteer package we all got when we signed up to help with the church's events."

"This will help us?"

She pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to John. "A schedule for the whole month. Look. Christian's got a meeting tomorrow with the school administrators and business council. And Billy will probably be collecting money or setting things up at the park."

"Excellent!" John smiled. "You and I can watch Christian and Billy, and Mitch will have plenty of time to get in and out of the church."

"What if someone comes back early?" The nervous look was back on Danni's face. "I've got the only cell phone."

"Leave that to me," Mitch said. "I'll get my old walkie-talkies from my closet."

"Those things still work?" Danni's eyebrows rose in disbelief.

"As long as we have batteries," Mitch said. "I'll go check."

Alone with Danni, John suddenly felt uncomfortable, as if something in the room had changed. *Or something between* us, he thought, noticing the strange way she was staring at him.

"Something's on your mind." He made it a statement rather than a question.

She placed her hand over his. Although he had a strong suspicion of what she was about to say, and he dreaded hearing it and what he'd have to tell her in return, he didn't stop her.

"John, if... if something happens to me tomorrow, or even after tomorrow, if you can't stop Christian, I want you to take Mitch and get the hell away from here."

John's prepared speech faded away. She wanted him to take care of Mitch? He'd thought... *well, it's better this way. The two of us could never...* "Danni, nothing's going to happen."

She gripped his hand tighter. "You keep saying that, but you don't know for sure. We don't have any real family left, at least not anyone I'd trust to raise my brother. He looks up to you. And I know you'd be good for him. It's not like it would be forever; just until he's eighteen and can take care of himself. Promise me."

He wanted to refuse. After Clara and Jack, the only time he thought about family was when he cried at night thinking about what could have been.

"I promise." The words scared him, because he couldn't imagine a world without Danni in it.

"Thank you." Her smile sent a rush of warmth through him, and he knew that, win or lose, he couldn't stay in Hastings Mills a day longer than he had to. The temptation to give in to his feelings was getting too strong. He pulled his hand away.

"I've got to go to my room and... prepare for tomorrow. Goodnight."

He hated the quizzical, slightly hurt look in her eyes as he hurried

away. She'd spend the rest of the night wondering what she did to offend him. But better a tiny hurt now than a much bigger one later.

However, it was one thing to hide his feelings from Danni, and another to keep them from his own mind. Long after he'd gotten into bed, John lay staring at the ceiling and wondering why Fate continued to play her cruel tricks on him.

Chapter 30

Deputy Carl Rothstein slammed down the phone, which immediately started ringing again. "What the fuck's going on tonight? We've got another jumper at the Five Mile Bridge. Three bridges in this town, and people jumping off every goddamn one of them at the same time. Who should I send out there?"

Chief Harry Showalter leaned back in his chair, a toothpick jutting from between his lips, and put his feet up on his desk. "Nobody. Why bother? By the time someone gets there, the body'll be gone anyways. Not like some crazy bitch is gonna wait for the cops to show up so they can talk her down. Best thing to do is pray the bodies wash up far enough down river that it's someone else's problem."

Rothstein's eyes darted between the ringing phone and his boss. He couldn't believe what he'd heard. Showalter'd always been a sonofabitch to work for, but he'd never shirked his duties. And how had he known the jumpers were all women?

Well, if the Chief wasn't going to do something, Carl would. If he could save just one of them... He grabbed his hat and stood up. "I'll take it myself."

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," came Showalter's voice from behind him. Bonaventura turned and found himself looking down the barrel of Showalter's pistol.

"Chief?"

"Guess you haven't noticed we ain't running things in town no more, Carl. And that means either you're dumber than a coma patient or the Reverend's words ain't taken hold on you."

"The Reverend? What's he got to do with this?"

Showalter nodded. "Guess that answers my question. Too bad you got raised a Jew."

The sound of the Beretta exploded in Carl's ears at the same time a sledgehammer struck his chest. He fell backwards over his chair, a fire

burning in his lungs and heart. The Chief's face appeared above him.

"He's got everything to do with it, Carl. Too bad you couldn't see that."

A black circle replaced Showalter's face.

This time the explosion brought darkness.

Cyrus Christian stood on the steps of Our Lady of Perpetual Hope Church and stared out at the town. *My town, now,* he thought, even though it wasn't quite his yet. *But it will be in a few days. And that's what matters.*

Under the night sky, Hastings Mills bore little resemblance to its former self. The sounds of sirens, howling dogs, gunshots, and screams had replaced the usual quiet. The flickering red glow of house fires made Christian laugh as he pictured the town's volunteer fire department struggling to put them out. At least a few men would go to the hospital tonight, their skin charred and peeling, their lungs scorched, their scalps blistered and hairless.

He cast his unnatural gaze to the east, where Town Hall sat dark and quiet. Showalter and his remaining men were concentrating on what Christian deemed most important, keeping Hastings Mills as isolated as possible. Thanks to a well-aimed truck taking out a critical junction box, no outside calls were possible. If he could have taken down the cell towers, he would have. Instead, he had to settle for the spotty, static-filled reception caused by the storm clouds cloaking the town with electrical interference.

Christian clapped his hands and a bolt of lightning arrowed down with a thunderous roar. On the south end of town a massive oak, its trunk split and flaming, tumbled over, setting a corn field ablaze. By morning the farmer's entire crop would be nothing but steaming ashes, driving him to beat his loudmouth brother-in-law into oblivion.

Letting his mind flow out further, Christian drank in more of the town's despair and anger and fear. People huddled inside dark houses, shaking children clutched in adult arms unable to promise protection from the invisible evil creeping through the night. Elderly men and women cried out as their hearts seized and their bowels loosened. House pets and family members alike turned on each other in sudden fits of senseless violence.

Nothing can stop me now. "Do you hear that, John Root?" he shouted at the night. "You're too late! The town is mine!"

John, Danni, and Mitch sat in the living room in shorts and t-shirts, drinking glass after glass of tepid water and watching the glow of fires brighten and dim at different points across the town.

"He wants to destroy everything," Danni whispered.

John didn't respond, afraid of saying too much. As bad as Danni thought things were, he knew there was more to come. He couldn't be sure of the specifics, but safe to say things were going to get much worse before they got better.

"I want to be there when you kill him," Mitch said.

John turned toward him. "You shouldn't think like that."

Something in his tone must have alerted Danni.

"John? You do intend to kill him, don't you? That's the point of us risking our lives tomorrow."

"It's not that simple." He didn't want to get into a long philosophical discussion on good and evil, alternate realities, and gods and demons. *They deserve some kind of explanation, though.* He took a sip of water and hoped he had the right words.

"He can't be killed, not the way we think of it."

"Then what are you going to do?" Danni's tone said, in no uncertain terms, that it had better be something worth the risks they were taking.

"I'm going to try and force him out of our world for a while, send him someplace it will take him years, maybe decades, to get back from."

"What if it doesn't work?" Mitch asked.

"Then I can at least drive him away from this place. Keep the town safe."

"But wouldn't that mean he'd just start over somewhere else? Kill other people, in some other town?"

The boy is too smart. "Yes, Mitch, that's possible. But if I do my job correctly, it will be a long time before he's strong enough to return to our world."

"How will you know if your spell works and he's really gone?"

John shrugged, knowing his answer wouldn't please Danni or Mitch. "I won't. It will mean spending the rest of my life watching for him."

"You've had to do this before, haven't you?" Danni's expression held more empathy than curiosity.

"No. And yes. My mother battled him on several occasions. The last time... she banished him, but it killed her, like her mother before her. I was there when it happened. Since then, I've been searching for signs of his return."

"I'm sorry."

In the darkness, her hand found his and he gripped it, allowing himself this one small moment of intimacy.

"John?" Mitch's voice, on the other side of Danni.

"What is it?" He moved ever so slightly, but Danni understood and let her hand drop away. Back to the real world, where there was no time for personal feelings.

"I still hope you kill him. I think it's okay for me to say that, 'cause he's not human."

"I agree," Danni said.

Although he hated hearing the boy talking so casually about killing, John didn't argue the point further. "I'll do my best."

Unspoken was the question in everyone's mind.

Would his best be good enough?

Chapter 31

Billy Ray was pouring a much-needed cup of morning coffee when Cyrus Christian entered the kitchen. For Billy Ray, it had been another exhausting night filled with nightmares of flaming eyes and strange beasts that rose from the oceans to devour entire cities. Each time he woke up, sweating and shaking, the howling of dogs and the tortured wail of sirens greeted him, letting him know the separation between dreams and reality might not be so great.

So he was already on edge when Christian's voice, only a foot or two behind him, startled him into spilling the coffee.

"Billy, I have a list of things for you to do today."

"Jesus Christ!" Billy Ray put down the pot and shook hot coffee off his hand. "Don't sneak up on a—"

Without warning, Christian's face was next to his. Something moved deep within the black pools of the man's eyes, making Billy Ray think again about his dreams. He tried to back away, but the counter blocked his way.

"That's not a name to speak around me, Billy. Understand?"

"Uh, yeah, sure, no problem. Sorry." Billy Ray leaned back and the eyes seemed to move with him, even though Christian stayed in place.

"Good." Christian stepped away, his eyes once more only dark, lightless circles. He held out several sheets of paper. "Here's what I need you to do at the park today. I'll join you after my meeting with the booth committee."

"Yeah, okay. I'll get right on it."

"Do that." He started to walk away and then turned back, a sly smile on his face. "You look tired, Billy. Having trouble sleeping?"

Billy Ray said nothing as Christian gave a short bark of laughter and left the kitchen.

I don't know how much more of this I can take.

Once more, the image of the money in the downstairs closet rose

up in his mind, and he forced it back down. Not the kind of thing to think about with Christian so close.

Instead, he chugged his coffee and hurried out into the roasting oven of another summer day.

"Christian is leaving the building, right on schedule."

John winced as Danni's voice came over the walkie talkie, accompanied by a burst of static. Even on the lowest setting, it sounded frighteningly loud as he crouched behind a tree on the hill overlooking Riverside Park.

A hundred yards away, Billy Ray Capshaw was marking off squares of land with sticks and colored tape. Several booths were already up, with more under construction. Although the pattern seemed haphazard, something about it made John feel queasy.

"Okay," he said. "Get Mitch inside and then head to the elementary school. Stay hidden when you get there, but make sure you can see all the doors. Mitch?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful. Even with Christian gone, there's always the chance of someone else going into the church. Get in and out as fast as you can."

"No problem."

John's lips tightened. T*hat's what people always say before there's a problem. Please, God, not this time. Keep him safe. Keep us* all *safe.*

As the seconds dragged by with agonizing slowness, John found himself half-hoping the church would be locked and they'd have to come up with another plan, one that didn't involve Mitch. *He's just a boy. He....*

Crackle-hiss. "I'm in."

John exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

Another burst of electronic interference. "I'm heading to his office. I'll let you know when I'm coming out."

Zzz-pop. "Be careful." Danni's voice.

"No sweat, sis. Back in ten."

John's stomach churned as he waited. Down in the park, a pickup truck pulled in. Two men got out and started conversing with Billy Ray. Both of them wore tool belts around their waists, and John assumed they were there to help put up booths. He leaned against the tree, taking some small comfort from the shade it offered. Sweat rolled down his forehead and neck, and had already soaked through the front and armpits of his t-

shirt. He wished he'd thought to bring a thermos of lemonade with him.

A glance at his watch showed only two minutes had gone by. The plan was for Mitch to slip into Christian's office. If the office was locked, then the bedroom was a second choice. If he couldn't get in there, he was supposed to just leave, because they couldn't be sure anything from the other rooms would actually belong to Christian.

"C'mon, Mitch," he whispered. The dead, stifling air dampened the words, made them sound flat to his own ears. A rivulet of sweat stung his left eye. In sympathy, John's other eye closed.

When he opened them again, his head was bent forward, his chin resting on his chest.

What...? Realization hit him. He'd drifted off, lulled by the heat and lack of sleep. Adrenaline surged, bringing him fully awake. He looked at his watch, saw he'd only been out a couple of minutes. No harm. He glanced down at the field, saw the truck was gone and Billy Ray was alone again. Except....

Hadn't Billy Ray been wearing a white t-shirt? The man standing by the parking lot wore an orange shirt, just like...

The men who'd come in the truck.

John jumped up. He could already picture the scene. Billy Ray saying he was thirsty, or hungry. One of the men offering to drive him to the store.

Or back to the church?

"Hell." John thumbed the talk button on his radio. "Mitch. Mitch, time to leave. Get out now."

No answer.

"John? What's the matter?"

"Danni, tell Mitch to get out of there. I think Billy Ray's on his way back. He just left in a truck with someone."

"Shit! Mitch! Mitch, did you hear that? Get out! Someone's coming."

John waited, but no answer came from Mitch.

"Danni, go to the church. I'm on my way, too, but you'll get there faster with the car."

John started down the hill. If he took the road, it was maybe two miles to the church. If he cut across the farmland separating the river from the Perpetual Hope Cemetery behind the church, he could cut a half mile of distance, but it meant running through a field of summer corn already six feet high.

No choice. He had to get there as fast as possible, even if it meant risking a broken ankle.

Horns blew and people shouted and shook their fists as he crossed the bridge and then dodged traffic on the Five Mile Road before sprinting into the cornfield. Rough leaves scratched his arms and face. Dust flew up with each step, clogging his nose and burning his eyes, turning into crusty mud as it mixed with his sweat.

Something growled and barked nearby, hidden by the intervening rows of corn. John risked a glance, saw movement amid the tightly-clustered stalks.

Just a farm dog. It won't do more than bark.

Up ahead, two large dogs, tongues hanging down and dripping foaming saliva, stepped into sight. Both looked underfed and very hungry. John slowed his pace. Another growl, this one behind him. He looked back as two more dirt-encrusted hounds, their ribs showing and teeth bared, emerged from the corn. Rustling movement and angry growls to both sides told him he was surrounded.

Now what?

One of the dogs in front of him crouched down, preparing to spring. The others copied it.

John gripped his two-way radio in both hands and prepared to fight.

* * *

Mitch watched Danni drive away and felt proud of himself for not being nervous. If anything, he had the safest job. With Christian and Billy Ray both gone, and all the old ladies and housewives over at the school, there was like zero chance of anyone seeing him. He figured if Christian's office was unlocked, he could get in and out before Danni got to the school. Heck, even if he had to search Christian's bedroom, there'd still be plenty of time.

As long as Christian hadn't left any hidden surprises.

That thought slowed him a bit as he walked down the hall to the office. What if there was something in there, some kind of guard demon? Or a shotgun rigged to go off? Why hadn't they thought about that before, so John could make some kind of charm or potion to protect him?

Mitch came to a full stop in front of the office door. Suddenly, he didn't want to touch the knob. His stomach was all quivery and he felt like

he might pee his pants.

Stop being such a baby. There's nothing in there. And suddenly he knew he was right. Christian couldn't have left anything inside. What if Billy Ray had to go into the office? Or someone stopped by unexpectedly? That would be too hard for Christian to explain, at least while some people in town still hadn't fallen under his spell.

Still, it couldn't hurt to be cautious. He rattled the knob several times, then put his ear to the door and listened. Nothing. Not a sound.

He turned the knob. Unlocked. Holding his breath, he gave the door an ever-so-slight push, opening it less than an inch.

Nothing.

Mitch pushed the door all the way open and jumped to one side, his heart hammering in his chest.

The office was empty.

"I knew it," he whispered. He hurried inside and closed the door, purposely averting his eyes from the spot where he'd been tied up and nearly killed. Instead, he went around to the other side of Christian's desk and started opening drawers. The first two contained the usual things you'd expect in an office desk: pens, paper clips, folders containing paperwork relating to various aspects of church business. But it was in the bottom drawer that Mitch found what he needed.

"Jackpot," he said, and jumped a little at the sound of his own voice. He pulled out the book, a leather-bound tome with words written on the cover in some language he couldn't read. "This has to be his." He slid the book into his backpack, hiding it between some comic books and the latest Daniel Waters zombie novel.

A quick look at his watch showed he'd been inside ten minutes. Time to go. He had what he needed.

But maybe he could find something else to help John. Why waste the chance if he was already inside?

Five minutes. Then I'm outta here.

Mitch moved quickly down the hall, keeping himself pressed against the wall like he'd seen people do in movies. He came to Christian's quarters and tried the knob, but the door was locked. After a moment's thought, he decided to try the basement, because it seemed like a good place to hide something.

Maybe I'll even find John's magic bag. That would be cool. John would be super proud of him.

Going into the basement didn't worry Mitch; he'd been down there

plenty of times before Christian came to town. His lack of concern, together with his preoccupation with finding John's bag, led to his not realizing the basement lights were on until he was halfway down the stairs.

By then it was too late.

Mitch froze as he saw Billy Ray standing by an open closet. Billy Ray was just as surprised but recovered faster.

"What the fuck are you doing down here, kid?"

"Um, I...I...." Mitch struggled to think of something, anything, that would keep him alive long enough to get away. Billy Ray's eyes narrowed, and Mitch imagined the man getting ready to pull a knife and gut him where he stood.

Then he spotted something on a nearby shelf.

"I just came for this." Mitch grabbed the bible and held it up. "I left it here a few days ago." Praying Billy Ray wouldn't ask him to prove it was his, he clutched it to his chest.

A strange look passed across Billy Ray's face. Fear? Relief? Mitch couldn't tell.

"Well, then take it and get the hell out of here before I throw you out."

Without saying anything, Mitch turned and ran up the stairs, his feet pounding on the wooden steps. Then he was down the hall and out the back door as fast as his legs could carry him. He reached the parking lot just as Danni's Mustang screeched to a halt.

"Get in!" she shouted, and Mitch wasted no time doing as she said. He was still struggling into his seat belt when she hit the gas and roared across the lot toward State Street.

"What were you doing there?" Mitch asked, as he buckled himself in and then grabbed the door handle when Danni slewed the car around the corner onto Main Street.

"John called. He said Billy Ray was heading back to the church."

"I know. I saw him."

Danni's hands jerked and the car swerved. "What? He was there? Did he see you?"

"Yeah." Mitch tried to keep his voice casual. "He yelled at me to get out of the basement."

"The basement? What the hell were you doing down there?"

Aware he'd just put his foot into his mouth, Mitch tried to change the subject.

"Wait 'til you see what I got in Christian's office," Mitch said,

hoping to distract his sister.

"I don't care if you found a magic monkey who can end all our problems by snapping his fingers. You're in big trouble when we get home."

Mitch hunkered back into his seat and made sure to project an appropriate air of guilt, but inside he smiled. He'd knew Danni well enough to recognize her tone. Her anger was mostly for show, and by the time they got home she'd be so eager to see what he'd taken that she'd let him off with nothing more than a stern lecture.

His relief turned to concern when John's voice crackled over the radio.

"Danni? Is Mitch okay?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"The cemetery. Come quick. I need help."

"We're coming." She swung the Mustang around in a U-turn. Mitch's stomach rolled with the car's motion.

What if something bad had happened to John?

Billy Ray leaned against the closet door and fought to control the tremors racing through his body. The fucking kid had been *right there*, in the basement, while Billy had his hands on the church funds. Had he seen what was in the boxes and jars stacked on the shelves?

I should've killed him. Ran after him and beat him to death, then dumped the body. With everything going on in this town, no one would even raise a stink about one more corpse.

Not that he expected the kid to go running to Christian. Odds were he was snooping around the church for that John Root fellow. So Billy Ray felt reasonably certain his secret was safe, for now. But what if the kid told someone else? And that person told Christian? Secrets traveled fast in small towns.

What the hell do I do?

Billy Ray slammed the door shut. If he told Christian about the kid, he'd be opening himself up to questions he couldn't answer, like why he'd been in the church basement instead of at the park. The excuse of needing something to drink wouldn't cut it, not with someone like Christian who could peel back lies easy as peeling an orange, and see the juicy truth underneath.

However, if he said nothing, and Christian found out the kid had

been in the church and Billy Ray knew about it....

I'm fucked.

He slammed the door again, then kicked his bed over.

I won't tell. Better to take my chances on Christian not finding out until later. Hell, maybe he'll never find out.

Billy Ray fixed his bed and headed up the stairs. He needed to get back to the park before Christian's meeting ended. Stepping out into the heat, he shivered as a new feeling took root inside him, one he felt sure many a convict on death row knew all too well.

The dread of knowing your days were numbered.

Chapter 32

Cyrus Christian found himself glancing over his shoulder for the third time in as many minutes, sure that someone was standing behind him in the hallway.

"Is something wrong, Reverend? You seem...preoccupied today." Mrs. Greenfield, the PTA President, gave him a quizzical look through her old-fashioned cat's-eye glasses.

Preoccupied didn't begin to cover how Christian felt. He'd been on edge since the moment he entered the school, an itchy feeling between his shoulders like someone was watching him. During the meeting, he'd kept checking the windows, but the only cars in the parking lot were those of the attendees. Had he been alone, he could have extended his senses outward, searched the surrounding area. But that required his full attention; going into a trance in the middle of the meeting simply wasn't an option. Not when several members of the PTA council and city business association were not yet fully under his control.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Greenfield," he said to the fashionably-thin woman. "There are several things that require my attention, and sometimes I find my thoughts get ahead me."

She laughed and placed a hand on his arm, a gesture he recognized as flirtatious rather than just friendly. Christian was well aware of Emma Greenfield's reputation in town; young, pretty, and married to a man who spent a good deal of time traveling on business. She had money and time to burn and entertained herself by volunteering for various community organizations. She also had a habit of volunteering her personal services in other ways, in the bedrooms and offices of well-to-do men.

Had he retained any sexual drive, Christian might have been tempted to take the woman up on her implied offer. Instead, he made a mental note to provide her with a more permanent solution to her urges.

"Well, Mrs. Greenfield, I must be going," he said, gently patting her hand before moving away. "But I'll be thinking of you later, you can be sure

of that."

The hungry look in her eyes, together with the way she gave her lips a quick lick, told him he'd planted just the right seed, that she'd spend the rest of the day thinking he'd be calling her to arrange a rendezvous that night.

And I will, too. Just not the kind you imagine.

Outside, he stood by his car and slowly scanned the entire parking lot, turning around until he'd completed a full circle. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary; in fact, the sensation of other eyes watching him no longer perched on his shoulders like an invisible vulture.

So why did he still have the feeling something wasn't right?

Only one way to find out for sure.

Christian got into his car and shut the door, oblivious to the oven-like heat. Closing his eyes, he let his consciousness extend outwards, expanding across the school yard and even further, down the surrounding streets and over the buildings, parks, and river, an all-seeing eye that took in everything happening in his vicinity.

Alone in a bathroom, Emma Greenfield already had her hands up her summer dress and a look of orgasmic pleasure on her face.

Two streets over, an out-of-work electrician kicked the family cat down a flight of stairs.

On Main Street, an old woman walked barefoot across the road, her feet blistered and bleeding, her gaze as empty as what was left of her mind.

At Riverside Park, Billy Ray Capshaw paused and wiped the sweat from his forehead before measuring another plot for a booth.

Christian opened his eyes. Nothing within several blocks of his location to explain the anxiety he felt. To look further, he'd need to go back to his office and cast a spell.

Perhaps it's just knowing John Root is back in town. The man was proving to be a real thorn in Christian's side, but Christian was loathe to expend his energy on an all-out attack.

He'll come after me in his own time, and when he does, I'll be ready for him, just like I was ready for his bitch mother.

Christian started the car. Time to get back to work. He had a surprise to prepare for Emma Greenfield.

* * *

John gritted his teeth as Danni wiped an alcohol-soaked cloth

across the claw marks on his legs. Similar scratches decorated his arms and chest, long, red welts that blended in well with the gouges from the barbed wire he'd climbed over to escape the pack of feral dogs.

"You're lucky you didn't get bit," Danni said, handing the soiled cloth to Mitch. She went to open a tube of antibiotic ointment, but John held up his hand.

"I brought better medicines with me." He pointed to a jar of healing salve. "Use that. The cuts will be gone by morning."

As Danni applied the salve, she made low *tsk-tsk* noises. John understood it was her way of expressing her relief.

"My escape was more luck than skill," he admitted. It was the truth. When the first dogs had attacked, he'd managed to keep them away from his throat. Using his fists, feet, and radio, he'd broken free from the pack and started running. If he hadn't stumbled across the old wire-topped wooden fence dividing two fields, he'd have never made it. Instead, he'd endured the pain of the barbed wire and left the dogs howling their fury on the other side.

"Next time, stick to the roads." Danni gave him a mock scowl. "One thing I've learned from watching movies with Mitch, bad things always happen in corn fields."

"What do you mean?"

"A *Children of the Corn* reference." At John's confused look, Danni shook her head. "Forget it. Everybody's safe. That's all that matters.."

"Ohmygosh! I forgot!" Mitch jumped up. "Wait 'til you see what I got." He ran to the entryway, where he'd left his back pack.

John looked at Danni, who shook her head.

"Check it out!" Mitch raced back in, holding something in his hands. John's heart froze when he saw it.

It couldn't be....

Danni reached out for it. "A book? I thought you were supposed to get something personal, not—"

"Don't touch that!" John grabbed Danni's hands and pulled them away, leading Mitch standing there with his arms outstretched and a confused look on his face.

"You said to get something that belonged to Christian. This was in his desk. Did I do something wrong?"

"Put the book down, Mitch, and step away from it." John was already digging through the boxes of supplies from his house, which they'd stacked in the kitchen. *Please don't let me be too late.*

"John, what's—"

"No time to explain," John said, interrupting Danni's question. She looked as puzzled as her brother. John ignored them both until he found what he was looking for. "Mitch, hold out your hands," he said, opening the jar of clear liquid. "This is going to sting, but only for a moment."

A lump formed in John's throat at the sight of Mitch's total trust in him. The boy's face was pale and his hands shaking as he held them out, but he never hesitated, never asked why.

I hope that trust doesn't get him killed.

Mitch grimaced as John poured the liquid over his hands and then rubbed it in. A faint odor of sulfur accompanied John's actions.

"It burns a little," Mitch said, but he didn't pull away.

"John, is this necessary?" Danni asked, not enjoying the sight of her brother's discomfort.

"It is if you want Mitch to live through the night." John pushed Mitch's hands away and poured the rest of the liquid onto the book.

The three of them watched the fluid sizzle and spit as it neared the book, boiling away an inch before it touched the cover. Only when some of the liquid actually touched the surface of the book did John stop pouring. By then the egg-farts stink of sulfur had their eyes watering.

"It's safe now, I believe." John sat down and motioned the others to join him. Danni waved her hands in front of her face as she approached. He picked up the book, his hands recoiling slightly at the feel of the human-leather binding.

"You believe?"

John glanced at Danni. "There's no way to be sure if a grimoire is ever safe."

"Grimoire?" Mitch asked. "You mean like, a book of spells?"

"Yes, but it's much more than that. I would have warned you about it, but I had no idea he'd keep it somewhere so easily discovered. What you've done, Mitch, is both excellent and very dangerous. You've taken away much of his power; in effect, you've done to him what he did to me when he stole my bag."

"That's good for us, right?"

"Yes and no. It won't change what he's got planned for the town. He doesn't need this," John tapped the book, "for that. But it will prevent him from casting any spells he hasn't memorized. Of course, we don't know which ones those are, so we'll have to prepare as if nothing's changed. On top of that...."

"What?" Danni asked, when John's paused dragged on.

He bit his lip. This was the part he'd dreaded telling them. "Very soon he's going to discover the grimoire is missing. When he does, he'll be furious, and he'll go looking for the person who has it."

"But how will he..., oh, because Billy Ray saw Mitch."

"It wouldn't matter even if he hadn't. The book is tied to Christian, or rather, the thing inside him. He'll be able to sense anyone who's come in contact with it, and follow that trail right to the person, the way a bloodhound can follow a scent for miles and miles. What I've done is akin to washing the scent away from Mitch's hands, and masked the book itself, at least for a while."

"Then we're safe?"

John shrugged. "Unless he already knows."

"So he could already becoming after us."

"I'm afraid so. We need to prepare ourselves for that possibility."

"Prepare, how?"

"That's what I've got to figure out."

And fast, he added to himself. *The Ancient One won't waste time.*

* * *

Billy Ray felt as if his heart might stop when Christian's voice called out from the top of the church stairs.

"Billy, come up to my office. We have things to discuss."

"Okay, as soon as I...."

"Now."

The Reverend stepped back inside and closed the door, leaving Billy Ray standing on the sidewalk, his mouth open but empty of words.

Shit. Shit-shit-shit! Does he know? The temptation to race down to the basement, grab the money, and head for the river was so strong he actually took two steps toward the basement door before stopping himself. *He can't know. If he did, he'd be throwing a fit.*

"Shit." Sometimes you had to trust your instincts. He took a deep breath and headed up the stairs. To his right, the setting sun was a flaming globe at the end of State Street, looking for all the world like an atomic explosion. That imagery did nothing to quell Billy Ray's nerves as he entered the church and found Christian standing by the doors, his arms crossed and an impatient look on his face.

"Let's move it, Billy. I haven't got all day."

Billy Ray followed Christian to his office. Instead of sitting, the Reverend stood by the window, looking out into the fiery red afternoon. Just as Billy Ray thought the man might have forgotten he was there, Christian turned to him, his eyes aflame as they reflected the setting sun.

"Something's not right."

A black hole opened in Billy Ray's gut. "Like what?"

"I don't know. But I've felt it all day, a nagging sensation at the back of my head, like someone's watching me."

Sudden inspiration hit Billy Ray. *He doesn't know!* Here was a perfect chance for him to come clean and look like a hero at the same time.

"Funny you should say that. I caught that Anderson kid snooping in the basement today, and I chased him out."

"What?" Christian moved toward Billy Ray, who took a step back to keep the distance between them.

His eyes! How are they still red even with his back to the window?

In the space of that thought, Christian grabbed Billy Ray by the shirt and shook him. "Answer me! What was he doing here?"

"I...I don't know! I found him in the basement. I came back to...to change my shirt, and he was coming down the stairs. Said he was there to get his Bible. I told him to scram and not come back if he knew what was good for him."

"A Bible?"

"Yeah. He said it was in the basement. He found it, too, and took it with him."

"A Bible?" This time the question wasn't for Billy Ray. His brow furrowed as he considered Billy Ray's story. "Did he take anything else?"

"Nothing that I saw. I followed him up the stairs, and watched him leave." He hadn't done any such thing, but he'd gone up not long after scaring the kid away, and the church had been empty.

"Why would the boy come here?" Again, Christian spoke to himself, but Billy Ray answered anyway.

"Maybe he came to spy on you."

Christian's eyes went wide and he let go of Billy Ray's shirt. Faster than Billy Ray'd ever seen a person move, he went around his desk and opened one of the drawers, his expression changing to one of fury.

"Damn his soul to Hell!"

In the space of an instant, the temperature in the room rose ten degrees, as if Christian's words had opened a door to the very place he spoke of. Billy Ray raised his arms, afraid Christian might leap over the

desk and attack him. Instead, the Reverend grabbed the desk with both hands and flipped it over, a non-stop string of curses flowing from him.

"Sonofabitchbastardcocksuckingwhorespawn!"

He kicked his chair across the room. By the time it hit the far wall, he was already throwing his wastepaper basket at a file cabinet.

"Hillbillygoatfuckinginbredasslickingfaggot!"

Billy Ray stood frozen, the communications between brain and body short-circuited, like a rabbit staring at an oncoming car. Even when Christian turned and came at him, his legs refused to move.

"He stole it, you brainless wonder! He came into my office and stole it, while you sat in the basement pulling your dick!"

Billy Ray tried to speak but nothing came out.

"Answer me!" Christian raised a fist.

"I didn't know he was there 'til he came downstairs! I swear! As soon as I saw him, I chased him away. How was I supposed to know he'd have the guts to break into your office?"

Christian's arm stayed raised. Billy Ray closed his eyes, anticipating the first blow. When nothing happened, he slowly opened them again.

Christian was back by the window, fists still clenched but hanging at his sides. Some of the furious rage had dimmed from his face, his eyes no longer bulging and his nostrils no longer flaring.

"You're right, Billy. How could you have known? Even I didn't expect something so...brazen from our friend John Root. A well-played counter-move."

"Root? You think he put the kid up to it?" Billy Ray almost asked what the boy had stolen, then decided he was better off not knowing.

"Oh, I'm sure of it." Christian took a deep breath. "Well, what's done is done. In the end, it won't matter. Let Root have his small victory, for it shall be his last. He thinks I'll come running to get back what's mine, and no doubt set a trap for me in the process. Instead, I think I'll let him waste his energy while I conserve my own. This is nothing but a minor hindrance. Inconvenient, yes, but it will not hold me back."

There was a pause, and when Christian spoke again, his words sent a chill up Billy Ray's spine. "Get back to work, Billy. There's much to be done, and very little time. Very little time for anyone in this town."

Chapter 33

"That's it? That's your big plan?" The look on Danni's face clearly showed her lack of faith.

"I don't know what you expected." John leaned back in his bed and regarded Danni, who sat on a chair across from him. Mitch had gone to his room earlier, barely able to keep his eyes open long enough to brush his teeth and wash his face.

He'd assumed that Danni, with no real background in the magical arts, would take it on faith he knew what he was doing. Now she was looking at him with a bewildered expression, as if he'd let her down somehow.

"I don't know," she said. "I guess I something more...dramatic. I mean, if I'm understanding you right, what it amounts to is you trapping Christian in some kind of magic circle and then doing another spell that sends him off to wherever. If it was that simple, why didn't you just do it before?"

John almost laughed. Simple? If only she knew.... "It sounds simple, but it's not. It takes a great deal of concentration and energy to perform these spells correctly, and it's not like I've ever done them before."

As John spoke, he closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall, savoring the slightly cooler temperature against his skin. After casting the additional wards around the house, he found himself more tired than ever.

He sensed Danni's presence seconds before the mattress shifted under her weight as she joined him on the bed, laying down next to him and placing her head on his chest. Of its own accord, his arm moved up and over, encircling her shoulders and holding her against him.

This is wrong. I should tell her to leave. Try as he might, his mouth refused to voice the objections his brain sent to it.

Danni sighed, her breath lost in the still, humid air surrounding them. "I didn't expect to feel this way."

John bit his lip. *Don't let her know the truth. Tell her you don't feel the same things she does.* "Neither did I."

Her fingers stroked ever-so-lightly across his chest, caressing him through his t-shirt. "At first I thought, maybe it's just the situation, you know? With everything going on, the danger, spending so much time together. It wasn't until you left that I realized...."

"You don't have to say it." He hoped she wouldn't.

"It's been a long time since I loved someone, John. I haven't let myself get close to anyone because of Mitch. I had to take care of him first, me second. But he's older now...."

"He's a good boy. You've done well with him. He's...he's the kind of son anyone would be proud of." The moment the words left his lips, John regretted them. *You're doing a fine job,* he berated himself. *Build up her hopes before you break her heart.*

She must have noticed something in his voice, because she opened her eyes and looked up at him. "You're thinking about your son, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Clara and I...we both loved children. All I ever wanted was a family." *But he took that away.*

"You could have one. If...if you want." Danni looked away as she said it.

It was the moment John had been dreading. "Danni...we can't be together. Not you and I, and not as a family. What I do is too dangerous. I know what it's like to lose people you care about, people you love. I couldn't put you through that."

Danni sat up. He expected to see anger on his face, but her expression was more sad than hurt, as if she already knew there was no point in arguing, but had to try anyhow.

"You mean you don't want to put *yourself* through it. Everyone's lost people they love, John. We have. You have. It's not fun. In fact, it really sucks. But what you're doing is worse in the long run, because you end up with all the heartache and pain of being alone, without experiencing the good parts, the companionship and love."

John shook his head. "It's more complicated than that. My job, my life, brings me into constant contact with things most people don't even believe in. Dangerous things. Is that the kind of life you want for yourself, for Mitch? Never knowing how long I'll be gone for, or if I'll even come back?"

"Is that any more dangerous than being married to a cop? Or a

fireman? Or a soldier?" Danni's lips thinned out, a sure sign her earlier compassion was turning into annoyance. "Hell, just going to work each day can be dangerous, what with all the crazy drivers on the highways and the mental cases shooting up buildings."

"It's not the same." Even as he said it, John knew how weak it sounded, knew Danni was right, he was thinking only of himself. *I can't take losing anyone again.*

"Bullshit." Danni jumped from the bed, her face flushed from more than just the heat. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "It's all just excuses." She turned and walked toward the door. Before she left, she looked back at him.

"The thing is, you're hurting yourself, and you don't even realize it."

Then she was gone, leaving John alone with the ghosts of his past and the memory of Danni's hands on his chest.

For the first time since losing Clara and Jack, he found himself wondering if maybe he didn't have to be alone forever.

* * *

Danni's scream ended abruptly as the green tentacles, each thick as a man's thigh and covered in circular mouths filled with razor-sharp teeth, wrapped around her and dragged her under the water. John stood at the edge of the river and watched helplessly while the water roiled and bubbled where the unseen monster lurked. He wanted to dive in after her, but his body refused to move. In the far depths of his mind he understood he wasn't really there, but it didn't stop him from trying to break free from the spell and leap into the river, tear the beast apart with his bare hands if he had to.

More bubbles rose, and even in the darkness of the moonless night he saw the color of the water change, grow blacker as Danni's blood spread across the surface. An irregular white shape bobbed up and drifted toward him. John tried to close his eyes, not wanting to see the thing, but he had no more control over them than he did the rest of his body.

The object drew closer, and a sick feeling churned his stomach as he recognized it as a piece of a human leg, the foot still attached. A pink flip-flop sandal, identical to the ones Danni had been wearing when she left his bedroom that night, still clung to the foot.

"Danni!" he shouted. The only answer the river gave was a bubbling of released gasses as more body parts floated up. One of them rolled over, and Danni's face stared at him, its twisted expression revealing the agony she'd felt as the

monster tore her apart.

"No! No!—"

"No!" John sat up in bed, his cry still echoing in his ears. His sweat-covered body shook from the nightmare, and his heart pounded so hard that he felt his arms vibrating from the force of it. He glanced out the window, saw it was still night.

Danni!

Something about the nightmare seemed too real. He leaped from the bed and raced down the hall to her room.

Her bed! Empty! No, it can't be happening. I can't let it. I won't!

Remembering the other women who'd supposedly committed suicide in the river, John wasted no time running downstairs, not even bothering to put on shoes or wake Mitch. He paused just long enough to grab Danni's keys off the rack and then hurried to the Mustang. It was less than ten miles to the bridge where the other girls had jumped, but there was no telling when Danni had left the house. As he drove down the deserted Main Street, he cursed himself for not considering Christian might do something like this.

I was a fool, and now it might cost Danni her life.

At that moment, he understood the mistake he'd made earlier, in not accepting Danni's invitation. The fact was, he loved her. Mitch, too. And it made no difference if he expressed that love or kept it hidden. If anything happened to them, the loss would be just as painful, so why shouldn't he allow himself to feel their love in return, share lives with them? Why take the bad but not the good?

"That's what I've waited to hear."

John's hands twitched on the wheel. *Clara?*

No one answered, leaving John wondering if she'd really spoken to him again or if it was just his subconscious letting him know she wouldn't be upset with him.

None of it will matter if I don't get there in time.

He pressed down harder on the gas, unconcerned about getting a speeding ticket at that hour of the morning. He went over the Main Street Bridge and then turned left onto the Five Mile Road. As he approached the Five Mile Bridge, he saw a figure silhouetted on the edge, arms spread wide.

No! I'm too late! Refusing to admit defeat, John drove onto the bridge. Just as he reached her, she stepped off and disappeared.

"Danni!" Without pause, John climbed over the barrier and dove, the expanding circle of wavelets from Danni's entry serving as his target.

He hit at a slight angle, the water slapping his face like a giant hand. The air exploded from his lungs in a mass of bubbles, and he fought his way back to the surface for a gasping breath before diving back down into the murky river. Hoping he hadn't strayed too far from where Danni had landed, he felt around blindly with his hands while forcing his way deeper. Just when he feared he might have to go up for more air, one of his flailing hands struck something soft but firm. He grabbed it before it moved away, and kicked for the surface, feeling the drag of something heavy behind him.

As soon as his face broke the surface, he gulped in air and then pulled up the object he'd been towing. In the near-dark, he saw a leg, a pink sandal on its foot, and for a moment he feared he'd been too late after all, that his nightmare had come true. Then the rest of her body rose up, all parts still attached. He lifted her head from the water and began side-stroking his way to shore. When his feet touched soft mud, he switched his grip and pushed Danni's body forward, half-crawling and half-swimming behind her.

Just a few feet from shore, fiery pain burst to life in John's calf. He leaped forward as something cold and slimy brushed against his legs. Images of monstrous tentacles appeared in his mind, and he dragged Danni's body from the water, ignoring the pain spreading up his leg until they were both well away from the river's edge. After checking to make sure nothing had followed them out of the water, he placed two fingers on Danni's neck and found a ragged pulse. Turning her on her side, he pounded her back until her body spasmed in a series of wracking coughs, and she spit several mouthfuls of water onto the muddy soil.

Her lungs clear, Danni fell back, gulping air. Only then did John reach down and feel the circular wound in his calf. Blood and water ran down his leg and foot, and he had to grit his teeth against the pain as his fingers probed the bite. Confident the creature's teeth hadn't severed any vital vessels or tendons, John returned his attention to Danni, who was slowly recovering her breath.

"Are you all right?" He took her hand as he asked, and she clutched at it gratefully.

"Yeah, I think so. My shoulder hurts like hell, but other than that.... What happened?" She turned and spit sand and water, wiped her mouth with her free hand, and spit again.

"You don't remember?"

She started to shake her head, then stopped. “I...I was dreaming. I was so sad. He told me everything would be all right. All I had to do was go to you. You would be waiting for me, at the river. And you were. You held out your arms....” She paused, her brow furrowed in concentration. “That’s all. The next thing I knew, everything was dark and cold, and I couldn’t breathe.”

“You jumped into the river.”

“Jumped into the...? Why would... Christian. That’s what he did to all those other women, isn’t it?” Her voice trailed off as a series of shivers wracked her body.

“Yes.” John put his arms around her and helped her to her feet. “Let’s get you back home.”

“You’re limping,” Danni said, as John guided her up the embankment toward the bridge.

“It’s nothing. Just a cut. I’ll clean it later.” He’d do more than clean the creature’s bite. He’d sterilize the hell out of it.

Danni stopped and clutched at John’s shirt. “What about Mitch? You didn’t leave him home, did you?”

“Don’t worry, he’s fine,” John said. “He was sound asleep when I left, and all the wards are in place around the house. Nothing can get in. That’s why Christian had to draw you out when you were asleep.”

“He could do the same thing to Mitch!”

“I don’t think so. His spell only works on hearts saddened by lost or unrequited love.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s my fault. And it doesn’t matter now. His plan failed. He’ll have to try something else.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence, both of them wondering the same thing.

What would that something else be?

And would they be as lucky next time?

Part III

He brings a shaking to the earth;
He speaks the words that stop your heart;
He sets the Devil in your path,
When the Stranger comes to town

- The Stranger, undated Southern folk myth

Chapter 34

Death.

Billy Ray smelled it before he even stepped outside, saw the evidence of it before the back door to Our Lady of Perpetual Hope closed behind him. Smoke rose from a dozen different points in the city, thick black clouds that stunk worse than junkyard fires.

"Can you smell it, Billy?"

He jumped at the Reverend's voice above him. For a moment, he pictured the gaunt man floating in the air, hovering over him like some kind of gargoyle waiting to swoop down on its prey. Billy Ray slowly turned his gaze upwards and felt a nervous relief when he saw Cyrus Christian leaning from his bedroom window.

"Um, yeah, you mean the smoke?"

Christian's grin grew wide, and Billy Ray's nervousness increased in tandem with it. "That's not just smoke. Breathe it in. That's the smell of cherished memories, life-long savings, homes where generations built happy memories, all burning away to ash. Flesh and blood reduced to oily, greasy vapors." Christian took a deep breath and held it. Just when Billy Ray thought it was impossible for a man to go that long without breathing, Christian exhaled through his nose, accompanied by a mellow sighing sound. Billy Ray remembered his old man making a similar sound whenever he took his first drag on his after-dinner cigar.

Billy Ray turned his eyes away from Christian's creepy presence and looked back at Hastings Mills. In that moment, he realized something was missing.

No fire or police sirens filled the early morning air.

There's no help coming for those people.

Billy Ray's stomach twisted, threatening to send his meager breakfast of coffee and a stale donut back into the light. The flavor of his toothpaste disappeared, replaced by a slimy, burnt-fat taste that took a seat on his tongue and slowly spread throughout his mouth.

That's roasted man-meat you're tasting, Billy.

He had no idea if words were in his head or if Christian had said them. In that moment he knew it was time to get the fuck out of Hastings Mills. Fuck waiting until after the fair.

Gotta act like nothing's wrong. He took out his cigarettes and lighter, shook a butt out of the pack.

"What are you plans for today, Billy?"

"Shit!" Billy Ray's hands twitched, sending cigarettes in all directions. *Stay calm, you asshole. He's not reading your mind.*

Billy Ray took a deep breath before answering. When he spoke, he was pleased at how calm his voice sounded. "Things are almost done at the park. I'm gonna take care of the last few booths. Unless you have something else you need done."

"No, that's fine, Billy. You get going. We'll see each other later."

Billy Ray purposely took time to gather his cigarettes and light one before glancing upwards. Christian was gone from the window.

Now. Time to get your ass in gear, Billy Ray Capshaw.

He took a few more drags on the cigarette, appreciating how it washed away the crematorium taste from his tongue, then stubbed it out against the railing. As he went back inside, already sweating from the god-awful heat, he started a mental list of things to take with him and then decided just to fuck it, just get the hell out.

He grabbed a paper bag he knew wouldn't look suspicious; he frequently took a bag of water bottles and snacks with him if he planned on being gone all day. The money would take up just about the same amount of space. Everything else he'd just buy when he got to wherever he ended up.

A floorboard creaked overhead and Billy Ray froze, droplets of sweat tickling their way down his back. The murky basement seemed to grow darker as he stood statue-still, listening for any indication that someone—*Christian!*—might be heading for the basement stairs. When a full minute went by with no further sounds, Billy Ray went to the cabinet and eased the door open, glancing around him as he did so.

More sweat dripped from his brow as he snatched the bills from their boxes. He stuffed them into the bag without even bothering to count them. He no longer cared how much was there, as long as it was enough to finance a fresh start someplace else.

Someplace where people don't kill each other on the street or light their neighbor's house on fire for kicks.

Billy Ray's heart stomped a heavy-metal rhythm as he approached the back entrance. What if Christian was looking out his window again? Or crossing the back lawn on his way to the parking lot?

An image of the Reverend, his ebony eyes alight with manic glee, appeared in Billy Ray's head. Except that in his mental picture, Cyrus Christian's fingers were long blades, like an evil version of Edward Scissorhands. Blades that dripped blood. When he smiled, his teeth were piranha-sharp.

Stop it! You're freaking yourself out. He's crazy, but he's not the fucking Devil. Open the door, make sure the coast is clear, and get your ass moving.

Billy Ray's palms were perspiring so badly the paper bag had brown, finger-shaped stains on it and his hand threatened to slide right off the door knob.

Get a grip, you pussy. One. Two. Thr—

The knob spun in his hand and then pulled out of his grasp as the door flew open, revealing Cyrus Christian standing there, along with Chief Showalter, the mayor, and two women he didn't know.

"Hello, Billy. Going somewhere?"

A terrible tightness filled Billy Ray's chest. He tried to speak but only a strangled gasp escaped.

"I'll take that." Showalter yanked the paper bag from Billy Ray's numb fingers. "Well, lookie here. A big ol' sack of money. Guess workin' for the church pays better than I thought."

Billy Ray's body came to life as the Sheriff showed the bag to Christian. He rushed forward, head and shoulders down, the words of his long-ago high school football coach—*"Picture yourself knocking those assholes down like bowling pins!"*—loud in his head, as if Coach Johnson was right behind him. Billy Ray rammed himself into Showalter, sending the heavy-set sheriff stumbling to one side. The two matrons' eyes went wide as he closed the few feet between them. Visions of freedom filled his head as prepared himself for the impact with their soft, plump bodies.

Five steps and I'm home free! No way they can—

Without warning his body rose up from the ground. The matrons' shocked expressions changed to self-righteous smiles as he continued his ascent, higher and higher, until he was looking down at them. Belatedly he felt his shirt and belt tugging at him, and realized someone had him in a two-handed grip and was –

Throwing me through the air? Impossible!

His body tumbled, an out-of-control human shot put. He sailed

over the two church ladies, watched their mouths open in laughter. As his body revolved, he caught an upside-down glimpse of Cyrus Christian behind him, arms still outstretched like a statue of a Greek Olympian.

How did he—

Then he was falling, faster than he'd risen, the ground speeding toward his face.

Jesus, God, please help—

The world exploded in pain and then went black.

Billy Ray regained consciousness with no memory of having lost it. His face felt like someone had poured acid on it and his nose was a concentrated ball of fire.

The bitter, metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. He tried to spit it out, only he couldn't work up enough saliva. His tongue felt dry and gritty, and he could tell his lips were swollen.

"Welcome back, Billy."

His body twitched in response to the Reverend's words from somewhere behind him. He tried to turn and belatedly realized he was tied to something, his ankles close together and his arms spread wide.

Like he was on a cross.

Oh, fuck. No. Fucking shit, NO!

He caught movement from the corner of his eye as Christian came into view, his head even with Billy Ray's chest.

"Billy, Billy, Billy." The reverend wore an exaggerated look of disappointment on his ageless face. "So predictable. I probably knew before you did that you'd try and steal the money this morning. In fact, I'd wager that I knew weeks before you did. That's why I kept you around. You were the perfect choice."

Billy Ray tried to focus through the pain. *Perfect choice? For what?*

"For the Binding, of course. Oh, I could have used anyone, but you practically fell into my hands when you asked me for a job."

He heard me. Heard what I was thinking. But that's impossible. Maybe...maybe this is all some kind of nightmare.

"Wrong again, Billy. No nightmare." Christian pursed his lips and tilted his head slightly, as if contemplating what to say next. "Truth is, it's going to be something much worse. For you, that is."

Christian turned his back to Billy Ray and waved to someone. For the first time, Billy Ray noticed the rows of pews in front of him and

understood he was on the altar of Our Lady of Perpetual Hope. He tried to speak, but only succeeded in making a small croaking sound. The cuts on his lips split open again, but even the fresh blood trickling into his mouth wasn't enough to moisten his throat.

Four figures stepped out of the gloom and joined Christian at the foot of the altar. Showalter flipped his middle finger at Billy Ray and grinned. Behind him was the mayor, his face as dour and lifeless as ever. Trailing the men were the two women who'd been at the church for Billy's failed escape attempt. Both wore expressions of pure bliss, the same looks Billy had always thought were fake when he saw them on TV in the audiences of Sunday morning bible programs.

Christian's four acolytes formed a semi-circle in front of Billy, with Christian at the base of the cross.

Just a dream. It's all just a dream.

"Guess what, folks? Billy still thinks he's dreaming. Poor fellow." Christian lifted his hands in the air, and his voice grew louder. "Lords of Chaos, Blood, and Death! Bringers of Pain and Darkness! Hear my words! Look upon us gathered here today in your unholy names, and see the sacrifice we make to you. Azathoth, Dagon, Cthulhu! Open thine eyes and feast upon the fear and pain of the anointed one! And in return, bestow upon your humble servant a taste of your darkness, so I may complete my work for you in this place."

Christian bent down out of Billy Ray's line of sight, and when he returned, he held a glass jar in one hand and a wicked-looking machete in the other.

This time Billy Ray managed to find the strength to shout.

"No! Get me down! Don't let him do this!"

"Shut the fuck up, boy," Showalter said. "I knew you was trouble the minute you walked into town. I'd say you got this coming' to you."

"No!" Billy Ray struggled against the ropes, but they held firm. A sudden odor of foul decay filled the air as Christian swung the jar back and forth, splashing an oily liquid across Billy Ray's body.

"I anoint thee, with stale piss and the melted fats of the dead! I anoint thee to open the eyes of the Elder Ones Who Will Someday Walk Again!"

"Stop! Plea—Aagh!" Billy Ray's plea changed to a choking gag as putrid fluids landed on his tongue.

Christian dropped the empty jar to the floor and stepped closer, tapped the long blade against Billy Ray's chest. "Time to say goodbye, Billy.

Your work here is done."

The import of the statement was still registering in Billy Ray's brain when Christian plunged the machete into the soft flesh below Billy Ray's ribs. The pain was instant and tremendous, and only grew worse as Christian drew the blade down, from sternum to waist. Billy Ray's back arched and his mouth opened wide in a silent scream that sounded deafening inside his head.

The smell of blood and shit pushed away the stink of the anointing fluids as Christian pulled the blade out. He held it up to Billy Ray's face. "This is the blood of your life, which you give today so that others may die tomorrow. Look upon this sacrifice, my Lords, and see that I am worthy of your favor!"

This time Christian swung the machete sideways, creating an inverted cross on Billy Ray's belly. Blood and shit and pieces of internal organs poured from the gash. More blood gushed from Billy Ray's mouth, creating a waterfall down his neck.

For an instant, the agony grew so intense it encompassed Billy Ray's entire world. He felt nothing else, heard nothing else, not even his own thoughts. Then something broke inside, releasing a rush of icy cold that extinguished the fire and left him totally numb. His body sagged forward against the bindings, and the room dimmed until the figures below him were little more than shadows. One, a man dressed in black, stood close by, holding something by Billy Ray's feet. He spoke, but the words meant nothing to Billy Ray.

The room grew darker, and Billy Ray wondered where the day had gone.

Am I dying? Is this what it feels like?

They say if you die in your dreams, you die in real life. So I should wake up now. Wake up. Wake—

Cyrus Christian held the glass bowl under Billy Ray until it overflowed with blood and offal. Only when Billy Ray's body slumped lifelessly against the ropes did he turn and face the four people waiting eagerly behind him. Dipping his hand into the fluids, he traced a series of symbols on each of their foreheads and recited a phrase to each of them.

"By the glory and the power, I bind thee to me, to serve as extensions of the Dark Lords' will. You are my arms and eyes and ears. You are my slaves. You are the tools I wield. In return, I give you strength and

protection from those who would stand in our way."

One by one, the chosen four knelt and kissed Christian's gore-splattered feet. They stayed humbled before him until he ordered them to rise.

"The time has come for us to finish what I've started in this pisshole of a town. Meet me in my office in one hour, cleaned and dressed. But first..."

"Yes?" Harry Showalter asked.

Christian pointed at Billy Ray's corpse.

"Feed."

* * *

John Root woke to the stench of fire. Before he opened his eyes, he knew the town had taken a turn for the worse. He rolled over and looked at his watch. Nine hours he'd been asleep. No dreams, either, which he was thankful for. He sat up, the sheets sticking to his already-sweaty back and legs. Another unseasonably hot day. Was it something his old nemesis purposely emplaced, or was it a by-product of the dark, dangerous forces he called upon?

Hopefully, in two days' time it won't matter anymore.

John knew better than to believe defeating the Trickster was a sure thing. Over the centuries, many had tried to stop him. Some, including his own relatives, had achieved limited success, but no one had ever truly banished the Hand of Chaos from the world.

Many, like John himself, believed it an impossible task, that the Hand was an immutable part of the natural order, and the best anyone could hope for was to set back the timetable for the inevitable day when he opened the way for the Dark Gods to come forth again, bringing about another of the cataclysmic struggles between Good and Evil that shaped the teachings of so many ancient cultures.

And what if I fail? John knew the answer to that question all too well. Three times he'd visited towns in the wake of the Ancient One. Seen firsthand the devastation. Twice, the towns resembled the aftermath of a military attack. The third had been intact but empty, a modern equivalent of the Roanoke settlement or the *Marie Celeste*.

Footsteps on the stairs alerted John to Mitch's imminent presence. Taking a deep breath, he put on his best expression of confidence. It was one thing to prepare himself for failure. There was no reason to worry

Mitch or Danni.

Plenty of time for that later.

Breakfast that morning was a solemn affair in the Anderson house. The extreme heat and humidity was enervating, sucking dry their will to do anything more energetic than spread peanut butter and jelly on damp white bread and wash it down with tepid ice tea.

"I can't believe this weather." Danni's hair hung in limp, curling strands and her shirt was already showing dark stains under her arms and between her breasts. "I feel like I might pass out, and it's not even noon."

John looked at each of them in turn. "We have to keep up our spirits, remind ourselves of how much we care about each other. That will help prevent Christian's darkness from tainting us."

"You mean I have to be nice to her for the next two days?" Mitch pointed at Danni and made a face like he'd just eaten something sour. "Talk about doing the impossible!"

"Keep it up, little man. You might just find yourself wearing that PB and J."

Mitch laughed, and Danni joined in. *Perfect,* John thought. *Now if I can only keep it up for the next thirty-six hours or so.*

John's original plan had been to spend the day observing the activities at Riverside Park, to get a lay of the land and develop a strategy for how he'd go about setting up his traps. However, the moment he'd smelled the smoke and felt, down deep in his bones, the anguish and insane waves of hatred emanating from the town, he'd understood he'd be spending the day inside with Danni and Mitch.

Hastings Mills has turned into a cauldron of uncontrolled rage. Thanks to the influence exerted by the evil thing inside Cyrus Christian, it would be safer hitchhiking through a war zone than walking the streets of Hastings Mills.

No, there'll be no leaving the house today. Of course, that didn't mean he'd waste the day. Rather, he'd just have to rearrange the order of things slightly and use the time to assemble and finalize everything he'd need for the coming confrontation.

John waited until they'd finished eating before bringing their attention back to the task at hand. "Mitch, Danni, I'm going to need your assistance today."

"With what?" Mitch asked, eager as always to help.

"I have to make a fairly large number of totems, which I will need

to use during the binding of the Ancient One."

"Totems?" Danni looked confused. "Those big poles with the faces on them? How are we supposed to make those?"

Mitch rolled his eyes. "Don't be a 'tard, sis. Those are totem *poles*. Totems are different. They're like, little magical figurines."

"Actually, you're both right. All totems, large or small, are physical representations of spirits. They can also be imbued with magics, similar to what I did with the warding stones around the house. I'll be using them to create a circle of magic around the fair that will have two purposes. One, to concentrate my own powers, and two, to bind Christian within so he can't escape before I'm done."

"You've done this before?" Danni asked, her tone clearly showing she knew he hadn't.

"No. I've made individual fetishes for people, though, and the principle is the same."

"I hate to say it, but I'm not real good at carving things." Mitch looked crestfallen as he made his confession. "I couldn't even build a simple soap box derby car."

A smile came to John's face. "No carving necessary, Mitch. All we need is string, cloth, and some pens."

"No problem," Danni said. "I can zip down to the store and get whatever we need."

"No!" At their startled looks, John forced himself to calm down and speak in a normal tone. "No one goes outside for any reason. It... it isn't safe."

Danni looked like she was about to ask him why, and he shook his head. She took the hint and changed her question. "How about thread, old rags, and markers, then? I have plenty of those."

"Perfect." John stood up. "Get whatever you can. Mitch and I will move some furniture around in the living room. We'll need a lot of space to work."

"How many of these do we have to make?"

"At least a hundred. Preferably double that amount."

Mitch's eyes went wide behind his glasses. "That's gonna take all day."

John ruffled a hand through the boy's hair.

"Then we better get started."

* * *

By the time night fell, Hastings Mills had sunk further into ruin. Dozens of house fires burned, the foul smoke forming a dark cloud over the town. Ash rained down, coating everything in a blanket of black soot that stunk of death. People suffered inside sweltering houses as brownouts and blackouts denied them the comforts of air conditioning and ice, infuriating already-frustrated residents even further.

In one neighborhood, a woman ran naked and screaming from her house while her husband of fifteen years chased her with knife in each hand. Neighbors watched through parted curtains and blinds as the man caught her in the middle of the road and stabbed her repeatedly until he fell to his knees in exhaustion.

Several people opened their doors and clapped when he finally got up and walked away, leaving her corpse in the street.

At the Broad Street Elementary School, a Cub Scout meeting descended into pandemonium when a mother returned early and found the Scout Master naked and demonstrating masturbation techniques to the troop. Within minutes, six outraged fathers showed up and beat the Scout Master to death with bats and pipes. Then, with the young mother's eager participation, they proceeded to show the boys how real men had sex with a woman.

Many people kept their windows closed, even in the stifling heat, to avoid the oily stench of the fires and to block out the increasingly common sound of gunfire. Others embraced the heat and ventured outside with their own weapons, looking to vent their own rages.

More than a few ended up dead in the streets.

Those who owned battery-operated radios or televisions, and who still retained control of their senses, huddled in basements or living rooms, slowly dehydrating and marveling at the complete lack of information on Hastings Mills' troubles in the news, as if the entire town had become invisible to the rest of the world. Some of those same people finally succumbed to desperation and attempted to leave town, only to be gunned down by the exit patrols.

Women suffered through strange dreams that sent them, young and old alike, into the streets to search for lost loves. Barefoot, they wandered south, drawn to the river as if tugged along by magnets. Most never made it, falling victim to random acts of violence perpetrated by crazed men and boys who roamed through town. Those who did, however,

arrived to find others there before them. Like lemmings who'd somehow managed to learn the act of prayer, one by one they lined up on bridges and riverbanks, waiting patiently as the ones ahead of them bowed their heads in silence or softly cried before leaping into the water. None of them saw the orgiastic swirlings and splashings of something unspeakable in the water capturing the unexpected bounty in its massive tentacles.

In kitchens and bedrooms and backyards, husbands punched wives and wives struck back with nails and teeth. Frightened comfort turned to furious rape. Older siblings snuck into nurseries and smothered infants with pillows. Normally docile animals turned on their owners in fits of canine and feline rage, snapping and growling and, in one instance of Chihuahua-ian insanity, chewing off toes.

At Saint Vincent's hospital, doctors and nurses administered overdoses of medications or turned off life support equipment, while in the ER the staff locked the doors, stripped off their clothes, and fell to the ground in a twisting, grunting orgy of sweat-slicked bodies.

Above it all, a discordant soundtrack to ruination, was the endless howling of dogs, a primeval melody taken up and answered from one end of Hastings Mills to the other, to which human screams and shouts played harmony.

In bedrooms at opposite ends of the town, two men slept, one tossing and turning and moaning and soaking the sheets with perspiration, the other laying corpse stiff on his bed, the smallest of smiles creasing his lips.

Both dreamed of Hastings Mills collapsing into a giant pit of fire, people and buildings alike falling into the bottomless, flaming depths.

* * *

The day before the fair brought an unexpected surprise to the citizens of Hastings Mills: rain. Just after seven a.m., the omnipresent clouds and humidity finally exceeded their capacity to retain any more moisture and a torrential downpour ensued, dumping millions of gallons of water onto the town in minutes. Streets flooded as sewers failed to keep up with the deluge. Parched ground turned to mud. Creeks and streams, reduced to trickles for most of the month, became brown-colored torrents that overflowed their banks. In less than two hours, the river rose four inches.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the drenching rain ended, trailing off into a steady drizzle. Creeks receded and roads no longer resembled streams.

Although the heat didn't diminish, the first real breeze in weeks kicked up, and people throughout town delighted in the sensation of air moving across their skin.

As if washed away by the rain, feelings of anger and hatred and fear dissipated, and people smiled at each other instead of raising fists or weapons. Gone was the insanity of the previous night, and friends and families gathered to offer apologies, condolences, and mutual affirmations of love. In those homes hit hardest by tragedy, men and women grieved and tried to rationalize the events of the past days, spouting half-believed explanations that ranged from heat stroke to chemical attacks by terrorists.

At the far northern end of town, John Root continued his preparations, at one point locking himself in his room and going through Christian's grimoire page by page, searching for the one spell that just might give him the edge he needed. By the time he found what he hoped was the right one and tore the brittle page from the book, it was already late afternoon. He went downstairs and discovered Danni and Mitch standing outside, enjoying the feel of the mist and wind on their faces. He watched them from the window, but didn't join them. He was too aware they'd merely reached the eye of the hurricane, and far worse things were to come before the storm was over. The Trickster's evil still blanketed them all.

Anything to the contrary was just illusion.

When Danni and Mitch came back inside, damp but happy, John was waiting in the living room.

"I've done everything I can. After dinner I'm going to take a nap and then tonight I'll go to Riverside Park and lay out my circle."

"You're going to carry all that by yourself?" Danni pointed at the two garbage bags filled with the totems they'd made.

"You can drive me to the park, but then I want you to come straight back here. No arguments," he added, seeing the look on Danni's face. "I need you to stay here, where you're protected by the wards around the house. I can't set up my circle and safeguard you at the same time."

"We can't just sit here and do nothing."

John thought for a moment. "You can be my backup. Stay by the radio. If I get in trouble, you'll come get me."

Danni leaned over and kissed John's cheek. "You're learning, John."

For the rest of the evening, the memory of her lips on his skin lingered on, and it took all his will power to wait until he got back to his room before placing his hand on that spot.

He never did fall asleep.

At the top of the dike overlooking the park, John opened the bag containing the totems and estimated how far apart to space them. The fairgrounds occupied a large space, and he estimated it would take hours to finish his work.

John made his way around the fair, setting the totems in clumps of weeds, behind rocks, and in the branches of trees. Each one had been anointed ahead of time with a mixture of blue cohosh root and boldo leaves crushed in cinnamon oil. Once activated, the ring would trap anyone inside it and prevent them from leaving the circle. While he worked, he tried to ignore the eerily-silent grounds. More than once he looked up, certain he'd seen movement, only to realize he'd been fooled by lazy patches of ground mist floating between the booths.

By the time he finished, almost three hours later, only twenty of the two hundred and forty totems remained.

However, in order for his plan to work, he couldn't complete the circle until Christian was already inside, a dangerous strategy that meant waiting until after the fair opened for business before placing the final totems.

What's done is done, he thought, wrapping the black plastic bag around the remaining totems. He'd only need two to close the circle; the rest he intended to place around Danni's house, just in case.

Just in case I fail, and they're trapped there while the town goes to Hell around them.

He hoped it didn't come to that, but there was no predicting the future. He could very well be dead this time tomorrow, and the whole town, Danni and Mitch included, with him.

Lost in his thoughts, he didn't notice the person coming up behind him.

Until she attacked.

Chapter 35

John let out a surprised shout that quickly turned into a gasp of pain as something heavy landed on his back and teeth bit into the soft flesh between his shoulder and neck. Dropping the bag, he bent forward and threw himself back, putting as much force as he could into the move. He succeeded in toppling them both backwards. They hit the ground hard and he thrust his elbow into her midsection, was rewarded with a heavy exhalation of air and the release of her jaws. He rolled over, coming to his knees facing his opponent.

And stopped, completely taken by surprise at the sight of the women in front of him.

Middle-aged and matronly, she wore a flowered muumuu and fuzzy slippers. In the dark, her eyes were two circles of black. She held her hands out like talons, nails ready to shred flesh from bone.

Adding to John's stunned amazement was the fact that he knew her. He'd bought groceries from Agnes Kopek many times. She always gave Mitch a piece of candy and enjoyed passing the time with customers while she rang up their orders. From their conversations, he knew she was on the PTA and volunteered at the animal shelter.

And now she's a madwoman, controlled by an ageless monster.

John reached into his pocket, where he had a vial of brown mustard seed and mint oils, a potent defense against those intent on doing harm. His hand closed on the vial but she was on him again, a dervish of teeth and nails, before he could use it.

Letting go of the vial, John pushed her away and lashed out with his fist, a direct blow to her left temple. Something snapped in his hand, sending currents of fire up his arm and he cried out. Tears blurred his vision and he wiped his arm to clear them, expecting to see her coming at him again. But his punch had done the trick. The matron lay motionless in the wet grass.

John gritted his teeth against the pain in his hand. He'd definitely

broken something, but there was no time to worry about it. He had to reverse Christian's spell on Mrs. Kopek and then get the hell away from the park. A dab of oils on her head and neck was all she needed; when she woke up, she'd be free of Christian's influence.

By then, his hand had gone from beyond painful and into another level of torture where each beat of his heart sent waves of throbbing agony from his fingers to his elbow. Doing his best to keep his injured limb immobile, he used his good hand to radio Danni.

"It's me. I'm done. Please come get me." He didn't even try to keep the pain out of his voice.

"John? What's wrong? Are you hurt?" In the background, Mitch shouted something and Danni told him to hush.

"Just hurry. The park. Front entrance." Closing his eyes, he sat against one of the gate posts and concentrated on not moving. He had no idea of how long he'd sat like that when a sudden voice made him jump.

"John?"

He couldn't hold back a cry as his damaged hand jerked and bumped against his leg. He looked up and saw Danni staring at him. Consumed by pain, he'd never seen or heard her car pull up.

"My hand. I broke it." He motioned for her to help him up.

"Jesus, you sure did. It's swollen all to hell. We have to get you to the hospital." She aimed him toward the Mustang, but he shook his head.

"You and Mitch have to get Mrs. Kopek into the car. We need to get her as far away from here as possible. I don't want Christian to know anything happened here."

"Fine. Then it's the hospital."

"No, everything I need is at your house. Just get her into the car so we can leave."

Grunting under the woman's excessive weight, Danni and Mitch dragged her body to the Mustang and then did their best to lift her into the back seat. John tried to help, but even the slightest movements brought invisible hammers down on his hand and caused bursts of light to explode in his vision.

In the end, they had to settle for pushing her onto the floor, her muumuu riding embarrassingly high up on her legs and showing far too much of her faded underwear. Once they were all in, John instructed Danni to drive to the mall, where they left her leaning against the building.

The ride to Danni's house was an exercise in excruciating misery for John. Danni did her best, but each bump in the road, each tap on the

brakes ratcheted his distress up another notch, until he feared he might throw up. By the time they reached the house John needed Danni and Mitch to help him up the porch stairs and onto the couch.

John had to close his eyes and wait for another round of nausea to pass before he could talk. "Mitch. Go up to my room and bring back the jars labeled Yerba Santa, Thyme, and Ten Bark. Also the jar of Holy Water. Danni. Please get me a clean dishcloth or rag."

When he had the items, John dampened the rag with Holy Water and then placed two pinches of each herb on top of his injured hand. "Now," he said to Danni, "bind my hand with the rag, tight enough so that it stays in place, but doesn't cut off the circulation."

"Are you sure?" Danni chewed at her lower lip. "It's going to hurt."

"I know. But it needs doing, and I can't tie it with one hand." He held out the hand to her. In the glow of the flashlights and candles, it looked worse than before, swollen to twice its normal size and already turning dark as the flesh bruised.

John groaned but managed not to scream as Danni wrapped the cloth twice around his hand before tying it. When she finished, he was covered in sweat and shaking. "One last thing," he whispered. "Please get me four aspirin and a glass of water."

"Aspirin?" Mitch asked. "Don't you have some kind of potion that can take away the pain?"

John managed a small smile. "Aspirin is one of the oldest herbal remedies known to man." He took the pills from Danni and swallowed them with a long drink of water. Then he put his head back and closed his eyes.

Two minutes later, he was sound asleep.

* * *

On the morning of the town fair, the people of Hastings Mills woke to blast-oven temperatures and a sky the color of molten lead. At eight a.m., the thermometers had already reached ninety degrees and the air was so sodden with moisture it made people feel as if they were walking through water.

The inhospitable heat brought a return of the short tempers which had plagued the town, but physical confrontations stayed at a minimum as excitement to attend the fair provided a counterbalance to anger.

The fair opened at ten a.m.; by nine-thirty more than two hundred

people stood in line at the main gate, waiting with growing impatience while booth owners set up their games, turned on deep fryers, and laid out cookies, cakes, and pies for sale. At the lemonade and ice tea stands, men and women estimated the temperature would reach one hundred by noon, and began calling family members to bring more ice and mix up more barrels.

At the top of the levee overlooking the park, John Root lay on the hot ground and watched the proceedings through a pair of binoculars Mitch had given him. The scents of the fair—popcorn, cotton candy, fried dough, corn dogs—drifted up, and for a moment John felt transported back to his own childhood, when the church fair had always been the biggest event of the year.

John had taken his position just before eight, hoping to trap Christian and deal with him before the fair grew crowded, thereby minimizing the potential for innocent people getting hurt. But whether through cautious self-preservation or cruel Fate, Christian still hadn't shown up by the time the gates opened and the eager residents streamed in.

The oddly-shaped spiral pattern of the booths was more disquieting in the daylight than it had been at night. John recognized it for what it was, a representation of Chaos, and he made sure not to stare at it for too long at one stretch, lest he grow nauseous, especially in his exhausted state.

He'd woken before six, his hand still aching but almost fully healed. He'd spent a good hour saying prayers, filling the pockets of his black jacket with anything that might come in handy, and reviewing the spell he'd stolen from Christian's grimoire. Whether it would help or not remained to be seen.

After a quick breakfast of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and ice tea, Danni and Mitch had driven him to the park. He'd given them strict orders to return home and stay there, and to be prepared to leave town if it looked like things went bad. As he'd expected, Danni hadn't taken well to that idea and had drawn him aside to argue her point.

"We won't leave you behind," she'd said, her eyes narrow and angry.

"You have to. You have Mitch to think about. Your job is to keep him safe, keep the both of you safe."

Her expression had hardened as she acquiesced to his logic. *"Why does it have to be this way?"*

He'd shaken his head. He'd often wondered the same thing. *"I don't*

know. Fate has roles for each of us. This is mine. It always has been."

Then she'd surprised him by throwing both arms around his neck and pressing her lips against his, harder and harder, forcing her tongue into his mouth until he gave in and returned the kiss, finally letting himself express a small portion of the feelings he'd kept locked away since the day he'd met her. For one brief moment, he forgot everything, savoring the feel of her body against his, the salty-sweet taste of peanut butter, jelly, and a hint of sweat, the way her hands clutched the back of his neck.

It was Danni who'd broken the kiss, stepping back and staring at him. *"You lied."*

He'd stared at her, pretending he didn't know what she was talking about.

"That night in your room. You said we couldn't be together because your life was too dangerous. But you lied. You said that because you knew this day was coming, that you might die, and you didn't want to...to...." She'd stopped, and a tear had dropped from one eye.

"To break both our hearts," he'd finished. He'd wiped the tear away, placed his hands on her cheeks. *"I couldn't do that to you. To Mitch."*

"You won't die." She'd said it as if she could make it true by sheer force of will.

"I might."

"You can't."

"Danni, I—"

"Promise me. Promise me, dammit."

He'd wanted to. He'd even tried, had opened his mouth, prepared to let the lie come forth.

But it hadn't. In the end, he'd simply stood there and stared, unable to provide the comfort she'd needed.

"I'm sorry."

She'd shaken her head and pulled him close again.

When they'd finally separated, they'd done it at the same time, a mutual parting.

The ride to the park had been a silent one.

Covered in sweat and itching from countless bug bites, John set the binoculars aside as tears blurred his vision. For a brief moment, a part of him—admittedly, a small part, but it scared him that it was there at all—hoped he wouldn't survive, that he and his sworn enemy would spiral into the great unknown together. What scared John wasn't so much that he'd

contemplated dying, but rather the reasons behind it. Was it a desire to escape from the pain and loneliness of his existence, or was it something darker, a selfish wish to make Danni and Mitch realize what they'd had in John, and what they'd lost?

That doesn't make sense. Danni and Mitch want *you to stay with them. It's you who's saying no.*

"Self-pity doesn't become you, John."

Clara's voice. And she was right. He'd never been one given to self-pity before. If anything, he was the opposite, accepting his fate as just one of the many burdens life laid on.

So why...?

Cyrus Christian.

John brought the binoculars up and scanned the grounds. Caught a flash of black. Sure enough, there he was, standing near the center of the fair, talking to the Mayor and two other people John couldn't identify.

He must have arrived while I was daydreaming about Danni.

In that instant, John knew it had been Christian's influence that had caused John's own bout of depression.

He's grown stronger. I have to act now.

John tossed the binoculars aside and made his way down the hill.

Chapter 36

Cyrus Christian paused and closed his eyes as he felt a sensation like fire ants on his skin. He reached out with his mind, tasted the bitter flavor of righteousness.

And so it begins.

Opening his eyes, he looked at his three remaining acolytes. The absence of the fourth was now explained. "John Root is nearby. You know what to do."

The three nodded and moved off.

John approached the fair with his head down, hoping the crowds of people streaming toward the entrance would hide him long enough to get his job done.

That hope ended when the Mayor and three other men stepped from behind a large truck, with scowling faces and hands clenched in fists.

"That's far enough, asshole," Mayor Watkins said. He motioned to his men.

John didn't wait to see what they had in mind. He pulled a handful of powder from his jacket pocket and flung it forward.

"Let the spell be broken!"

The powder, a mixture of herbs and roots, sparkled like diamond dust as it struck the four men and clung to their skin. The moment it touched them, they collapsed to the ground.

John braced himself for screams, but the crowds continued past without a second glance, talking excitedly amongst themselves about the fair.

The attack, coming so far from the entrance, worried John. He felt the reaction within himself, a lessoning of his strength, strength he'd need to defeat the Trickster.

Too soon. I'm depleting myself faster than I'd planned.

He had no time to rest, however, as Sheriff Showalter and several

police officers took up places just outside the entrance to the fair. One of them spotted John and called to the others, who drew their guns. John had no choice but to dip into another pocket, this time drawing out a charm made from shards of mirrored glass glued to a picture of himself he'd taken with Danni's old Polaroid camera. He slipped the charm over his head and continued walking, enjoying a small satisfaction as the Sheriff and his men stopped and looked in all directions, their faces almost comical in their confusion.

"Where'd he go?"

"Find him, you idiots!" Showalter shouted.

The police moved past John, oblivious to his presence. He kept walking, right to the gate, even though his spell was like wading through a muddy swamp while carrying a heavy weight on his back. Despite the extra effort it took to move, he knew he couldn't discard the invisibility charm until after he'd closed the circle.

At the entrance, he placed the final two fetishes behind garbage cans, one on each side of the gate. When he let go of the second one, a burst of energy sprang up, leaping from totem to totem and encircling the fairgrounds within a magical wall. Imperceptible to the people entering the fair, it would be solid as stone to anyone trying to exit.

The moment the energy ring came to life, John removed his charm. Fifty yards away, Cyrus Christian turned and regarded John, a shocked expression on his face.

John lifted an arm that felt made of lead and pointed at him. "It's time, Trickster."

Christian's look changed to one of intense loathing, and then he burst into laughter.

"Let it begin, John Root!"

* * *

"I can't take it anymore." Mitch Anderson rose from the couch. "We have to help John."

Danni stared out the window. "How? He said we'd be putting him in danger if we went down there."

Mitch smiled. "Yeah, but what if we could give John an advantage over Christian? Something to help him."

"Like what?"

"Think, Sis. Christian's at the fair. All his people are there, too.

Heck, by now half the town's there. That means the church is empty. We can break in, get John's black bag, and bring it to him. He'll have access to all his magical stuff."

Danni started to say no, then paused as she thought about it. The church would definitely be empty, so they'd be safe.

And let's face it, you're going as crazy as your brother just sitting around with your thumbs up your ass while the man you love is risking his life.

"Let's go."

"Yeah!" Mitch pumped his fist in the air. "Hang on for a sec, I gotta get something from my room." He sprinted up the stairs, leaving Danni to wonder if she'd made the right decision.

Too late to second-guess yourself now.

A minute later, they were in the car.

Cyrus Christian raised his arms. Townspeople gathered around him, some wearing confused looks, others expressions of pure rapture.

"The time is upon us, my friends! Behold the true face of the Stranger, he who has come to thwart the will of the Gods!"

"Kill the Stranger!" someone shouted, and others took up the chant. "Kill the Stranger! Kill the Stranger!"

Overhead, the clouds grew darker, roiling and churning as if a terrible ocean had formed in the heavens. Lightning flared deep within the tempest like spotlights glowing in a thick fog. Thunder rumbled, muffled by the threatening black and gray mass.

"Why not tell them the truth, Old One?" John called out. "Tell them who they've been blindly following these past weeks. Or are you afraid?"

"I don't fear you, farmer." Christian waved one hand and a heavy wind sprang up, pushing John back several steps before he caught his balance. Around them, papers tumbled through the air and cups flew from counters.

"Kill him!" the crowd intoned.

"*He* is the Stranger!" John pointed back at Christian, and the gale died to a stiff breeze. "He goes by many names. Chaos. Trickster. Loki. He is Coyote, Fox, and Raven. He is known throughout—"

A flash of lighting, bright as a miniature sun and cannon-loud, detonated behind John, blowing a hot dog stand into wooden shrapnel that sent several bystanders to the ground screaming in pain. Untouched, John continued speaking to the crowd.

"—He is known throughout the world as the Great Liar. Amaguq,

Kupua, Kokopelli, Jacob, and Seth. Huehuecoyotl, Anansi, and Bamapana. Juha, Gwydion, and Veles. He is all those and more. Since the dawn of time—"

"ENOUGH!" People gasped and covered their ears as Christian's voice roared from every speaker, every radio, every cell phone. "He calls me the Liar, but it is he who tricks you with his lies. How do we deal with liars?"

"Kill him!" The crowd repeated it over and over. "Kill him! Kill him!"

"Yes! In the name of Yig, Tsathoggua, and Nug, and all the Gods of K'n-Yan. Kill him now!"

Christian stepped aside and the crowd surged toward John.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Danni kept her voice to a whisper even though they'd already made sure they had the church to themselves.

"Nothing happened the last time," Mitch said, gripping the knob to Christian's office door. It turned easily in his hand, and he pushed the door open. "See? Let's—"

The attack came so fast he didn't even have time to scream. Two winged demons the size of small cats struck him, knocking him back into Danni, who cried out before grabbing one and throwing it against the wall. It bounced like a rubber toy and came at her again. Emitting a high-pitched squeal, it swiped at her with clawed hands. She ducked just in time to avoid losing part of her face, but the creature still managed to tear a clump of hair as it went past, igniting a burning pain in her scalp.

"Get it off me!" Mitch cried, struggling to pull the second demon from his leg. Like its partner, it had a furry body and the face of a deformed toad. Danni kicked it, drawing another teeth-rattling squeal. In tandem, the two airborne monstrosities swooped down the hall and then turned around to mount another attack.

"Watch out," Mitch said, pulling his slingshot from his backpack. He took aim at the creatures as they began their run. There was a soft twang and something shiny struck one of the demons, which let out a horrible screech and then disappeared in a burst of black smoke.

"What was—?" Danni started to ask, before diving to the ground when the second imp lunged at her.

"Stay down." Mitch stepped past her, loading the slingshot again. He pulled back and let go in one smooth motion. Something flashed past Danni's face and hit the wall with a metallic *ping*. The demon landed on her

leg and she yelped in pain as it bit down. She swung her fist at it; once, twice. The third blow knocked it free.

"Kill it!" she shouted, as it prepared to leap at her again. Its oversized mouth opened wide, showing jagged teeth that dripped blood.

My blood...."Mitch..."

"I'm trying!"

Mitch sighted in on the remaining demon, his arm quivering ever so slightly.

"Almost," she heard him whisper, and then he let go, sending another metallic object on its way. A moment later, the second demon exploded.

"Holy shit." Danni touched her head, and her hand came away spotted with blood. "Are you okay?" she asked her brother.

Mitch set down the slingshot and pulled up the leg of his pants. Small punctures showed where the monster's claws had pierced his jeans. Danni inspected them, but they looked no worse than if he'd caught himself in a thorn bush.

"What did you shoot them with?" she asked, as he loaded the slingshot again and peered carefully into the office. When nothing else attacked, he put the slingshot in his back pocket.

"Silver dimes from my coin collection." He showed her one. "Silver killed the Hellhounds, so I figured it might be a good idea to bring some with us."

"Smart thinking." Danni pointed at the desk. "You check the drawers. I'll check the closet."

She crossed the room and slowly opened the door so that just a crack of darkness appeared. When nothing happened, she pulled it all way open and jumped back.

One of Christian's black shirts hung from the rod. On the floor were a pair of shoes and a white cardboard box, the type offices used for storing files. Danni pushed the heavy box aside, but the rest of the floor was empty. The one shelf above the hanger bar held only a thin coating of dust. She was about to close the door when something stopped her. She looked at the box again. Something about it...

Why would Christian keep a box of files in the closet?

Danni's heart beat faster as she lifted the lid.

A human head stared at her.

"Fuck!" The shout escaped her as she fell backwards, landing on her hands and butt. She scuttled away from the closet like a small child

doing a backwards crab walk.

"What is it?" Mitch rushed over, his slingshot at the ready. Danni tried to speak, but her mouth refused to work. A vision of the head, with its dark hair and terrified face, seemed superimposed over everything. Even worse was the fact that she recognized that face, had seen it more than once.

Mitch reached toward the box, and that was enough to unlock Danni's jaw.

"Mitch, no!"

Her warning came too late. His hand went in, came back clutching something dark in his fingers. Danni whimpered and slid further back, dreading the sight of her brother holding the severed head by the hair.

Instead, he held out a leather satchel. "We've got it!"

"Mitch, didn't you see...?" Danni paused, wondering if the head she'd seen had been an illusion of some kind.

"See what?"

"The head! There was a human head in that box." She leaned forward and peered in.

The box was empty.

"I don't understand."

"Remember what John said. The Trickster is a Master of illusions."

"Could he have set up an illusion to scare anyone looking in that box?"

Mitch frowned. "I don't know."

She grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him away from the closet. "Then he might know we're here. Let's go."

"Wait a sec." Mitch opened the bag and reached his hand inside.

"What are you doing?" Danni asked.

"John said all you have to do is think about what you want, and you'll find it. I'm looking for that oil he put on us before, to protect us from evil. We might need it when we get to the park."

Danni watched as her brother's arm disappeared into the bag, well past his elbow. *Someday I'll have to ask John about that.*

"Got ya!" Mitch held up a small glass jar.

"Well, well, what have we here?"

Both of them jumped at the unexpected voice from the doorway. Sheriff Showalter stepped into the room, his hand resting on his belt right next to his gun. "Looks like I caught myself a couple of intruders. I think the Reverend's gonna be real happy to see you two."

Danni stepped forward and then stopped as Showalter gripped the handle of his pistol. "Don't do anything foolish. The Reverend wants you alive, but he didn't say anything about unhurt. Now here's what we're gonna do. I'm going to toss you my handcuffs, and you're going to put them on you and the brat. Then we're all gonna take a ride to the park, so you can watch your friend John die."

Showalter took a step forward and threw the handcuffs to Danni, who caught them. "Nice and slow," he said.

She spoke to the Sheriff while she snapped one cuff on her wrist. "You don't have to do this. He's evil. Can't you see that? He's just—"

"Shut the fuck up." Showalter's face was hard and angry. "I got no problem hitting a woman." As soon as the second cuff clicked on Mitch's wrist, Showalter motioned them forward. "Let's go. I—"

Mitch pushed past Danni and threw the open jar. It hit Showalter in the chest, spraying clear liquid everywhere. He froze with this gun half out, his eyes wide. Then he fell sideways, his head hitting the floor with a muffled thump.

"You took an awfully big chance, little brother. What if that stuff didn't work?" Danni asked, as they searched Showalter's pockets for the key to the handcuffs.

"It wouldn't be any worse than getting taken prisoner."

"You got a point." She pulled out the key and unlocked the handcuffs. "C'mon, let's get the hell out of here before he wakes up."

Remembering the Sheriff's words about John dying, she ran down the hall as fast as she could.

I hope we're not too late.

* * *

"You're weaker than I thought." Cyrus Christian gave no indication he was exerting himself. Overhead, oil and sludge and rotten flesh masqueraded as clouds. Discomforting swirls of bilious green, pus yellow, and shit brown vapors moved in odd patterns amidst the grays and blacks. Lightning continued to arc back and forth, all the more strange for the complete lack of thunder.

Many of the fair-goers had taken shelter in booths, crowding together as if hiding from an invisible rain. A handful of people stood behind Christian, while the group he'd exhorted to kill John had overwhelmed him with sheer numbers and pinned him to the ground. One

of them raised a large hunting knife and drove it down toward John's chest. There was a scream, and Christian's smile grew wider.

Then it faltered as the man who'd wielded the knife stood up, blood pouring from a gaping wound in his arm. Light exploded beneath the pile of bodies, and several people were thrown through the air. The rest hurriedly stepped back as John stood, his clothes dusty, his body unharmed.

"You mistake compassion for weakness," John said, holding a clenched fist in front of him. He opened his hand and swung his arm around, casting a shimmering powder across the people who'd attacked him. Tiny bursts of light appeared, like a swarm of fireflies, and the people keeled over.

"But you *are* weak, *u'ya igawa'stï.*" Christian's tone made an insult of the ancient Native American term for practitioners of white magic. "Your compassion won't allow you to hurt the innocent, while I am free to do as I wish."

His voice rising to a shout, Christian intoned, "People of Hastings Mills, listen to me. The time of the new beginning is upon us! The Old Ones call to you through me. They who have waited are eager to come forth, and they demand their due! They yearn for the blood of the unbelievers, the ones who stand in the way of the Dark Path. Let this be your sacrifice to the Gods!"

A wave of energy, dark as night and cold as death, struck John, sending him to his knees and pulling the air from his lungs. He fought to breathe while the wave continued past him, spreading across the fair. By the time he struggled back to his feet, Christian's magic had already taken effect.

Men, women, and children were turning on each other, teeth bared and faces twisted into masks of pure hatred. People struck each other with fists, bit at noses and ears, and clawed at eyes and genitals, instinctively going for soft, vital parts. Neighbors, friends, and relatives fought with animalistic frenzy, like cavemen battling over a kill. Blood sprayed and clumps of flesh flew through the air. Combatants screamed in pain or howled their fury, until the cacophony grew so great John had to press his hands over his ears just to hear himself think.

"Now you see the power of Chaos!" Christian's words boomed over the din like a cannon among gunshots.

John closed his eyes and tried to concentrate. The Trickster's magic wasn't complicated; it never was. He relied more on sheer power,

harnessing the dark energies surrounding the town, than he did on building intricate spells. It was something John was grateful for, as he'd have been no match against a true wizard or mage. Instead, it came down to raw strength versus raw strength, will versus will. He'd known that going in, prepared as best he could. So it took him only seconds to determine the proper counterattack.

The problem lay in putting it to use.

From his pants pocket, John drew a Y-shaped branch no larger than his hand. The previous night he'd stripped off the bark and carved a series of runes into the wood. Now he pushed the stem into the ground and bowed before it, placing his hands flat on the earth to either side. Doing his best to block out the increasing pandemonium around him, including Christian's manic laughter, he concentrated on triggering the runes.

One by one, the symbols began to glow, brighter and brighter, until the entire stick resembled red-hot metal. At the same time, a powerful thrumming pulsated through the ground and air. As the vibrations grew louder, people slowly ceased their fighting and stepped away from each other with bewildered looks on their faces. Some burst into tears. Others fell to the ground, moaning in pain.

John lifted his head and looked at Cyrus Christian. His muscles ached so bad he was afraid to stand up, lest his shaking legs show his enemy how weak he truly felt. He let no hint of how he felt show in his voice as he addressed his enemy.

"Come now, Old One. Surely you can do better than that?"

Across the empty space separating them, Christian let loose an inarticulate cry of anger. "You dare mock me? Let's see how you feel when I sacrifice your new family to the Gods."

Christian's body underwent a series of changes, as if the wind was grinding away a disguise and revealing the true being beneath. His hair grew even longer and faded to silvery-gray. His skin aged decades in ten seconds, taking on the visage of an octogenarian mad scientist covered in wrinkles and creases, loose flesh hanging from his neck and chin.

With one hand, he painted intricate symbols in the air, while with the other he pointed at the ground in front of him. A whirling cyclone of dust rose up, a hot tempest that swirled between the booths, turning tent flaps into enormous pterodactyl wings and forcing John to raise his hands against flying grit and debris. Then there was a thunderous explosion and the tornado evaporated, leaving behind three forms. Wiping dirt from his eyes, John immediately recognized two of them.

Danni and Mitch.

It was the third form, however, that turned John's blood cold.

The alligator demon stood well over eight feet tall. Although John had never seen it for real, he'd come across pictures of it in magical texts often enough to recognize the mythical Gator Daddy of the Florida swamps. Half crocodilian and half man, the demon sported razor-sharp claws, a five-foot, muscular tail, and a long snout filled with arrowhead-shaped teeth. Its eyes glowed angry red, and venomous saliva dripped from its jaws as it hissed at the two humans cowering before it.

God, no. I can't let anything happen to them. Sick from guilt and fear, John frantically searched his pockets for something he could use to thwart the demon's attack. He'd never expected Christian to call up something so powerful, though, and he had nothing capable of driving the beast away.

"John! Do something!"

Danni's cry for help galvanized John into action. He ran forward and leaped onto the demon's back, wrapping his arms around the thick, scaled neck and squeezing as hard as he could. The demon bellowed in surprise and spun around in circles. John clawed at the creature's armored hide, but it was like trying to dig through steel plating. His grip gave way and he found himself flying through the air. He landed awkwardly on his left hand and couldn't hole back a scream when the already weak wrist gave way. He rolled over and struggled to his knees, holding his injured arm to his chest, expecting to see the monster charging at him.

Instead, the alligator demon had already turned its attention back to Danni and Mitch. Its meaty tail whipping back and forth with a sound like a cracking whip, the demon emitted a growling, gurgling laugh as it advanced, clawed hands opening and closing in anticipation.

Have to do something. Anything.

With his good hand, John reached into a pocket and pulled out a silver medallion, praying the metal worked as well on Native American demons as it did on other evil beings. Gritting his teeth against the ache in his wrist, John charged the Gator Daddy, slammed the medallion against its neck, and watched in horror as the coin fell harmlessly from the thick, scaly hide. Intent on avoiding the creature's teeth and claws, he forgot that alligators carried a third weapon.

The beast's tail caught him across both thighs with bone-bruising force. John screamed as he tumbled over, his legs and wrist sending out bursts of agony each time one of them hit the ground. He'd barely come to a stop when claws tore through his clothes and pierced skin. Then he was

flying once more. He hit the ground hard, knocking his breath from his lungs.

"John! Help me! Don't let it kill me!"

Danni's voice reached him through the black fog surrounding his brain. He tried to move, but every part of his body felt broken and battered. Darkness closed in, narrowing his vision to a pinpoint. There was a sensation of falling, and Danni's cries grew distant. *"...Save me. Don't let me die...hate you...."*

What was that? John's mind struggled to make sense of things. *Something wasn't right. Why would Danni say that? And why wasn't Mitch saying anything?*

John fought the darkness but the pain and dizziness had him feeling like he was trying to run through a spinning cement mixer in the dark. He focused his concentration. *Not right. Something....*

Her pleas came back to him. *"Help me" "Save me"*

Me. Not *us*.

I've never heard Danni put herself before Mitch.

I've been –

A massive blow struck his head and the darkness claimed him.

* * *

Danni's first thought as they entered the park was that they'd arrived too late, that John must have failed. The fair grounds were in complete turmoil. Screaming people, trapped by John's magic circle, ran in all directions, searching for a way out. Many of the booths had fallen over or been destroyed, and several were ablaze. Dozens of bloodied bodies lay on the ground. Danni couldn't tell if they were dead or alive, but she refused to stop and check, even when she recognized people she knew.

"We've got to find John," she shouted over the general bedlam. Holding Mitch's hand, she led the way through the madness. Without warning, they reached an area clear of people, the change so sudden she stumbled and almost fell. When she saw what was happening, her legs went weak and she had to grab Mitch for support.

John hung motionless in the air, several feet off the ground. His head snapped back and forth and his body jerked as if invisible hands were slapping him and shaking him at the same time. Suddenly, he flew backwards and crashed into a table filled with desserts. The table broke, sending brownies and cupcakes everywhere.

John didn't move.

On the other side of the clearing, a hideously aged version of Cyrus Christian stood facing the bloated, evil clouds, his hands moving in strange patterns. He shouted something in a language Danni couldn't understand and the ground shook like a giant animal waking from a slumber.

"Hurry, before he sees us." Mitch tugged at her and held up John's bag. She remembered why they were there.

Forcing her trembling legs to move, Danni followed Mitch across the circle. Christian shouted their names, and gale-force winds whipped at them.

"Faster!" Dust burned their eyes and stung their skin, and more than once the wind threatened to lift them off the ground, but Mitch's grip never loosened until they were crouched next to John's prone form. Mitch dug through the bag, mumbling about medicines, while Danni checked John's breathing.

"He's alive!" she said, just as Mitch handed her a small, brown bottle.

"Try this."

"What is it?" she asked, fumbling the cap off with shaking fingers.

"I don't know! I asked for something to wake people up."

The cap came off and odor of smelling salts hit Danni like a punch in the face. She waved the bottle under John's nose and his eyes sprang open. He coughed and moaned at the same time.

"You're...not real...I couldn't...save you." His eyelids fluttered and closed.

"John!" She gently slapped his cheeks. "Wake up."

Danni peered over her shoulder, expecting to see Christian coming after them, but he was still shouting to the sky. The earth continued to rumble and quake. More booths toppled over, and people shouted for help as they ran past, making Danni wonder if they were in more danger from being trampled than from Christian's black magic.

"Danni." John's hand tried to grip hers, slid off. She looked down and saw his eyes were open again. "If it's really you, get out of here."

Before Danni could respond, Mitch interrupted. "John. We got your bag back. You can use it to—Ow!" Mitch cried out as a piece of plywood hurtled into him.

"Mitch!" Danni let go of John and went to her brother.

"I'm okay," he said, sitting up. His glasses hung from one ear and his arm was scraped and bloodied, but he looked relatively unharmed.

Returning her attention to John, she found him smiling through the dirt and blood covering his face.

"It really is you. Give me your hand. You, too, Mitch." He held his hands out to them.

"What about your bag?" Mitch asked. "Don't you need it?"

John shook his head.

"All I need is the two of you."

* * *

They're alive! Really alive! John had opened his eyes to see Danni and Mitch staring down at him. At first, he'd been sure it was another of the Trickster's illusions, illusions he should have expected. It was what the Ancient One did best, playing games with peoples' minds and turning them against each other.

Even after touching Danni, he hadn't been sure, not until he saw her reaction when Mitch got hurt. That was where Christian had made his mistake. Without the capacity for compassion himself, he couldn't incorporate it into the illusions he created.

At that moment, John had known how to stop his old enemy.

Clasping their hands tightly in his, John stood up, pulling them along with him. He felt their pain, their fear, their confusion. But most of all, he felt their strength, strength that came from their innate goodness and the love they had for each other. And for him. He felt it, and he let it revitalize him, heal him, charge him like a living battery.

Then he channeled it into the spell handed down to him by his mother.

"Your time here is over, Trickster. Your Gods are the Gods of darkness, of evil, of selfishness. They cannot stand against true goodness. I banish you by all your names. Trickster, Coyote, Anansi. Huehuecoyotl, Puck, and Seth. Eris, Iwa, Amaguq. Uncle Tompa, Samedi, and Crow. And all your other faces. You are not welcome in this place. Begone!"

The ancient, wizened thing that had been Cyrus Christian screamed. His eyes flashed red in time with the lighting streaking across the sky, and the ground rumbled and shook harder than ever. "You will not win, John Root. I'll destroy you like I did your bitch-dams before you."

Blinding light flashed as lightning exploded a nearby popcorn booth. Danni and Mitch cried out, but John held their hands tight and began his banishment again. This time, the effect on Christian was visible. He fell

to his knees, his body twitching like he'd stepped on live wires. John started his banishment for a third time and Christian's skin split open in a dozen places, spraying thick, reddish-brown fluids onto the ground.

A figure appeared next to Danni. Distracted by the movement, John turned and saw Sheriff Showalter aiming his gun at Christian's twitching form.

"No!" John cried, but it was too late. Showalter pulled the trigger, the sound of the report lost amid the deafening thunder of the lightning storm.

Christian fell backwards. At the same time, the thunder and lightning ended and the ground went still.

In the sudden silence, Showalter's voice sounded too loud.

"That'll take care of the fucker."

Letting go of Danni and Mitch's hands, John turned on Showalter. "You don't know what you've done. You can't kill—"

The earth heaved, sending everyone tumbling to the ground. A terrible grinding, crashing sound, like a thousand dump trucks dropping rocks onto cement, drowned out the terrified cries of the crowd as the entire park shuddered.

Long, jagged cracks opened in the ground, spreading out from Christian's prone form. People scrambled frantically to avoid the rapidly-widening crevices, but dozens still tumbled into endless darkness.

John grabbed Danni and Mitch and ran for the entrance. Behind them, Showalter swore as he fell into one of the faults, which closed again like a huge, earthen mouth.

"What's happening?" Danni had to shout to be heard.

"Shooting Christian broke my spell."

"But he's—"

A thunderous roar cut off Danni's words. The bellow sounded again, erupting from the Stygian depths of all the fractures at once. John stopped and pushed Danni and Mitch behind him, reacting instinctively to the primordial sounds rising from beneath them.

A tentacle, fat as a telephone pole and twice as long, sprang from a crevice, accompanied by the stench of dead, rotting fish. More python-like appendages joined it, snaking up from holes and cracks throughout the fair grounds. They whipped back and forth in search of prey, their rows of sucker-shaped mouths drooling greenish, foul-smelling fluids.

"Behold Asuggath!"

Christian's voice confirmed John's fears.

Asuggath. One of Chaos's harbingers. Compared to the Elder Gods, it was a child, a pet even. But to humankind, it would be as if Hell itself had come to Earth. A distant cousin to the monster that had taken residence in the river, it dwarfed that creature the way a Tyrannosaurus would tower over a lizard.

John ducked a probing limb that angled toward them. Nearby, another tentacle wrapped itself around a fat woman in a blue dress, cutting off her screams in mid-shriek. The coils constricted and blood and organs erupted from her mouth. The moment it slid back into the darkness, another rose to take its place.

John put his mouth close to Danni's ear. "Get out of here. Go as far as you can."

Danni shook her head. "We're not leaving you."

"If you want to live, you will. I have to finish this, one way or the other." John wrapped his arms around her and Mitch, squeezed them to his chest. "I love you both. But this has to end. Go."

He stepped back. Mitch was crying and shaking his head, and Danni had to hold him to keep him from running to John.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Danni leaned forward and gave John a furious kiss he wished would go on forever but which ended too soon.

"John, I want you to know—"

The rest of Danni's words were swept away as a massive weight crashed into John. Tons of cold, slimy rubber enfolded him, squeezing the air from his lungs and threatening to crush his ribs. Fiery pain lanced through his body as miniature teeth sawed through cloth and skin.

"John!"

Danni's shout faded away and the fair flew past him. He realized the beast was dragging him to the crater from which it had come. John struggled to free himself but his arms were pinned tight, preventing him from reaching anything in his pockets. Blood from dozens of quarter-sized bites soaked his clothes, and he thanked the Lord he'd been caught by the tip of the appendage, were the muscles were weakest. Even so, he knew he wouldn't last long.

He heard Christian's mocking laughter. "Goodbye, John Root! Tell your mother I said hello!"

John saw the impenetrable black of a crevice growing closer.

This is it. I've failed.

Mother, I'm sorry.

He closed his eyes. The tentacle twitched and he felt himself falling. He opened his mouth to scream.

And landed hard on his back.

Chapter 37

"John, move your ass! Hurry!"

John opened his eyes and found himself inches from the abyss. Every shake of the ground threatened to roll him into the opening. Although confused as to how he'd gotten there, he pushed himself away and got to his feet.

Mitch and Danni stood nearby. Mitch still gripped John's black bag in one hand.

In his other, he held a brown bottle that John immediately recognized. It had been his mother's, and her mother's before that.

Holy water mixed with the powdered bones of a Saint. The one thing that could bring pain to a minion of the Elder Gods.

I'm glad I taught that boy how to use the bag!

John turned and saw the tentacle that had held him. It lay on the ground, twitching in erratic spasms. Wide blisters covered the rubbery skin. Greenish-yellow ichor dripped from the wounds.

Returning his gaze to Danni, he shouted. "I told you to leave."

"We can't." Her expression was a mix of relief and terror. "The circle."

You're a country fool, John Root! He couldn't believe he'd forgotten. As long as the fetishes were in place, no one could exit the park.

"Get a piece of wood, a stick, anything long. When you get to the main entrance, find one of the two fetishes I hid there and move it. You'll need the stick to reach through the barrier. As soon as you break the circle, you'll be free to leave, and so will everyone else. Hurry!"

"John..."

He nodded to her. "I know. But I still have one trick up my sleeve." Before she could say anything else, he took off at a run, dodging tentacles and panicked townspeople.

The thing that had been Cyrus Christian stood in the same place John had last seen him, steady as a mountain while the ground quaked all

around him. More than anything else, he resembled an ancient corpse magically reanimated, his white hair waving wildly in the wind, gaping wounds in his skin leaking vile fluids, eyes covered with cataracts so thick it seemed impossible he could see through them.

"Trickster!" John shouted.

The opaque orbs turned toward him.

"I'm coming for you now!" John held up the empty jar Mitch had used against the Asuggath.

Christian's blind eyes focused on the jar and narrowed in fury. With a curse, he turned and bolted away from John. As he ran, the Asuggath's tentacles aided his escape, clearing the way before him and blocking it after he passed. John followed as best he could, dodging the snapping, whipping appendages while trying to keep his quarry in sight.

At the side of the park bordering Route 16, John caught sight of Christian's tall, insect-like form at the bottom of a small slope that led to the road.

I've got him trapped! All he needed was for Danni and Mitch to take a few moments longer before they broke the circle.

Christian saw him approaching and traced more symbols in the air. The ground gave way in front of John, tumbling him into a shallow hole. Before he could regain his feet, the sides of the hole collapsed on him, burying him to his waist. A second later, the heavens exploded with thunder and a torrential rain. By the time John fought his way free from the muddy pit, Christian was nowhere in sight.

Looking both ways to see where he'd gone, John instead saw people running from the fair grounds and back toward town.

The circle's broken. He was freed.

Now what do I do?

John turned and strode back to the fair.

* * *

John walked through a scene that resembled the aftermath of a barbarian raid. Broken and dismembered bodies lay everywhere, the heavy downpour washing blood and body parts down into the Abyss. Only a handful of booths remained, the rest either dragged away by the Asuggath or crushed beneath its tentacles.

How many dead or missing? Dozens? Hundreds? He knew that even if he succeeded in his task, Hastings Mills might never recover from the

Trickster's visit.

Putting his shoulders down, he forced his way through the tempest, careful to place his feet on solid ground. When he finally reached the main entrance, John paused. *Now what? Christian could have gone anywhere.*

Barely audible over the cacophony of human cries and blaring car horns that still filled the air, the pealing of bells reached him.

The church.

Of course. It's his center of power in the town.

John took off at a run through the torrential rain.

Our Lady of Perpetual Hope had the appearance of a long-abandoned building when John arrived. Red vines and brown fungus covered the walls and stairs, and the doors hung crookedly from broken hinges. The inside was even worse. Pews lay overturned or in jumbled piles. Frescos lay broken on the floor. Unspeakable growths hung from the ceiling, waving back and forth even though there was no breeze. Just past the entrance, the font resembled a stagnant pond, filled with greenish-yellow slime that bubbled and stunk of decayed flesh.

"I knew you would come." Christian's voice. Weaker than before, but still powerful enough to fill the cavernous church over the sounds of the storm.

John peered into the gloomy depths and saw his enemy standing behind his pulpit, as if preparing to give a final sermon.

"Enough is enough," John said, entering the church. Beneath his feet, the once bright-red carpet was faded and slippery with mold.

"You're quite right," Christian said. He gripped the lectern with gnarled hands as the ground shook again, sending candles and statues to the floor. "Asuggath is almost ready to breach completely through veil, and then I'll be on my way. Pity you won't be around to see it. But I suppose you can take comfort in believing you'll be reunited with your lovely wife in the hereafter. Oh, wait. What about Ms. Anderson and her brother? Won't they be there as well? I imagine that could be awkward. Unless Heaven allows multiple partners these days."

John's heart clenched at the mention of Danni and Mitch. Had they made it out alive?

Shaking his head, John continued down the center of the church. "I know what you're trying to do, Old One. But it won't work. I'm not falling for your tricks."

"No tricks this time." Christian said. "I don't need them. You've

already lost, just like your mother, and her mother before her. Now it's time for you to see what they saw, right before they died." He held a leather-bound book. "I sent my little friends to your whore's house. Look what they found." He opened the grimoire and began reading:

> Cthluhu, Yog-Sothoth, Hastur, Azetoth!
> Th'glou n'gtam Asuggath R'lyeh osi'gah attam
> B'ryal dol myrl accu'rah
> Asri, Asuggath! Asri!

Pieces of the ceiling cracked and fell. Walls groaned and the floor twisted and bucked. Windows shattered and overstressed beams splintered. Outside, the skies loosed a barrage of thunder louder than anything John had ever heard. The church floor split with an explosive *crack!*, a gaping wound opening from the doors to the altar. Boiling-hot steam rose up, carrying the vile reek of brimstone and roasting flesh.

"Behold the doorway to R'lyeh! Beyond the veil lies the Sleeping God, who sleeps no more! Hear me, Asuggath! I bid you welcome!"

An unholy bellow echoed from deep within the earth, riding a blast of foul air. John got to his knees and took a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. Gasping from the hellish stink, he mouthed the unfamiliar words slowly and carefully:

> X'cha n'kou ru chi Asuggath
> Ama k'lyam sho-ta Cthulhu
> X'cha n'kou ru chi Asuggath!

Christian's triumphant expression disappeared, sudden fear twisting his cadaverous features into a living Halloween mask.

"No! You can't know that spell. Only I—" He fell silent as he realized the truth. With an inarticulate scream, Christian charged down the altar steps, narrowly avoiding the six-foot wide crevice.

Undeterred, John continued reciting the incantation to control Asuggath.

> X'cha n'kou ru chi Asuggath
> Ama k'lyam sho-ta Cthulhu
> X'cha n'kou ru chi Asuggath!

Christian had nearly reached John when the entire building shook and the crevice spread wider. The floor fell away beneath John and he found himself hanging on for his life, his feet dangling over the endless blackness of the rift. Ten feet away, Christian was already pulling himself back over the edge.

John did a quick calculation in his head. His enemy would easily reach him before he could pull himself up, leaving him helpless to defend himself. There was only one way to avoid defeat.

"Trickster!" he called out in as loud a voice as he could muster. Christian paused and looked at him.

John let go of the edge with the hand that still held the domination spell.

"If you want control of your demon, you'll need this." John let the paper fall into the abyss.

"No!" Christian jumped after it. The Stygian blackness swallowed his form, and his screams faded away to nothing soon after.

Once again, the ground commenced its rumbling, only this time the edges of the crevice drew closer instead of separating. John grabbed at the wooden floor. Two of his nails peeled back and fire blossomed in his fingers. He kicked his feet but found no purchase. Like a movie in reverse, the opening grew thinner with every second, threatening to cut him in half.

He felt himself sliding into the Abyss and closed his eyes, waiting for the deadly crush that was only seconds away. So he never saw the two pairs of hands that gripped his arms and pulled him free just as the crevice slammed closed. The resulting vibrations shook the church to its foundation. Two of the walls buckled and collapsed, sending the far side of the building crashing down in a pile of wood and plaster.

John looked up and found Danni and Mitch kneeling over him.

"We have to get out of here," Danni shouted.

He held out his hands and they helped him up. Bent low and holding their arms over their heads for protection, they ran through the falling debris and out the front doors.

Danni paused at the top of the steps and John gave her a push forward. "Keep going!"

Only when they were half a block from the church did he stop and let them look back.

Watching the church crumble reminded John of a skyscraper being demolished. The walls and roof collapsed inwards, the bell emitting one last discordant clang before the spire disappeared into the rising dust. But

the destruction didn't end. With a groan like a prehistoric animal's death cry, the entire structure sank into the ground. The hole grew wider, swallowing the tall cement stairs. It continued to expand, sucking down the dead lawn and the white sign that read "Town Fair this Sunday!" Only when it reached the sidewalk did the crater finally stall.

At the same moment, the ground ceased shaking and the rain came to a stop. As if finally emptied of all the evil stored in them, the unnatural clouds seeped away, leaving behind ordinary summer thunderheads. Sitting on the wet, muddy grass, Mitch looked over at John.

"Is it over?"

Still trying to catch his breath, John nodded.

"Did we win?"

John felt a smile crawl across his face. He reached out and put his arms around Mitch and Danni, drawing them into a hug as the clouds began breaking apart and sunlight fought to peak through.

"Yes. Yes, we did."

Chapter 38

John placed his battered suitcase on the sidewalk and fought to keep his tears inside. He'd already shed more than any man should have to, saying his private goodbyes to Danni the night before. The past two weeks had been better than any John had experienced since losing his wife and son so many years before. He'd spent his days playing with Mitch and repairing the house, and his nights in bed with Danni, doing all the things he'd dreamed about since he'd met her.

By unspoken agreement, they rarely talked about what had happened. The entire town remained convinced there'd been a freak earthquake, culminating with the ground collapsing under the church. They blamed the same hole for releasing toxic gasses that had caused rampant hallucinations and violent behavior. The day after the fair, John had gone to the crater and looked around, but had found no sign of Christian or the grimoire. He'd told Danni it was his opinion the Ancient One had met up with Asuggath after all, although not in the fashion he'd expected.

"So then he's dead?" Mitch had asked.

Unable to lie to them, John had shaken his head. "No, the Trickster cannot die. He's an elemental being, eternal. Like it or not, we'll never be rid of him. But I think it will be a long, long time before he's able to cause any mischief in our world again." Those had been his last words on the subject, and neither Mitch nor Danni had brought it up again.

But he'd known their being together couldn't last, that eventually he'd have to return to the path Fate had placed him on so many years before. So two nights ago he'd told Danni he had to go. She'd taken it badly at first, but eventually she'd accepted it, telling him she'd known he couldn't stay forever. That night, instead of making love they'd simply held each other until they fell asleep.

Now, saying his final goodbyes at the bus station, John wished he'd had the strength to deny his destiny.

"I don't understand. Don't you want to stay with us?" Mitch wiped the back of his hand across his cheeks, his own tears flowing freely. Rather than looking sad, his face was clenched tight in teenage anger.

Kneeling down, John placed both hands on Mitch's shoulders. "Mitch, if I could stay here, I would. There's nothing I'd like better. I love you and your sister like you are... my own family."

"Then why are you leaving?" Mitch refused to meet his eyes, so John placed one hand under the boy's chin and tilted his face up so they were staring at each other.

"Because I don't have a choice. My calling, my life's work, is to help people like you and Danni and all the people in all the towns like Hastings Mills. It's what I do, and no one else can do it. Sometimes that makes me feel bad; it's like a curse. But it also makes me feel good, because I think about all the people I help, and I know I've made the world a better place."

"Will I ever see you again?"

Looking into Mitch's eyes, John made a decision. He'd had a family once, knew the only thing keeping him from starting another had been the fear that his life would put anyone he loved in too much danger.

But Mitch and Danni knew the danger.

And they still wanted him.

"Yes, you will." At Danni's startled gasp from above them, he turned and stared at her, let her know he wasn't lying to them. "You will. I promise." Turning back to Mitch, he said, "Whenever I'm not involved in... in taking care of a problem, we'll figure out a way for me to either visit you or for you and Danni to come visit me."

"You... you promise?" The look of frightened hope in Mitch's eyes made John more determined than ever to change his life.

"I swear." John stood up and took Danni's hands. "I swear to you, too. We'll find a way."

Danni shook her head, not in denial but in mock exasperation. "Great. Bad enough I could never find a local guy to date. Now I've got a long-distance relationship with someone who doesn't even own a car. You expect me to drive to South Carolina whenever I want to see you?"

John let out a small laugh. "I guess I'll have to invest in a car."

Danni poked him in the chest. "Get with the times. Ever hear of an airplane?"

A shudder ran through John. He'd never flown. Too many supernatural beings used the skies for transportation. Just then, the

loudspeaker announced that the bus to Pittsburgh was boarding. From there, John would change buses three more times before he reached home.

He leaned forward and gave Danni a long kiss, her lips tasting of sweet lemonade. He held the kiss until he ran out of breath.

"We'll start with a train." He picked up his case. "It's safer."

"Safe is for ordinary people," she said, giving him a wicked smile.

He shook Mitch's hand and then climbed onto the bus. Until it pulled away, he waved to Mitch and Danni through the darkened windows, and smiled every time they waved back.

Only when the town of Hastings Mills was well behind him did he think about Danni's last words and nod.

Safe is for ordinary people.

Maybe someday I can be ordinary again.

Epilogue

Inuvik, Northwest Territories

The battered, decades-old pickup came to a halt in a cloud of black, oily exhaust smoke. The blowing snow made it hard to see more than twenty feet, and the scattered buildings of Canada's northernmost town appeared ghostly.

"Sure I can't take you into town, Father?" the bearded man behind the wheel asked, as his passenger got out.

"No, thank you," said the passenger, his face hidden in the hood of his coat. "I need to exercise my legs."

"Suit yourself. But be careful. This weather can kill you fast." The truck pulled away, belching diesel fumes as it picked up speed.

The hooded man raised a hand as if to wave goodbye, and traced a series of symbols in the subzero air. A quarter mile down the road, the wheezing pickup slid sideways on the icy pavement and flipped over. A moment later, a ball of flame shot up as the truck exploded. Thick smoke rose from the wreckage, creating a column of black rising into the sky. Overhead, the storm clouds grew darker, as if absorbing the smoke and becoming one with it.

In a matter of seconds, the falling snow changed to icy pellets.

Laughing to himself, the hooded man walked down the road until he came to the flaming wreck. He set down the beat-up snakeskin suitcase he carried and warmed his hands of the hot metal. Then he removed the white collar from his shirt and cast it into the flames.

Hidden by the hood of his coat, the flesh of his old man's face twisted and reformed itself.

Moments later, a heavyset, middle-aged man strode down the icy highway toward Inuvik. As he grew closer, the howling of sled dogs echoed from the town.

In the land of the Inuit, the *Amaguq* had returned.

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A life-long resident of New York's haunted Hudson Valley, JG Faherty has been a finalist for both the Bram Stoker Award® (The Cure, Ghosts of Coronado Bay) and ITW Thriller Award (The Burning Time), and he is the author of 5 novels, 9 novellas, and more than 50 short stories. He writes adult and YA horror/sci-fi/fantasy, and is a member of the Horror Writers Associations' Board of Trustees as well as the head of the HWA's Library and Literacy program. He is also an active member of the Science Fiction Writers of America, Mystery Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, and Romance Writers of America. You can follow him at www.twitter.com/jgfaherty, www.facebook.com/jgfaherty, and http://jgfaherty-blog.blogspot.com/