

STOLEN PROPHET

THE PROPHET'S MOTHER BOOK I

IT TAKES A
MONSTER TO
PROTECT A
PROPHET.

JULIAN M. COLEMAN

STOLEN PROPHET

THE PROPHET'S MOTHER - BOOK 1

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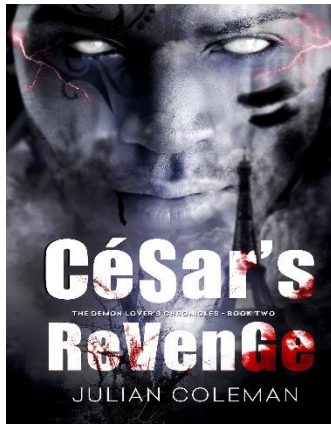
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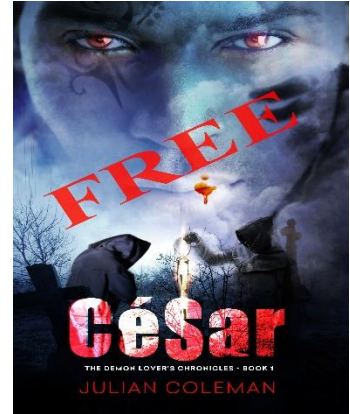
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The Legend

The oral history was bleak for the mortal orishas. According to folklore, Olorun, the Supreme Being of the Universe, instructed his son, Obatala, to create land on a blue planet.

Obatala was an obedient son, but he also did much more than make the blue planet terrestrial. He created life, forming the lesser gods and goddesses, known as orishas. He was pleased with them and because of this triumph, he decided to create minor beings. These creatures were called humans.

For eons Obatala watched over his beloved planet. Initially he was proud of his humans as they first loved one another; but too soon they became violent and began to torture and fight each other. The humans eventually forced the orishas to meddle on their behalf until the orishas began plotting and warring against each other too. Obatala was disturbed but remained aloof until he saw a chance to change things through her...Dolapo.

Dolapo was the brave and precocious daughter of a wealthy merchant. By the time she was seven, she was a cunning liar and a talented thief. She stole repeatedly to feed those poor souls who lived in the city's gutters and underbrush, and then she lied convincingly to her father, who--Obatala knew--suspected her dishonesty.

The prepubescent thief had also stolen Obatala's heart. He saw a goodness in her that he not only wanted to preserve, but that he knew could benefit mankind. Maybe with her help, the orishas could guide humans away from their warring and back to their idyllic existence.

One night as she slept, Obatala crept down from heaven and altered Dolapo's life force. When she awakened, Dolapo discovered that she'd been changed. She was still mortal, but she'd been granted the gift of agrokinesis: the ability make flowers and plants grow.

This gift guaranteed that her people never starved even when drought and pestilence devastated their crops. Her power fed harmony just as Obatala had intended. Dolapo's benevolence extended beyond her country's borders and earned her many followers. At her death, the gift of agrokinesis bloomed within her only child, a daughter. Afterward, it was discovered that each mortal orisha gave birth to a daughter who acquired all of her mother's gift at puberty.

However, one of Dolapo's descendants, the mortal orisha whose name is still never spoken, perverted the gift by murdering her daughter before the child could reach puberty. It

was this sacrilege that cursed the bloodline. After a time, that same orisha became pregnant again and gave birth to another daughter. But this time, her infant daughter was stolen by her most devoted followers before the nameless orisha could falsely sacrifice her to Obatala.

The oni, the African king, who had seen his power decline as the orisha's grew, saw the conflict among her followers as his chance to rid his kingdom of the zealots. He arranged for the nameless orisha's assassination. After she was slaughtered, he tracked down the infant. Ultimately he was afraid of Obatala's wrath so he decided that she should live. While still in her swaddling clothes, she was sold, along with her followers, to North American slavers.

Somehow they all survived the brutality of the Middle Passage, but tragedy continued to curse the bloodline.

At least that was the myth Grace Adamson passed down to Little Evelyn.

And her daughter didn't believe a single word of it. She was tired of hearing the old boring story, and on several occasions, she'd interrupt the oral history with vocal contempt claiming that she preferred, The Telltale Heart by Edgar Allen Poe.

Chapter 1 – Selfish

April 1973

Evelyn was drowning, but not for real.

The whole *fluid-filling-up-burning-lungs-as-her-nostrils-snotted-up-with-a-mean-hurt-for-oxygen* wasn't actually happening. Still, she was drowning in a misery that had her thinking about suicide. She didn't want to snuff it, but she knew that she had to die to save her mom. She loved her mom more than anything or anyone else.

Just the thought of ending her life had her suffocating in an emotional whirlpool. Each time she thought about what *they* wanted her to do, she had to swallow down a scream. This could not be happening! The old stories surely couldn't be true!

Why couldn't she just be a normal 12 year old?

The day was beautiful, unforgivably so, and Evelyn saw this as an insult as she glanced out at the manicured landscape from her hideout in the Walker's attic. She felt like a fugitive among a real family's boxed-up memories and discarded furniture while her thoughts cycled through one theme like a worn out groove from a beloved LP, *What was taking Sissy so long?*

Maybe it was because their plan was bogus?

She and Sissy were best buds, so maybe the Walker home wasn't a good hiding place. *They* could find her once they pieced together that she had run away. No one seemed to be searching yet, and there were still a few hours more before the Walkers came home.

"Come on," she pleaded. Sissy had to hurry. After all, her dad wasn't that hard to find. Although he was her dad, Bill Adamson was the only adult Evelyn knew who wouldn't tolerate any suggestion of a sacrificial ritual. He could save her from the craziness.

She wiped the tears from her eyes.

She didn't want to be this orisha-thing. She couldn't be this orisha-thing. She couldn't kill her mom. They were all crazy.

Evelyn paced the cluttered floor, kicking up dust as she did so, before collapsing in a rocking chair that creaked. The house was too quiet; the whole world seemed too quiet. She felt entombed. Her hands were neatly folded in her lap. They were trembling.

She had long slender fingers with manicured nails. Each ring finger was adorned with a one-carat ruby or sapphire surrounded by diamonds. Yes, it was always about the money. As long as an orisha bled for them, the followers would keep the rituals intact. The orishas kept them rich.

Damn them! She hated all of them. Except for Sissy.

She flipped her hands over and stared at her palms. Did they really expect her to dig into her mom's chest with her weak hands? She grunted with a grimace. Not happening.

Tears slid down her cheeks and fell in splotches on her jeans. Her lips quivered as she wiped away her tears. She loved her mom in a way that was sort of like worship. Maybe their bond was like that because they were different in the same way.

Evelyn let out a harsh sigh. Why did they have to be different at all? Why did her mom have to lead a freaky cult that demanded blood sacrifices? Wasn't that crap supposed to be outlawed? Maybe she should call the police? But where was her proof? Who would believe her? She was just a kid and they had been doing this for a long time.

"I won't do it," she said.

Emboldened by the silence, she screamed at the ceiling, "I don't want it, Obatala! If Mom dies, I'm walking the fuck away!" She'd said a bad word and it was strangely liberating.

She took a breath, stared at the rafters, at the wood and beams and webbing, and silently challenged her Father-god to strike her down. She braced herself for precious seconds. Nothing happened. She unclenched her body and said, “I thought so! It’s all fucking bullshit. They’re nothing but a bunch of crazy-ass fuckers!”

Somehow that bit of knowledge made everything a million times worse. They expected her to kill her own mom for no good goddamn reason.

She bit down on her lower lip and saw an image of herself in festive robes and a matching African headdress, clasping that damnable jewel-encrusted knife and thrusting it into her mom’s chest. Blood spurted and soaked her.

She shivered and hugged herself as fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. She whispered, as if her plea was a prayer, “Daddy, please help me.”

She tried not to, but remembered how she’d been skewered with a feeling of wrongness when she’d awakened that morning. She’d gone to bed a normal person, but woke up a freak.

Her senses were off, but not in a bad way; smell was sharper, taste was richer, and touch was weirdly sensitive. Her sight was the most different. While her other senses were just revved up a notch, there were a few instances where she saw the world in a hazy glow. Everything flickered in shades of yellow and red.

Evelyn had finally understood why her life had turned into a freak show when she’d found the source of the stickiness in her panties - menstruation.

She screwed her knuckles on her eyes like a small sleepy kid as she continued to weep. In her religion her puberty was *the* big deal.

She remembered how she'd fled the restroom and tracked down Sissy. Her best-bud had been chatting up the dark and lovely basketball player she had spent weeks not-so-secretly ogling. Yet, one look at Evelyn's face was all it only took for Sissy to shoo him off.

Evelyn led Sissy to their favorite smoking spot under the stairwell. Evelyn thought she would explode as she blurted her tragedy. Sissy's cherub face first registered shock and then grief.

The girls cried, hugged, and bickered to a solution. They couldn't drive, and although Evelyn had a trust fund, she didn't have any money. The only plan they came up with was getting Evelyn's dad to sneak her out of the city.

Bill Adamson was the only choice because he had married into the religion, and wasn't a true believer. He privately denounced them all as loony-loon fanatics. Evelyn was pretty sure her dad wouldn't stand for any cult-arranged sacrifice.

After they had come up with their plan, Evelyn called his office. Although each time she called, his secretary, Mrs. Alford, responded in a nasal voice with barb-wired efficiency that her dad was busy or in meetings.

Evelyn didn't believe her. She suspected that somehow word had gotten out. If *one* suspected she was menstrual and crying in the girls' room, then *they* all knew. *They* had been waiting for a long time for the transition. *They* had served up prayers to Obatala for a fruitful continuation, blah, blah, blah.

Evelyn had been left with no choice. She'd sent Sissy on the fragile mission to find her dad, tell him what had happened, and that she needed rescuing. Now!

Her thoughts were jolted back to the present when she thought she glimpsed peripheral movement. Maybe it was just a shadow? She nearly threatened herself with whiplash as she craned to track down the source.

Although she saw nothing except barren walls and crates, she wasn't fooled. She caught a whiff of her mom's lavender scent. It was subtle and aromatic and usually comforting, and Evelyn was determined to locate the source. Once the scent faded, Evelyn wondered if she was just sampling crazy now that her world was going schizoid.

Slowly, she began to breathe unaware that she had been holding her breath, and settled back into her seat. The rocking chair tilted a little to the left. Evelyn felt as unbalanced as the chair. Eventually, her thoughts drifted.

She tried not to, but she zeroed in on how she didn't have any maternal relatives. Once she had a grandfather. Grandpa James had been a sour old guy who used to smell like hemorrhoid ointment. That memory caused her to giggle.

He'd been an outsider, just like her dad, and Evelyn supposed that maybe he'd been a nice guy once. But Evelyn had only known him as a hateful man who was mean to everyone, especially her mom.

Grandpa James used to say peculiar things. *Knife to butter*, yes that had been his favorite phrase. He used to brag about how he could kill people just by moving through them. "Like knife to butter," he used to say, "I can slide through them and bleed them out. I can make it happen real quick, like knife to butter."

Evelyn had been scared of him. But her mom? Not at all ever. Grace would just laugh at him and then say in a voice that sounded sweet, but wasn't, "Your gift to me, Dad. Remember?"

His eyes would squint, and his mouth would move, but he wouldn't say another word. Instead, he would trot off on his bowed, old guy legs, grumbling. Weird. Later, a heart-attack stopped him from moving through anyone.

Evelyn suspected she knew the reason for his hatred. Would her dad hate her too if she was forced to...?

She shook her head to free herself of that thought. She tried to think of anything nice while she waited with antsy anticipation for rescue. But she just couldn't let it go.

Evelyn had never really participated in the religion. She preferred watching television or gossiping to performing any of those boring duties in the temple. But after she grew boobies, her mom insisted, which Evelyn couldn't do without frequent eye-rolls and under-the-breath backtalk. She was forced to listen to yawn worthy stories about orishas. She really didn't know what all that meant until her mom started explaining about the transfer of power.

Grace had made the transitioning sound magical. And at first, Evelyn kind of bought into it the way her mom surrounded the crazy with pretty words that described dancing and singing and feasting to celebrate the power passing and all the while praising Obatala.

Hey, wait a minute. What did you just say?

Of course it was a joke.

But no, wait a minute?

Her mom, wearing these silk robes and fancy turban, was going to get carried down the aisle, and placed on that ghoulish looking marble altar. Everyone else was supposed to be dancing and singing and worshiping Obatala and Olorun while Evelyn was supposed to take that big knife, the one with the jeweled handle, and carve into her mom's chest. At the end of that gruesomeness, the power would completely pass from mother to daughter and the new mortal

orisha, after saving her mother from suffering due to the curse. The power had to be transferred before the mom resorted to killing her child to keep it all...the daughter had to kill the mother before the mother was cursed with the itch to kill the daughter.

That was some rancid screwed-up story.

Evelyn had no intention of ever being a part of any transitioning again. Murder was murder and did that mean that one day her daughter would have to kill her too? Well she had a remedy for that, then, she would never have a child. She just added another never to her list of Nevers. In addition to never having a child, she was never going to cut open her mom, and she was never ever going to forgive Obatala for cursing them for something somebody else did!

She checked her wristwatch. So far, still no Sissy.

Now Evelyn was growing terrified. What was taking so long? She wished that she could know what was taking...so...so long.

The room started to spin. She collapsed in the chair as her eyes rolled back in her head. A sweet feeling bloomed within her chest. It was so warm and sweet that it reminded her of sunshine and honey, or a sticky sweetness like tree sap? What a bizarre thought...but when her eyes finally rolled back in place, she saw the world in a red and gold haze.

She was dreaming, and in this dream, she saw into her dad's office. She saw him with Sissy. Poor Sissy was weeping as she pleaded Evelyn's case, but her dad regarded her tenderly as he shook his head, *no*.

No?

Evelyn trembled as she tried to bring herself back to the room. But the scene abruptly changed and she found herself watching her mom climb into her Mercedes. Grace Adamson turned the key, gazed into the rear view mirror, and said, "You will do as you're told, young

lady. I've had enough of your foolishness! You're selfish. I've had to do it and now you will too. The both of us can't live with this much power."

Evelyn screamed herself awake. In her heart, she knew that it had all been too real. Her mom had been here earlier somehow...knife to butter, that's how she did it.

What?

She screamed again in exasperation. Nothing made sense, but everything was perfectly logical if she believed every morsel of those horrific stories. And her mom knew where she was and she was coming.

Evelyn wept and heaved as she considered her only option for peace. She stood on legs so weak they threatened to buckle and made her way to the grimy window. She grabbed a heavy old plaster bust and smashed a jagged opening.

The breeze that swept into the room was filled with the scents of springtime, freshly cut grass and wildflowers. The wind lightly tossed her dark hair while at the same time lifted her spirits. She was done crying. This really was a brave thing she was going to do.

The new window opening was ragged enough to tear into tender flesh, but she climbed through it anyway. She stood on the sliver of a ledge. Her fingertips dug into the grooves in the mortar between the bricks.

Her heart raced. Her mouth dried out. Yes, she was scared. Maybe it *was* going to hurt, but after that – well, what did the living really know about any existence after death?

Evelyn looked up at the sky, and shouted out her own curse. "Screw you, Obatala!"

And then she jumped.

Chapter 2 – A Normal Life

December 2003

The harsh bleat from the alarm was a welcome disruption to a nightmare that dissolved too quickly to be remembered. The darkness was so liquid that Evie wondered if she was awake even as the alarm insisted reality. Finally her fingers crawled over the nightstand and slapped the damned buzzer quiet.

She felt paralyzed by the shadowy remnants of the nightmare. Evie was sure that she *had* dreamt of Obatala. The realization was terrifying because he belonged in her *before* life.

She swung her legs from under the warm blankets and sat on the edge of the bed. Her teeth chattered. It was cold in the room, but colder in her soul. Rascal, her seven-year old Dalmatian, entered her bedroom, navigated the darkness and sat by her knees.

Although Evie didn't relish the predawn stroll, she was grateful for his intrusion. She asked, "Really? Can I pee first?" Rascal thumped his tail happily as she slipped into her robe. "Victor, time to get up!"

The world had righted itself as she operated in mommy-mode. She flicked on the apartment lights as she wove to the kitchenette to make the elixir of life which she knew would boost her with enough caffeine to nudge her into full wakefulness. She scooped in coffee grounds and filled the machine with tap water. As she waited for the brew, she listened for movement in his bedroom.

She responded to the silence. "Victor, don't make me come in there!"

At last she heard the patter of feet followed by the slamming of the bathroom door. Shortly thereafter, Rascal galloped into the kitchenette. His spotted tail smacked happily against the cabinet doors. He buried his nose into her crotch and sniffed, without provocation, she hoped.

She pushed him off. “What? She did a bad Elvis impression by twitching her upper lip and saying, “Thank you, thank you very much!”

Clad only in a thermal nightgown, bathrobe, socks and slippers, she slipped on her overcoat. Rascal danced around her as she filled a travel mug with the life-giving coffee. She sipped, gave the dog a smirk, and retrieved his lead.

She called out to the quiet occupant in the bathroom. “We’ll be right back in a few. I want you dressed and ready. Ok, mister?” More silence. With keys in hand, they left the upstairs apartment.

The second floor landing was narrow and dark. Coldness snaked inside her coat as she trudged down the stairs. She unlocked the exterior door and braced herself. As was his habit, once the outside door was opened, Rascal began tugging on his lead. She had to struggle to keep from spilling the coffee.

Rascal immediately trotted to his favorite spot, lifted a hind leg and unleashed Niagara Falls. When he was done, they began their leisurely walk. When Rascal seemed calm enough, she slid open the lid and took a sweet sip of coffee.

Dawn glinted on the icy sheen that glossed the landscape. The mornings were starting to feel Christmassy, and the holiday season was good for her business with most orders requesting the showy poinsettias.

Evie couldn’t help it, her thoughts returned to the elusive nightmare. And Obatala. She tried to sweep those thoughts aside as she took another sip of coffee.

Their home in eastern Richmond was only a few blocks from St. John’s Church where Patrick Henry had delivered his speech to the Virginia House of Burgesses. Evie had fallen in

love with the brownstone before the area drew in the trendy professionals who graduated from the local universities.

Before the yuppie invasion, Church Hill was still suffering from blight. It was during that time, that Evie had found the duplex and fell in love. She'd sunk a sizable portion of her trust fund to restore it.

The second floor was the residence, a quaint loft with exposed brick walls and fireplaces in the living room and each of the bedrooms. The other feature that sold Evie on the brownstone was the charming French window that opened up to a small balcony.

The first floor at one time been some type of store. Evie had imagined how she would easily convert the large open floorplan into retail space. She would finally be able to realize her dream. In less than three months, she opened The Evelyn Adamson Flower Shoppe.

Evie couldn't think about those early entrepreneur days without conjuring up memories of Victor's dad. He had been her proudest supporter. She missed him. Even now, she couldn't listen to that Noah Eagle song, their song, without disintegrating into tears. It was tragic that he died the same day she had told him about her pregnancy.

Evie found that another sip of coffee did help to disrupt her thoughts about him.

Rascal, who was flimsy with his obedience, yielded to his feral nature and snarled at another poorly trained dog, a German shepherd. She smiled apologetically at the bundled up human who chose to look away. That was the thing she noticed about the influx of up and coming professionals. Most weren't neighborly. After thirty minutes of righteous tugging, her walk with Rascal finally ended.

Evie fumed as she came upon her shop and looked beyond the gilded lettering on the window to see only displays of seasonal flowers and darkness. Sissy was supposed to open in the

mornings because Evie needed time to drop Victor off at school. She swore under her breath. Even as kids Sissy was allergic to promptness. With a new purpose snapping at her heels, she hurried up the stairs and into the apartment.

Victor was sliding a black leather belt through the loops of his dark green slacks when she blew into the living room. “Mornin’ Mom.”

“Mornin’ baby. It’s really cold outside. You’ll need more than a sweater.” Evie shifted into autopilot by shedding her coat and preparing his breakfast of toasted waffles with orange slices.

Victor was excited. “Is it cold enough to snow? We might get snow for Christmas?”

She shrugged. “Never know. It’s been a long time since we’ve had a white Christmas. If I could, I would make it snow just for you.” As soon as those words were uttered, she was stabbed by an inexplicable dread. When she poured herself another cup of coffee, she saw that her hands were trembling.

Victor parked himself at the kitchen table. He grabbed the decanter and drenched his toasted waffles with syrup and wolfed his food so quickly that she wondered if he had actually tasted anything. Evie noticed that he was eating too quietly. Even Rascal who watched Victor shovel morsels in his mouth with greedy anticipation, was unusually silent.

She left him to shower and dress. She stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Evie had to admit that the fortyish woman in the mirror was pretty. She had an oval face, dark brown eyes with long black eyelashes and full lips and perfect white teeth.

Victor’s dad used to remark on her alleged beauty. She wasn’t really, but it was a nice lie she loved to absorb. Her nostrils were wide and slightly flared. Evie remembered how he used to kiss the tip of her nose.

She traced her lips with her index finger as she remembered how he used to deliver the most delicious toe-curling kisses. He would dig his fingers into her thick mane, yank her head back and plant his lips on hers in a manner so hungry that she had no choice but to moisten.

She bit down on her loss. Now the fortyish creature staring back at her had tears leaking from her eyes. Evie rewashed her face, and then combed her hair into a soccer mom ponytail. She had just finished up slipping into her clothes when her phone rang.

“Who is it?” she called out, but she already knew. Her best friend was probably testing a barely plausible excuse on her godchild.

“It’s Aunt Sissy. She said...”

Evie didn’t care. “Tell her she’s late.”

She could hear Victor parroting her remarks, and after a moment, he responded, “She said so are you.”

When she emerged from the bathroom, Evie made a spinning motion with her index finger so that he could wind up the call. Something he seemed to do reluctantly. After he hung up, she said, “Get your things and wait for me in the shop.”

Victor opened his mouth as if to protest, seemed to consider the consequences, and instead he pushed his wire-framed glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Evie raised an elegantly arched eyebrow. She knew what he wanted. She wasn’t in the mood. Yes, he was old enough to walk to school, but he was her only child. He was too precious to risk his safety on an unchaperoned walk, and besides he was her only reason for not committing suicide.

She locked up the apartment and followed Victor and Rascal down the stairs. As soon as the trio entered the shop, Victor raced through an aisle of floral arrangements with Rascal at his

heels. The pair plunged through the café doors to the backroom where Victor could be heard laughing with Sissy.

Daughter?

Obatala?

Was she actually hearing his voice? She spun around the shop as she sought a rational source for her misery.

Evie's limbs turned to lead. She listened with every inch of her soul. Was she awake or did she dream still? She sampled a dread that clung to the back of her tongue and dripped down her throat with the acid taste of raw garlic.

Nothing was amiss. The wood-paneled walls and the green-tiled floors were just as ordinary as usual. There was only the hum of the display coolers that held the more traditional floral arrangements in odd-shaped vases. There were tiers of houseplants displayed near the walls, and in the center of the shop were the poinsettias. Music from Sissy's radio, and chatter from Sissy and Victor, were the only sounds she heard. Everything seemed normal.

She laughed nervously at her lunacy. It was only the power of suggestion brought on by a bad dream she couldn't remember. Besides, she told herself, she was a Catholic now. That life was over.

She flipped on the neon OPEN sign just as Armando, her overtly masculine delivery guy, wandered inside sporting an aw-shucks smile. It was easy for Evie to see how his hunky charisma worked on Sissy. She said, "You're late, too."

Armando's confidence in his sex appeal was well placed. He held up his hands as if to surrender. "I know, I know. But y'know how Sissy is, and man-oh-man my bebé is makin' her worse."

He leaned in and whispered, “She had me up all night fixing her this and fixing her that. How can she eat that much food? What can I do? When I feed her, I feed my baby. But I’m tellin’ you the truth. I know why men cheat when their women get knocked up.”

Sissy shouted, “I heard that. You cheat on me and I’m cutting it off! Don’t call me Delilah cuz I ain’t talking about `cha damn hair either!”

Evie tried to resist the urge to smile, but she caved in and laughed. Only then did her nervousness subside. She had some time before she had to drop Victor off, so she and Armando reviewed the early morning deliveries list. Evie stressed to him that he had to be timely with the bank, because it was a new customer. Their representative had ordered over one hundred poinsettias for their lobbies.

Armando again complained about their wholesale supplier, Swanson Brothers. She hoped that her face was as blank as his stare was inquisitive. She needed to be careful.

She’d found Swanson nearly a decade earlier. He was a crusty old gent with a kind heart and absolutely no business sense. His stock was generally worthless. Although he sold his merchandise cheaply, none of it had any shelf-life. She had felt sorry for him and bought from him exclusively.

Evie wondered if she was the only reason why Swanson was still in business. His Grade D stock, was usually dried and crumbling when they arrived. But Evie felt like it was her duty to lovingly care for each petal or stem. She would hum or sing as she moved from flower to plant. They flourished under her nurturing. She also found that releasing just a bit of her power stimulated her in a way that tasted like bliss.

But not so much lately. Her touches used to give her charges vitality, but recently the flora dried out and withered. This didn’t happen every day, but often enough to be heartbreaking.

She didn't know why they died when she touched them, but she left all loving touches to Sissy. She just couldn't risk hurting them anymore.

She said, "I know you hate going there. It is a bit of a dump, but pick them up anyway. I don't want any other supplier. I will talk to Mr. Swanson. Maybe he just needs some capital to move to a new place."

Armando said, "You're too nice."

She consulted her watch. It was getting late. She slipped outside to warm up the Volvo. As the wind nipped her face with stinging kisses, she lifted her gaze. Despite the beautiful morning, she braced against a fear that was as heavy and rigid as a corpse. It fell on her with the full weight of rigor mortis. She was swathed in layers of horror so tight that she was momentarily robbed of thought.

What am I sensing?

She came very close to begging Obatala for understanding, but she couldn't. The bloodline was cursed, and that truth often gnawed on the edge of her existence. She was afraid that after one true bite of power, she might someday turn on Victor. She couldn't do that to him, especially since he was almost ten. Did it matter that he was male? Should she warn him? He had a right to know about the curse.

She said, as if her words were a shield, "We're Catholics now. We've moved on." She climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine.

Victor ran out of the shop. His light brown skin was flushed. "You weren't going to leave me, were you?"

"You wish."

Behind his wire-rimmed glasses, his eyes shone like onyx floating in white pools. There were times when they gleamed like polished gold. Evie remembered a slip of a detail without wanting to, of how her mom had been able to change the color of her eyes when she worked her power.

Victor caught her staring. “What’s wrong, Mom?”

“Nothing.” She drove five blocks to the Catholic school and arrived just as the late bell sounded.

Victor leaned over to kiss her, but then he hesitated. “I had a dream last night.”

“Really?” Evie caught the tightness in her voice.

He shrugged. “Yeah, I kinda want to tell you about it. It was sort of a good dream, I think, but you get kinda weird when I talk about my dreams.”

She teased. “Not I. What did you dream about?”

“Well,” he eyed her suspiciously, but it was clear that he wanted to share. He said, “I dreamt about my daddy. I think I was lost. He kept trying to get to me. I think he found me because he lifted me out of this dark place. You were there too, Mom. It was weird because I think he was scared of you. I mean, you looked...” he shrugged his shoulders, and looked up at her warily.

“What? I looked what?” She tried to make her tone sound light and whimsical, but failed at both.

“You looked different.” His voice drifted off as he added, “But I wasn’t scared of you. Honest.”

Evie stared straight ahead as she tried to swallow down a knot that yo-yoed in her throat.

The power couldn’t be shared. Obatala wasn’t fooled.

She wanted to make Victor understand that she could never hurt him, but the knot lodged in her throat wouldn't let the words come out.

Maybe they hadn't escaped. Maybe the curse would force her to eat him up like a praying mantis. She briefly observed him from the corner of her eyes and saw that he was watching her, and waiting. She needed to speak, to be consoling especially when her heart was breaking.

Just then a sweet memory washed over her turmoil. It was the day they had met. She had held the newly born person and marveled at how tiny but perfectly formed he was, and how he hadn't cried. His delivery had been brief and painless.

Evie remembered grasping the simple but significant notion that he had been aware. While she'd thanked Obatala for this quiet gift, she had also been stunned that she had given birth to a male. Evie used this anomaly to get out of their punitive religion. Because in her lineage, no other mortal orisha had been able to give birth to a son. Instead of Victor crying on his birth day, it had been Evie who had happily wept.

Now she sensed their normal lives were disintegrating and that perhaps turning her back on all that power had left them vulnerable. After all, she was so clueless that she couldn't decipher the signs of an impending kismet. She barely remembered how her mom used to summon her spiritual father for advice. Something bad was coming, she knew this, but she didn't know what the bad was or how to stop it.

Victor said, "Hey Mom, are you okay?"

Evie smiled. "Of course," she lied.

He kissed her cheek again. "I gotta go. Love you, Mom."

He bounced out of the car lugging his green book bag. She watched as he climbed the steps and disappeared inside the school.

Other parents drove off, but Evie couldn't.

Eventually Sister Anne appeared at the top of the steps like she did most mornings, with her arms folded and her hands tucked inside the cuffs of her habit. The women engaged in a not-so-friendly stare down. Victor wasn't the only one who thought Evie was too overprotective.

Sister Anne was a wispy-thin woman with severely lined features. Evie had never seen her smile. After a few minutes, Sister Anne spun around with a trace of curt impatience, and entered the school. Evie wondered if the nun delighted in closing the huge red door practically in her face.

Usually Evie could easily be dismissed, but not today.

Victor was a sleep psychic just like Evie. She guessed they had acquired this nasty gift from her dad. Victor wasn't good at deciphering his dreams, not yet, but he was better than her dad. And her dad was better than she. She wasn't sure if Victor knew that he had this gift, because she never tried to encourage him.

She had to be honest with herself, especially now that she was grasping for understanding. The truth was that sometimes when Victor dreamt, he spoke directly to Olorun. This was an enormous gift. Her son actually had real conversations with the Supreme Creator. The mortal orishas were treated as goddesses, but they could never talk directly to Olorun, only to his son, their spiritual father, Obatala.

But Victor was the exception, again.

She had seen him do it the first time when Victor had just been a toddler. That evening hadn't been unique. She had spent the evening watching television after putting Victor to bed. She wasn't certain how long she'd sat in front of the television watching one banal sitcom after another, but after a while she was tired enough to go to bed. She'd gotten a cup of cocoa, her

newspaper and shuffled off to her bedroom, only she hadn't made it that far. Her usual habit was to check up on him, make sure that he was tucked in and kiss his forehead gently before she retired.

This night was different.

Victor had been tucked under his Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles blankets. His nightlight was on, but the true illuminance in the nursery came from her son. He was bathed in a golden light. It looked like an aura, only brighter.

Evie's mind seemed to empty as the newspaper slipped from under her arm and crumpled at her feet. She had felt the hot chocolate slosh and burn her ankles, never quite aware that she'd dropped the cup. Although she didn't react to the pain, it did affirm that she was awake.

It was strange.

Obviously Victor slept, but he spoke and waited for a reply as if in steady conversation. Although Evie couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, she did see how the golden aura pulsed around him with the soothing tempo of a beating heart. His voice, which was clear and conversational, spoke in a language she didn't recognize.

But to her horror, and perhaps shame, she did make out His name, *Olorun*.

When their conversation appeared to end, Victor opened his eyes and smiled at her. The pulsating light stopped, but his eyes were the same color as the sun.

Evie had felt cold. Even hot cocoa wouldn't have been able to warm her insides. She had been frightened, not of her son, but for her cause. Her body had turned to lead and her feet into concrete. She had waited and watched as he drifted to sleep. She also wondered, *What does Olorun want with my baby?*

After that, sleep remained elusive for days. She'd spent most mornings at the Catholic Church where she asked the statue of Jesus to make them normal. And eventually, they were normal again.

Until now.

Something was happening and she couldn't grasp it any more than she could wrestle smoke.

She stared at the school doors as she smothered the urge to beat on them and demand Victor's return. She could keep him safe.

But what about tomorrow? Or the day after that? Besides, she didn't know *what* was coming or even *when* the *what* was coming.

Evie drove back to the shop feeling haunted and alone.

She arrived to find Armando leaning against the delivery van enjoying a leisurely smoke. He expelled a nicotine cloud from his majestic nostrils. He took one look at her, knitted his thick eyebrows and asked, "You okay?"

Evie grumbled something incoherent as she hurried past. She was glad there were no customers in the shop. Sissy was on the phone. It sounded as if she was negotiating a greenhouse delivery with one of Swanson's imbecilic sons.

Evie scrambled to her windowless office. Once she hung up her coat and tossed her purse in the bottom drawer of her massive desk, she leaned back in the executive chair and allowed herself to breath. She wondered, Am I being silly?

In the vacuum of near silence, she heard the hum of the display coolers. The soothing sound helped to force her calmness. Her gaze lingered on the family photo that sat in an elaborate frame on the corner of her desk.

In the picture, she was posed in a high back chair. She wore a low-cut Versace dress and her hair was pulled back into a severe bun. Her ears sparkled from two-carat diamond studs. Victor wore a tailored dark suit, monogrammed white shirt, and gold cufflinks. A Scooby Doo tie pin clipped his blue and yellow tie. He stood behind his mother with a hand placed on her shoulder. Rascal sat regally at her feet. A bowlful of beer had kept him tranquil. It was a normal photograph of a normal happy family.

Evie's inspection of the photograph was disturbed by a light rap on her office door. Before she could respond, Sissy entered. Evie marveled at how much Sissy had ballooned during her pregnancy. Sissy had jokingly compared herself to a killer whale. Despite her girth, she was still very pretty. She had tawny brown skin and brown eyes, a wide but slightly flat nose and full pouty lips. She wore dreadlocks pulled back into a ponytail.

Evie smiled at her as she waddled up to the desk. Frankly, Evie thought her best friend looked adorable pregnant.

"What's funny?"

"I hear you and Armando had a tough night last night...Belly."

"Oh," Sissy said, "You got jokes? You snuck back here like a thief and you're laughing at *me*."

Evie said, "No...not *at* you. I'm laughing *with* you!"

"That's right. Clean that shit up," Sissy snapped. "Hey comedian, I'm hungry. I'm going down the street to get me some food. You'd better get out here and watch your business til I get back."

"What about Armando?"

Sissy sashayed to the door as she shot back, "He's coming with me. Okay?"

Before Evelyn could comment, Sissy was gone.

“Gawd! When is that baby due?” Eight hours, when she could get eight hours of work out of her, was too much time spent with both Sissy and Armando. Evie felt sorry for the child. At least, she mused, the child would definitely be beautiful.

Evie began strumming long fingers on the desk just as evenly as her intuition was strumming her nerves. The minor interruptions hadn’t been enough to fully distract her from her fears.

She told herself that she wasn’t orisha, and that she couldn’t do the orisha thing, but really she didn’t have a choice. She needed to pretend to be the mortal orisha to ask for a favor.

She dialed his number.

“Hello?”

Her demeanor was instantly authoritative. “I need you to get to Victor’s school. Just watch over him today. When can you get there?” She paused as he answered without hesitation.

“Yes,” she answered, “That should be fine. Just don’t let him see you.”

Chapter 3 - Stolen

The schoolyard was ordinary. It had a standard jungle gym, two hopscotch courts and a basketball court. Twelve-foot high chain fencing enclosed the front and back areas. It was also adjacent to the convent.

The aftercare teachers were lay people. They huddled in a group and gossiped although they were supposed to be watching over the clusters of noisy pre-teens. The loudest were a group of girls who cheered the mushrooming athletic abilities of budding star hoopsters as they played a fierce game of show-off basketball.

Victor watched them with particular envy. He wasn't too young to shoot hoops, they just wouldn't allow him to play. He didn't know whether or not he had a smidgen of athletic skill, but still he wanted to give it a try. He wanted to be out there with them leaping and hustling just like a real boy.

A few times he actually tried to get in a game, but they had just dropped the ball at his feet and left him standing on the court by himself. There had been no rage or hate only their respect which made him feel worse. He had gotten the message.

He hated being apart from everyone else. He tried not to blame his mother, but he couldn't always help it. There were times when she made him feel like Pinocchio, the wooden boy who only wanted to be real.

He sat on the steps leading down to the cafeteria and popped open a book. Although he skimmed the words, his thoughts were on how and why he was so different. Everybody was always super nice to him -- all the time -- and he hated that too.

He'd learned how to be careful not to talk about things before they happened. But his internal cautions were sometimes too late and he'd let things slip. A few of the older kids started calling him Prophet, but without teasing him.

The word, *prophet*, always made him feel cold. He didn't know why, except that some of his dreams were so scary that he prayed to Olorun they would never happen in real life.

He returned his attention to Edgar Allan Poe's Collection of Short Stories, but looked up again when he heard an exasperated cry of, "Leave me alone!"

A group of girls were picking on his classmate, Shelby. They were fourth graders who sat next to each other. Victor suspected she liked him. Although Shelby was cute, he didn't like her in that way.

Their eyes met. She silently begged and Victor relented with a slight nod.

The girls stopped their teasing as if chastised. Shelby poked out her tongue and rolled her eyes before she skipped over to join Victor on the step.

Victor never understood why girls were so mean to each other.

He cringed when Shelby sat close enough for their shoulders to touch. He flipped the pages back to the beginning so that they could read them together. Shelby annoyed him again by reading too slowly and mouthing the words.

Victor was glad when the basketball whisked by them. He handed the book over to Shelby and sprang to his feet. Although the ball players wouldn't let him play with them, he seemed allowed to retrieve their ball. Maybe it was his lucky day after all.

He felt awkward and clumsy as he gave chase. The ball seemed to bounce just inches from his grasp. As the ball neared the chained and padlocked gate, it gained momentum and somehow cleared the fence.

“Whoa!” Victor’s steps faltered as he stared after the ball in disbelief.

Chad, a lanky seventh grader, shouted, “Hold up, little man, I’ll get it!”

Victor didn’t like being called little man. Besides he was closer to the fence. He squinted, a little scared by the way the gate seemed to sway open a tad wider, as if extending an invitation despite the chains.

By the time the older boys crowded the fence, Victor had wedged his head between the posts. Once he cleared his head, he eased his body out, hopping on one foot and then the other until he was free.

The way the ball players whooped and cheered him on made Victor feel like a member of the team. He grinned and gave them a thumbs up.

“Hey? What’s going on over there?”

The voice sounded like it belonged to his least favorite aftercare teacher. Mrs. Winston was an old woman with cruel eyes. She was at the gate fumbling with her keys. “Come back here!”

Victor spotted the ball the next block over and defiantly ran after it. But as he approached it, he thought it odd the way it sat in the middle of the street as if glued to the spot.

Victor stood above the thing and hesitated, almost afraid to touch it. He expected the thing to sprout giant spider legs and crawl up his body. Well, maybe not but something wasn’t right. At the next block, he could hear the other kids either urging him to hurry up or jeering at the aftercare teachers. He only had minutes to get back to the playground before Sister Anne found him and sent him to detention.

The ball was still at his feet. All he had to do was scoop it up and run...but, his attention was immediately drawn to the boarded-up house directly across the street from school. He

remembered now how that house had been in his dreams. There was nothing special about the house. It looked like all the others in the neighborhood, big and old-timey. Yet, dream fragments had told him that something bad was going to happen. He suddenly remembered it. He needed to protect his mom!

Victor looked down at the ball, again. He wasn't supposed to be here, either. But he knew that he was too late. Power wrapped around him like tentacles. Suddenly, all sound disappeared.

There was no noise from the nearby street, or the ball players, or even Mrs. Winston threatening his existence. It was quiet...like he had died quiet. The only sound he heard with absolute clarity was his terrified heart beating.

Finally, he made himself scoop up the ball, but Victor spun around at the jarring sound of a car door slamming shut. He came face to face with a fiend straight out of the pages of his Edgar Allen Poe book.

Victor crushed the ball against his chest as if it was a shield. He tried to be brave, but a scream tore out of his throat before the fiend clamped a hand over his mouth. Victor's nostrils were filled with the stench of grease and urine. An instant later a jab of pain pierced his neck.

The world shifted and darkness started to drip over his eyes. The basketball slipped from his fingers and although Victor tried hard not to, he sank into the black void.

Chapter 4 – Hopelessness

Evie stirred a cup of tea. Earl Grey wasn't her favorite, but some part of her hungered for the taste. She was perched on a tall stool behind the cash register and clinked the spoon against the cup absentmindedly. The sweetener had dissolved long ago and the tea was cold, but it didn't matter. She sipped again without tasting.

Her lunch crowd consisted of a solitary customer; a young woman in a fur coat, who wandered the displays and occasionally opened the cooler to examine the arrangements. She didn't seem interested in actually making a purchase. But Evie wasn't anxious to be alone with her thoughts so she didn't mind.

Rascal lounged in his bed in the corner farthest from the door. His soulful eyes tracked the customer.

Evie lifted her cup to sip her tea when the woman's eyes met hers. Evie was startled to see her gaze was full of expectation and something else, contempt. The skin on Evie's arms prickled as she settled the cup down on the saucer and rubbed her skin. The air around her grew heavy and carried an unclean odor. She felt...power, but not hers.

Rascal yawned.

Although she saw the polka dots on the roof of his mouth, she hadn't heard his subtle sound. Puzzled, she tapped the spoon on the cup. She didn't hear that sound either. Evie was scared. She tapped harder. Again nothing. Fear severed her calm just as the ghost of his scream snaked up her vertebrae, stack by stack.

"Baby?" She could hear her voice now, frightened and desperate.

A thin sliver of pain pricked her neck and caused Evie to leap from the stool. Immediately, her legs started to weaken. She felt like a drunkard tottering for stability. Darkness

lapped at the edges of her consciousness, but she fought the urge to surrender. It was the sensation of his absence that anchored her into awareness. His sudden loss drove a serrated blade into her heart and it twisted each time she drew breath. The pain was so intense that Evie expected blood to erupt from her mouth.

“Are you all right?” The young woman held out her hands as if attempting to help Evie keep her balance. Her concern seemed seeped in artificial undertones.

“Don’t touch me!”

She’d been a fool. She should’ve trusted her instincts. The blackness started to diminish as the true horror continued to overwhelm.

Victor’s presence, always a constant since the day he drew breath, was gone. Evie kept gasping for breath as the knife dug deeper into her heart and the pain squeezed out the oxygen in her lungs. As she struggled for breath, she reminded herself that she needed to be strong. She had to be whole to find him.

All around her, Evie heard rustling whispers as a sweet feeling gave her just enough juice to function. Slowly, the world stabilized and the pain in her heart withdrew, just a bit.

The young woman let out a scream as Rascal charged at her, growling and barking. The woman ran for the door, but Rascal blocked her exit.

Evie’s power continued to rise, coating her insides like something warm and seductive. Then there was a moment the world was drenched in flickering shades of red and gold.

She looked at the woman and knew that she was part of it. She sensed it, she felt it, but she didn’t know exactly what it was and she gnashed her teeth in frustration. Evie wanted to tear the truth out the woman, but her power couldn’t extend. It was there, but not the knowhow to use it. She screamed in frustration.

Evie reached for her, but the woman skipped over Rascal, threw open the door and fled.

Tears slid down Evie's face as she swore, "It ain't over for you. Run, bitch!"

The darkness vanished under the blaze of her power, but her power offered her little else. She had to find out if Victor was really gone. Once she felt strong enough to stand without the threat of falling on her face, she hurried out of the shop with Rascal at her side.

Tears burned and blurred as she bumped into pedestrians and then stumbled into traffic. Her thoughts were as fractured as her behavior all the while she told herself to keep calm, that she was probably in the middle of some godawful nightmare.

The school was only five lousy blocks away. It was just a simple turn off Broad Street to the quiet, mostly residential area. But somehow the harder she ran, the further the distance seemed. In the distance, she heard sirens and realized the earsplitting sounds were actually her screams.

When she finally got there, what she saw made her blood feel acidic.

The students, teachers, everyone it seemed, were standing in formation around the school as if lined up in a fire drill. Dour faces turned toward her, but no one moved or spoke or looked into her eyes. *He had to be there...he had to be there...he had to...* She screamed his name, "VICTOR!"

After tense seconds, a child, a little girl, said, "I knew the Orisha would come. I felt her coming."

Evie vomited. Rascal sniffed the bile on the sidewalk and backed away. She backhanded her mouth. She felt held together by bubble gum and string. "Where is my son?"

No one else spoke. She staggered toward an adult, a mousy woman with downcast eyes. Evie couldn't stop sobbing. She pulled the woman out onto the street and shook her and tried to

force her to look up and see her grief. She demanded in a raspy voice. “I want someone to talk to me! Where is Sister Anne?”

They were all so quiet that their collective attitude smacked of guilt. She scanned three hundred forlorn faces and each of their averted gazes twisted the knife in her already shredded heart.

Sister Anne finally emerged from the school. She seemed to assess the situation and descended the steps toward Evie. Her manner was as brisk as usual, but this time she kept her head lowered. Her pale face seemed pinched and bloodless.

Evie couldn’t swallow her rage. She wanted to twist the nun’s withered head off her neck. Before she sent Sister Anne to the Afterlife, she gripped the nun by her arms and shook her with more strength than Evie would’ve believed she possessed.

“Please,” Sister Anne begged, “I’ve called the police. Please stop. You’re scaring the children.”

Evie spat, “You haven’t seen scary yet! Where is my son?”

Sister Anne freed herself and only then did she look Evie in the eye. “We will talk. Just let me take care of this first. Okay?”

Evie nodded even as she began to become more undone. She couldn’t handle civility when her world was tumbling into hell. “Okay.”

Sister Anne turned and seemed to speak to no one in particular, “Everyone else accounted for?”

Another nun answered, “Yes, ma’am.”

Evie recognized the assistant principal, Sister Ruth. She was another mature nun, and despite her horn-rimmed eyeglasses, Evie could tell she’d been crying.

Even as the fear lodged in her throat and made talking difficult, Evie asked, “Where’s Victor, that’s all I want to know?”

Evie caught the exchange between the nuns.

Sister Anne turned to Sister Ruth and said, “Send everyone back to their homerooms, and finish calling their parents. We need them here in case the police start questioning their children.”

Evie started anew and realized that she didn’t have enough air in her lungs to form a decent scream. Her legs couldn’t support the gravity of her grief, and she went down sobbing on the sidewalk beside an oak tree. To her astonishment some of the students and teachers began crying too.

Sister Anne wrapped an arm around Evie and helped her to her feet. Evie reluctantly leaned on the nun. A young boy who was almost as tall as she, handed Evie a basketball as if the thing had a special meaning, then he climbed the steps and blended with the others as they made their way inside the school.

Evie stopped crying long enough to glare at Sister Anne.

Sister Anne said, “I tried to call you, but I guess you were on your way here.”

Evie jerked free. “Please tell me what happened.”

Sister Anne wrung her hands. “I was told that he’d slipped through the gate to get that ball and...” The words suddenly died in her throat. After a while, she added, “Here, let me give this to the police.”

Evie handed it over as words tumbled from her lips. “Through...*this* ball? Did you hear him scream?”

Sister Anne said, “Yes, I know that doesn’t make any sense but I heard his scream...I felt his scream when I was in my office. How do you know?”

Evie breathed in as deeply as she could with the blade still ripping up her heart. Perhaps it was caused by her pain or her fear of not knowing, but she started to experience an odd sensation that blossomed like an awakening. Although the pain burrowed deeper each time she inhaled, the new sense also expanded, and kept her buoyant by feeding her bits of energy. It also felt like the energy was some type of analgesic that numbed her turmoil so that she was able to focus.

She said, “This is strange.” A new piece of knowledge directed her attention at the house across the street from the school. It looked abandoned. She said, “*I feel strange.*”

Sister Anne asked, “You knew something bad was going to happen, didn’t you? You seemed different this morning.”

Evie whispered, “You will have to go now, Sister.”

Evie couldn’t wallow in the comfort of numbness. She had to fix this, but she needed His help. If she had to dance with the devil, or Obatala, to get Victor back, then so be it.

Sister Anne said, “Come inside with me. You can bring in the dog. The police should be here soon. While we wait, we can pray together for Victor’s safe return.”

Evie reined in her anger, because ultimately Victor had disappeared on her watch. She looked right through the older woman, and said, “I told you to leave. Do as I say!”

Catholicism couldn’t help her. She needed more than prayers. Her paradox was that she didn’t want to be an orisha, but that she had to become one to find Victor. Perhaps she had the ability, but not the knowledge?

She needed to get an audience with her Father. To do that, she needed to use the perversion of her natural gift to reach him. Just the thought of it added a layer of revulsion to her pitiful circumstances.

She crouched alongside a giant oak. It had a thick trunk and wide nude branches. Such a magnificent specimen broke Evie's heart even further. She imagined how the oak leaves gave shade to some of the classrooms on notoriously humid southern days. The roots corrupted the buckled sidewalk into mini-pyramids. Once there had been flowers in the tree well, but the cold weather had only left nubby remains

She buried her knees in the tree well. The dirt was still soft, but she felt the thick ropy roots just under the surface. She raised a hand, but hesitated before she forced herself to caress the bark. The texture of the wood was harsh and unyielding.

She remembered how her mom used to distress whenever she needed extra juice to talk to her father. Evie had thought it was because the process was painful. Perhaps, but now she believed the pain was emotional.

Her moan was full of pity. She knew instinctively the tree was healthy and free of parasites, except for her...except for...she dug her fingernails in between the crevices in the bark while sighing regretfully as she did so. A few of her fingernails broke off as she pushed down hard enough so that each of her fingertips touched wood.

She said, "I'm sorry."

Sister Anne asked, "What are you doing?"

Evie said, without raising her voice, "Shut up, you will ruin my concentration! I thought I told you to leave."

Suddenly she grunted when a burst of energy exploded within her chest. The power throbbed like a second heartbeat. Her palms grew warm and melded into the wood. Startled, Evie yanked her hands free, flipped them over and dropped her jaw in surprise.

Her skin had mutated. Her palm was covered with thousands of tiny pimples. She grazed her index finger across her palm. Not pimples, more like little needles. A delicate graze sent prickly heat shooting down her arm and flooded her body with a deliciousness that was akin to an orgasm.

The purity of the sensations terrified her, yet at the same time, she was absolutely compelled to attach – was that what was happening – her hand to the tree trunk. She obeyed the overwhelming desire. When she did so, there was a bit of suction as her fingers, from tips to wrist, were sucked onto the bark. Her palm grew sweaty. She began to swallow and down liquid that rose up her throat and realized that she was ingesting the sap that passed through her palm, and up her arm.

She closed her eyes against a myriad of sensations; the steady yet engulfing beats of tree as it charged her while she drained; the blissful needlelike protrusions as it fed back tree sap, and the sweet glorious power that furiously rode through her with such ardor that she had to clasp her thighs together to keep from coming.

She was parasitic, but she couldn't help it. How could she stop when the power sweeping through her caused her to clench her teeth against a most delicious orgasm? Eventually, the ferocity ebbed and Evie felt that she had enough control to open her eyes. She chuckled at the absurd, the world was glossed over in fiery gold.

Sister Anne gasped and crossed herself. Evie was tempted to laugh at the nun who fled her side and ran inside the school.

Despite the power she felt mingling with the blood in her veins, Evie couldn't ignore the brutality of her loss. She needed Victor back, alive. Still on her knees, she lifted her head up to Obatala. Rascal crept up to her and dropped his head on her lap. She stroked his head once and with one hand practically imbedded in the tree, she raised up the other in a plea.

“Father, may I come home?”

Chapter 5 – Obatala’s Mercy

“Please Father. Accept me.”

Obatala’s response was instantaneous. Was she imagining it or did her soul separate from her body only to crash through the atmosphere like sonar?

She seemed to lose consciousness only to awaken in absolute darkness. Or was she dreaming? Or dead?

Although she was afraid to move, she was grateful that somehow Rascal, who whimpered his apprehension, was still by her side. She groped for and then held onto his collar. She did notice that while she still knelt, her knees weren’t in the tree well, but on a solid floor. Her fingertips determined that it was possibly made of marble.

The Orisha legend, the one that wasn’t shared with the followers, told of the cursed Orishas who had transitioned from mortality – why couldn’t they just admit they were sacrificed -- they assumed grand rooms in Obatala’s home in the heavens.

Did that mean her mom was here? Her grandma? Evie quivered in hopeful anticipation. She almost called out, but she held back because she needed Obatala’s help more than forgiveness from her mom.

Would her mom forgive or console her? Or would her mother tell her again that she was selfish? That avoiding her path would cost Victor his life?

She couldn’t help it. “Hello? Mommy?”

Evie’s timid voice echoed in the darkness. She placed her cheek atop of Rascal’s head. How was it that she could be powerful and powerless at the same time?

Finally, she said, “Father, please help me.”

The prayer had barely left her lips when the distant light appeared. It brightened when a man materialized within the cone of light. Even from her distance, slightly more than half a mile away, he appeared gargantuan. Evie surmised that she could fill the palm of his hand...and while she was awed, she was also terrified. Despite his imposing size, his appearance was glorious.

His approach was soundless and the absence of sound made her situation even more terrifying. He shrank the closer he came, until he was just over six feet tall. While the light followed him, he was surrounded with the same color aura she'd seen cocooning Victor during his conversations with Olorun.

Rascal whined again.

She shushed the dog and bowed her head as the giant advanced with the bravado of an accomplished ruler...or god.

Evie tried not to hold onto the memory of Obatala wearing her like a meat-suit and forcing her to murder her mom. But her hatred started to seep. She tasted her hatred for them all for making her go through with that hellish ritual. She'd cursed Obatala, her dad and all those greedy followers. That was the last time she answered to the name, Evelyn.

She never wanted to be Evelyn again.

But she was here and ready to grovel.

Obatala looked down at her, his eyes flickering like wildfire under thick eyebrows. In the dim light she could see his scowl. Evie narrowed her eyes as she absorbed his hellish gaze.

He was inexplicably handsome. Perhaps he was just unnaturally perfect. His flawless black skin shone like marble and tightly contained his muscular physique. He wore his coarse hair closely cropped. He had wide nostrils and full lips. He carried a magnificent staff that was

slightly taller than he with a handle that resembled the head of an eagle with ruby eyes. The beak opened and the eyes rolled over and stared at her too.

Obatala wore a simple white loincloth. Embarrassed, and yet intimidated, Evie rose without permission when she realized that she was eye level with the pronounced outline of his enormous penis.

Face-to-face, they regarded each other like adversaries. Only the pain in her heart kept Evie from lashing out.

Obatala's voice filled her mind in a splendid baritone, *"Daughter, you are here? Did you allow Victor to be taken from Olorun's grace after I sent you a warning?"*

His accusation twisted the phantom knife in her heart. She forced herself to remain humble, so she apologized. "I thought I heard you, but I didn't understand." Almost instantly and without an ounce of shame, she said, "I need your help, Father."

"Yes?"

Before she could elaborate, she felt him. He was in her head. It was as if he was absorbing her thoughts. No, not just her thoughts, he was reading her essence. How did she know that? Evie was terrified.

Obatala spoke again without uttering words. *"You belong with us. You have always been orisha. You cannot deny your heritage. Your power is..."* He inhaled deeply as if taking in a glorious scent, and then he finished in a tone filled with pride, *"... immense. Your mothers found a way to increase their powers by mating with others who had different endowments. I see that you have done this as well. Do you see the power granted you?"*

Mating? Had he used the word *mating*?

Evie couldn't contain her rage. "Wisdom! One person did one very bad thing and you cursed us? How is that wise or even fair? Then you force us to kill our children or if we don't..." She stood inches from his face, spittle sprayed from her mouth, as she screamed, "...if the daughters don't kill the mothers, then the mothers will kill the daughters! Oooh, yeah, that's so fucking wise!

"What am I doing here? I wasn't even supposed to be able to get pregnant – yeah, I did a snip-snip. So, uh huh...you want to know why I tuned you out? Because this is all fucking crazy ass bullshit!"

Evie gasped. The words had tumbled out. She mewed in frustration. She wanted to beat him, to throw him on the ground and kick him in the nuts. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she trembled from righteous anger and sorrow. "Please Father. I'm sorry."

His fiery eyes danced, but his face was expressionless. Finally, his voice hissed in her mind, *"If your arrogance costs Victor his life, I will take your soul to hell and make sure that you suffer with the nameless traitor who cursed your bloodline."*

Evie challenged him. "Olorun wouldn't have sent you, Father, if you weren't supposed to help me!" Her voice cracked in desperation, as she begged, "Can't you just tell me where he is?"

At last Obatala's features softened. He even smiled. He was breathtaking when he smiled. *"Your will is strong, Dolapo. I must admit that I find this reincarnation of you very challenging. Yes, you are most vexing, but you make me proud and you give me amusement."*

Amusement? Dolapo? Evie guarded her thoughts. She said, "I can't be..."

Obatala interrupted, *"There are two truths. I know the loss of your mother made you turn away from us. You don't see the curse is also the foundation of your power. If Victor lives, his power will be so great that he could easily end the curse. Do you understand?"*

Evie gritted her teeth. She was *understanding* too much when she only wanted to know when he would start helping.

Obatala chuckled, *“You know I can hear your thoughts, Daughter, and yet you continue to provoke me...ah yes, amusement. Second, Olorun has waited a long time for Victor. I knew you were the only one strong enough to carry the vessel. Victor has important work to do at the birthplace of humanity. The warring and pestilence has to end. He will start the end there. Do you understand?”*

Evie guarded her thoughts as she nodded.

He struck the staff on the floor which started to quake and while Rascal whined, Evie remained rigid and quietly defiant.

“Good. I am prepared to forgive you. It is right that I selected you to be his mother.” He stroked her cheek. There was tenderness in his touch. *“Your love for Victor will allow others to follow you as you journey back to us. You will be an instrument of justice and love for me, Daughter. Thus, I will assist you, but you must listen to my warning. Do not call on me again or evoke the spirits of your mothers until your work is done. Remember that this is not your journey alone, Dolapo.”*

Evie had questions, but she didn't want to voice or think about them. She placed her hands over her heart and bowed respectfully. “Thank you, Father.”

Obatala asked, *“How can I help you?”*

She said, “Can you tell me where I can find him? Please, Father?”

Abruptly he turned to go, she touched his arm, and said, “I'm sorry. This is my journey...but not mine alone? I don't know what that means, but is Victor still alive and in this city?”

Obatala gave a slight nod.

“Since this is also my penance, I will follow your instructions. I don’t want anyone getting him out of the city.”

“Good,” he said as if she had made a wise move on a chessboard. “You must use your power. There will be no other way for you to find him. You must move between time when you can. Remember this...as long as you live Victor will live. If you die, then he dies. Although you are my most favored daughter, I will eat your soul.”

“I have no intention of dying, Father. If I lose Victor, I will give you the salt, pepper, and hot sauce.”

Obatala laughed, but the sound was chilling and was made worse when his hellish eyes blazed brighter. He tapped her forehead with the top of his eagle staff. Although the handle looked like solid gold, she felt feathers.

Immediately she somersaulted into darkness and was chased into oblivion by the sound of Rascal’s whine. She came to leaning against the oak tree with her knees rooted in mud. Evie needed a few minutes to swallow down the bile knotted up in her throat. Eventually the world stopped spinning long enough for her to rise, but she had to use the tree for support.

It was dead. The bark shimmied off the tree like dandruff flakes. Evie swallowed her grief with the bile.

Rascal tried to rise too, only to slump back down without an iota of grace. His fur bristled and his eyes were vacant. He rotated his face toward hers and his eyes seemed to reflect sharper intelligence.

She said, “Me too, boy. I feel different.” She remembered things she had forgotten and knew things that she wished she didn’t know. She felt like...Evelyn.

She resolved not to waste any more time on her grief. Yet, it was the sirens that forced her into action by blasting through her cobweb-coated thoughts.

Police cars swarmed and then braked randomly around the school. Sister Anne ran out to meet the police officers. At the same time, she avoided eye contact with Evie. The nun handed one of the first responders something. It flapped in the breeze. From Evie's vantage point she saw that it was a photograph of Victor.

Evie watched the churn of activities spin around her in efficient collaboration. A blue forensics van screeched to a halt from the opposite direction and a team in windbreakers spilled out and seemed to confer with a lanky man in a black coat that looked one size too large. He had a narrow face, pockmarked skin and small eyes. One of the police officers, the clean-cut one Sister Anne had given the photograph to, spoke in his ear.

Rascal, who still seemed dizzy, thumped his tail erratically. She looked at her watch. It felt like she and Rascal had disappeared for eons instead of seconds. *Move between time?*

Evie couldn't be there when she needed to focus elsewhere. Thin face saw her. He stuck an ink pen in his mouth like a smoke and looked down at the picture. He possibly saw a resemblance.

Just as he moved in her direction, Sister Anne said something to him. Evie grabbed the opportunity to flee as additional police officers spilled out of their patrol cars.

It seemed that she had left her hysterics in paradise. Calmly, but wearily, she said, "C'mon, Rascal, let's go home."

She saw a single snowflake flutter from heaven.

Evie allowed herself a smile. She said, "Thank you, Father."

Chapter 6 - No Peace, No Safety

Paula slammed the apartment door closed, pressed her back against the hard wood and slid, without any grace, onto the floor. She had to stretch her legs just to work her hands through her jeans pockets and fish out her cellphone. Even now, miles away and in the sanctity of her home, she didn't feel safe.

They hadn't seen what she'd seen.

They didn't know what she knew.

Tears slipped from her eyes and down her cinnamon-hued cheeks. She cupped her thin fingers around her phone and for a moment, she was paralyzed as she fought to remember his number. Speed dial? She laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. Soon enough her laughter turned to sobs.

How had they gotten it so wrong? If she had known, Paula would never have walked into...into what? The lion's den?

She found his name and pressed the telephone icon. Once the call started to ring in, she began to breathe, a little stunned that she had been holding her breath at all.

"Please," she wheezed, "c'mon, c'mon pick up." It was a prayer.

Maybe he would think she was crazy. But Paula knew what she'd seen. Although she tried hard not to remember, not to take it all in again, she was mentally right back there in that shop, in that hell.

Despite Paula's revulsion by what Evelyn had done to her people. Paula couldn't help feeling awed that she'd shared space with the deity.

Perhaps Robbie had been right. When the women had been only a few feet apart, Paula had gloated. All the fuss had been about nothing. The woman was just that...a woman. She hadn't paid Paula any attention, and obviously hadn't known at all what they had planned.

She looked like a soccer mom who was sitting at the cash register and drinking her tea.

Paula had felt quite silly as she strutted among floral displays just to keep an eye on her. How stupid did she feel that she had bought in to all that mystical talk about the orishas her entire life? She may as well have believed in Santa Claus.

Plus there were all those secret meetings Robbie had gone to, without her. The only reason Paula knew what his friends had been up to was because Robbie needed to prove that he wasn't screwing around with another woman, and that he needed her to keep the orisha under surveillance. Of course Paula wanted to do her part. It had sounded intriguing like secret agent stuff.

So how in the hell did she get involved in a kidnapping? How did she fall for the, nobody-would-get-hurt jingle?

"Hey? How'd it go?"

Paula jumped at the sound of his voice. When she first tried to talk, the words got trapped in her throat and she could only emit a squeak. "Bad. It was real bad."

"What do you mean?" Apparently, he wasn't expecting her to say that because the trajectory of his tone had dived into disappointment.

Paula raised her knee and used it as a brace for her elbow as she cupped her forehead. The words were rushing out of her soul while her heart hammered so loudly that she could barely hear his demands to calm down.

Outside the wind rose to a gale and she could hear snow pelting the windows. Although she had turned on the lights, the room seemed to darken. There were shadows everywhere.

He screamed in her ear, “Talk to me!”

“Don’t shout,” she begged. “I tried to help her. I felt sorry for her. She knew something was wrong. She looked at me and then all the flowers in the shop wilted. I was surrounded by dead things. She looked at me. Her eyes...her eyes...” Her voice tapered off.

Paula squeezed her eyes shut against the memory of staring into Hell’s fire and having her soul examined and found deficient. She nearly gagged on her words, “She’s going to kill me.”

Robbie said, “She can’t kill you. She’s nothing but an empty figurehead. Once we take her down, everything will be fine. We’ll be back where we belong.”

Paula started to babble. “I can still hear them crackle as they dried up.”

She heard the exasperation in his voice as he said, “Let me take care of this at my end. You’ve done your part. Do you still have the stone?”

Paula felt a moment of elation. She had forgotten. She cradled the cellphone between her shoulder and ear as she dug into her other pocket. Her fingers grabbed through fabric as her anxiousness ratcheted up to near hysteria. Finally, her index finger dug deep enough to graze the smooth surface. She straightened her legs, dug a little deeper until she had a firmer grasp on the object and then she pulled it out with the glee of a fisherman holding up a hard fought catch. Her smile was genuine and triumphant.

“Yes, I have it.”

The stone was only a few inches long and a half-inch diameter. It had been carefully polished until it gleamed like black onyx. When Robbie had presented it to her as a gift, Paula had wanted to have it drilled and looped with a fancy chain, but he had cautioned against that

idea. The stone was magic and granted protection. He had pointed out the nearly invisible words inscribed in very tiny letters on the surface. Breaking the lettering would dissipate the magic.

Now she turned it over in her hand and held it up like a quarter. She almost said, *I feel better*, but she didn't. She saw something strange.

She gasped and then moaned softly in her throat. The sound was of defeat.

The shadow by the window didn't belong. There was nothing there to cast it. Paula wouldn't have noticed it if it hadn't moved.

It had a shape.

It had her shape.

"Oh God!"

Robbie was in her ear, but the cellphone had grown too heavy to hold, and it plopped on the floor. Paula descended into blind fear as she tried to escape. Her feet kicked as she tried to gain some traction just so that she could stand.

Paula had never known such fear. It was condensed, true and bloomed in her heart like hellfire, like those eyes that stared at her unblinking from the wall. How long, she wondered, had that thing stood there observing and listening. Fear prickled her skin and ran roughshod up her spine in cold tightrope steps.

She reached up for the doorknob and used it to help stand. She remembered the stone and held it out like a badge with one hand as she twisted the knob with the other. Her conviction wavered when the hellfire eyes brightened as the shadow pinched off the wall.

Paula screamed.

She couldn't stop screaming.

Chapter 7 – Quiet Cages

Harry hated to run, especially through the projects. His foot slipped on a patch of ice and he ended up flailing his arms like a hapless critter in a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Not cool, bro, when trampling through cinderblock hell after a druggie suspect.

His partner, Mason Epps, who was closer to the perp than Harry, looked back, saw that he was still surefooted, and flashed him a smile that promised a major heehaw follow-up in the precinct.

Great.

Harry ran harder. The wind swathed his face with cold bitterness as bits of snow slipped into his shoes. He wanted to write the chase off and head back in, but a body had shown up and a snitch had given up the druggie. They had just piled out of the car when that puke, Jerome Bryant, surrounded by a group of guys, had spotted them and took off.

Mason was a tall black guy in a tailored coat, and he was a short Japanese guy. They had zero chance of blending in the Centerfield projects.

How could that skinny druggie run so damn fast?

Harry was losing steam and going by the ground the druggie gained in distancing himself from his partner, he knew that Mason was tapping out too.

Mason looked back again and pointed in a different direction. Harry nodded that he understood. Divide and conquer, right?

Jerome Bryant had chosen a path that didn't leave him any options. Mason was trying to close in on him, so Harry took the shortcut. He ran down a parallel path and hopped over a small

chain-link fence. He couldn't get beyond being ticked-off that he had to run down a druggie who sprinted like an Olympic runner despite the snow.

To make sure his godawful ordeal was just a little worse, the snowfall started to become brutal. The white stuff didn't float, it was shooting down like little missiles. He skidded again which only heightened his fury and then he lost them.

Harry stopped, caught his breath, and looked right and then left to get his bearings. The housing development was one huge maze. But he wasn't completely alone. He saw faces in windows and anonymous threats were shouted down at him from a few onlookers who dared the elements to prop open their windows and curse his existence or threaten to do carnal things to his mother.

Worse, he saw that he had lost his bearings in the chase. Where the hell did they disappear to? He smothered a sick feeling that he had screwed up; that his partner was trapped in an alley being gutted like fish.

Harry couldn't allow himself the luxury of bona fide dread. He decided to give his search a couple of minutes more before radioing in for backup. In the meantime, he decided to do an about-face and backtrack.

He noticed, aside from the charming shout-outs that colorfully labeled him as someone who slept with dogs, was that Centerfield was too quiet. He couldn't get past the eerie isolation. After all, the housing project was a sprawling and nondescript collection of second story single family dwellings. It smelled like poverty and looked like hopelessness.

Other times when Harry found himself at any of the housing projects in the city, he could detect wee bits of hope in some of the children as they played on the ball fields or playgrounds. Their dreams hadn't been scrubbed off their young faces.

What was the shelf life of hope in this environment?

How long could it last in places like Centerfield? It was little more than cheap brick and cinderblock and interwoven between the stones were swatches of poverty, abuse and desolation.

Today seemed different even in Centerfield. There wasn't a child in sight. There weren't any kids playing in the snow. Even the hopelessness in Centerfield tasted differently, but it was pervasive.

The snow was now deep enough to give Harry a good set of tracks. He restarted where he and Mason had first split up. His speed kicked up as a thread of anxiety had him seeing Mason getting ambushed by Jerome and his posse.

Hadn't the druggie Jerome Bryant knifed his supplier to death, allegedly?

Harry kicked his search for them into hyper drive. The tracks wove on through a side street and up an alley. Harry knew that alley led to a dead end.

There were only two choices Jerome had. Either he gave it up or he challenged. Mason was a giant at six foot two and a solid two twenty-five, but a well-handled weapon was a great equalizer.

Finally, Harry saw them. Mason and his perp stood side-by-side and were both facing a brick wall. And they were both quiet.

Harry stopped running. His cold toes were numb and dampness reached inside his pants and clawed up his thighs. Breathing heavily, he freed his Glock and aimed it at the druggie. His grip was less than steady.

"Mase? What's going on?" he asked, breathlessly. He was very aware that his instincts were screaming caution. "You alright, buddy?"

The pair stared intently at a graffiti-covered wall. It was just the side of an apartment, but wide-eyed fright was the only way Harry could describe their expressions. Although Harry didn't want to take his eyes off the perp, he gave the wall a quick sweep. He only saw graffiti, possibly gang tags and a few crude attempts to depict sexual positions.

Mason's head jerked as if he'd been slapped. Then procedures seemed to resume as he swiftly snapped the bracelets on and started Mirandizing the perp.

Jerome didn't seem to wake up like Mason. He had junkie written in his sunken skin, haunted eyes and threadbare, dirty clothes. He started sobbing. His grief seemed so genuine that Harry's initial pissed-off state evaporated.

Harry was used to perps crying because they got caught, and not for being scummy creeps who embezzled or raped or murdered. Harry always thought it was funny, but not in a humorous way, how innocent folks tended to be outraged or embarrassed when apprehended. They often clung to the idea that surely true justice would prevail, etcetera, etcetera. While the guilty ones usually said nothing and lawyered up, or they said too much. Some did boo-hoo for themselves, while others sought to out-slick the stupid policemen.

Harry saw that Jerome was one of those crying perps. As the partners walked him to their car, he talked and sobbed not only about the murder that he had committed earlier that week, but he also tried to verbally wash his soul clean by copping to a few other ones. He oozed details all the way to precinct.

Even when he was thrown into holding, he never stopped crying. Jerome had plenty of company in the cage. It was standing room only. Harry often found it unsettling, how even the churches in the former capitol of the Confederacy stayed basically homogenous, but there was always slightly more diversity in the city jails.

Harry gave a once-over of the raggedy self-proclaimed serial killer. The guy looked like a mealy-mouthed weakling who would draw in like a turtle if the wind pressed too hard.

Harry caught himself from saying something snarky, like, “It’s always the quiet ones.”

Quiet.

The word, and the atmosphere rolled over him like a silent avalanche.

The cage occupants were too quiet especially since the cells were packed, which given the size and temperament of the city, was also a little unusual.

Their eyes were on him, but surprisingly, not their anger. Occasional sobs punctuated the stillness.

Harry was reacquainted with the same edginess he had fleetingly experienced when he’d found Mason and Jerome staring at the wall.

Had he missed something? Had there been more than nonsensical graffiti and inane gang tags on the wall? Like maybe a message?

He turned to leave when Jerome piped up after noisily sucking down a nose full of snot. “I told it like she wanted. Is she go still hurt me or is she go let me go?”

Harry didn’t have a right to feel sorry for a confessed killer. He caught Jerome flinching, maybe someone nudged him to keep him quiet. The perp clammed up and dropped his head.

Harry understood. Yeah, yeah, snitches get stitches, but maybe that was what he’d been sensing from this population. *Fear.*

“You’re afraid of who? What’s *her* name?”

A voice from the back boomed, “You ’bout to find out, porker, and if you know where that boy is, you’d better tell her that too.”

Harry scanned the faces silently challenging him. “Who said that?”

Someone in an adjoining cell laughed before total quiet reasserted itself. Jerome dropped back and blended into the crowd. Harry lost sight of him. No matter. He would finish up his report and question him later in interrogation. At least, that was what he told himself when deep down he knew that he had to get away. The fear became tangible and gripped him in a stranglehold.

Even though he slowed his swagger -- he didn't want those bastards to know that he was afraid -- Harry did just that. He escaped.

Chapter 8 – Up Against a Wall

David Cochran's hour-long commute home from Richmond to Norfolk was usually as dull as a baloney sandwich. To spice things up, he sometimes engaged in a little road rage.

His favorite targets were the stiff shirts driving spanking new Land Rovers or Bimmers or any of those other high ticket SUVs that were more pretty than functional. He had a real man's truck, a Chevy.

His Bertha was a much loved shiny red Silverado. He loved it almost as much as his first born, okay – well, maybe not, but he damn sure loved that truck. She purred like a well-stroked pussy and when needed, she'd roar up close and impersonal on fake He-Man vehicles that were cleaned and waxed and shined every time they got a spot of dirt.

But tonight it was dangerous to rage. An honest to goodness blizzard was making his trek home dangerous.

The storm had sprung up without any warning from the overpaid jerks on the tube. Apparently none of the weather *experts* bothered to check their fancy Doppler systems beforehand. Now he was alone on Interstate 64 and it looked like a ghost road. The only company David had was Bertha.

He turned the volume down on the radio so he could concentrate. At least that's what he told himself. The real reason was the jawing on the radio. The call-in chatter was getting weird.

The first caller, probably a low-voltage buffoon, started crying about the winter vortex. What's that, a twister? How the hell did he see a storm twister in Richmond? Then another hysteric started complaining about how a snow thunderstorm just parked over the city like it was

a car. He didn't have any fancy Ph.Ds., but he knew bad weather had to come in from somewhere and then move.

After that, the calls got even freakier, as if those earlier losers had pushed open the floodgates. Jesus fucking Christ, David didn't think Richmond had that many crazies inside the city limits! He'd heard enough of the Valium deprived knockabouts when they started spouting off about ghost creatures with fire for eyeballs, and ghosts hiding in shadows.

David smirked. Yep, those fools were off their dipshit crazy meds.

He thought southerners were goofballs, anyway. They always got sissy over a few baby inches of snow. He'd grown up in Cleveland where they had actual snowstorms. The only real vortex were those dumb lummo drivers caused by flipping on the roads and shutting down the interstates in the first place; those nitwits who drove functional fakes instead of rugged trucks like his Bertha.

David wished he had left work sooner. He'd gotten the warning, all right. Before the white stuff got too thick, two cops had stopped by the garage and told his skinflint boss that it might be a good idea to close up early. Al and the others lived in the city, so getting home was no big whup for them, but David, well he had that long cruise so an early release sounded real good.

That was the first time he'd heard about the wall. It came from one of those cops. David struggled to remember what he'd said. Yeah, that was it. His exact words had been, *The city is surrounded by a godforsaken wall*. David remembered trying not to laugh. Hell, where were they, in China? Weren't no wall around this city.

Gulp, gulp – somebody had drunk his lunch and ate the olives. But then he saw how scared the cop looked, it stopped being funny. And boy, did he look pissing-in-his-pants scared.

What David noticed was how the six foot three, linebacker-looking, square jawed, won't-take-no-crap cop looked scared enough to draw on his thumb and grab a teddy bear. Now that David thought about it, Mr. Al-the-Cheapskate had been acting spooked all day too. The tightwad did, without much chitchat, let them go early. Swear to God!

David asked his running buddy, Craig, about Al's sudden generosity, storm or no storm, cops or no cops. Craig, who acted a little squirrely too, had said something about taking a break in the backroom and seeing a news report about some missing kid. David thought that answer was way off topic but Craig's behavior was well...weird too. David had let it go.

He'd gone back to coaxing life into an old Nova for a young mom who'd been taken for a ride. The 'as-is' had been a piece of crap junk bought in desperation. David had worked most of the day making sure the damn thing was roadworthy. So, uh-huh, he hadn't heard the news about a missing kid. But that was bad stuff, though. He had little angels of his own.

If given a choice, he would've stayed to work on the car instead of going home. Gina wouldn't care if he had to drive through Armageddon so long as he got home to free her up from the kids. He knew the whine was waiting for him as soon as he crossed their apartment threshold.

No hugs. No kisses. Just a big fat jug of Kiss-My-Ass Wine, vintage 2003, with promises of more of the same in 2004 and 2005. God help him.

Gina hated that he drove to Richmond for a job she considered as rinky-dink. She claimed mechanics gigs were a dime a dozen in Norfolk, as if she would know, while completely missing the point that her nagging had chased him out of the city.

He loved her *and* his kids, but lately he wondered if the I do's had come too early in their relationship. David remembered with hot fondness how he'd nearly fallen over in his seat when the hot blonde with the go-to-hell boobs practically sat in his lap at the club. His pals had turned

into drooling dogs while those blue eyes had focused solely on him. She had been fresh out of some la-dee-dah university up north and was itching to burn off some steam, which is what they did. Boy did they burn off steam, clothes, and the sheets in his crappy apartment on Brookside.

Gina had considered him a bad boy, which he wasn't, but to dive between those creamy thighs, he'd pretend any role she wanted. Right in the midst of their good times, she'd gotten herself pregnant. By that time she had found a position as a hotel manager. But once the girls came along, right behind the other...and damn didn't Miss Edu-ma-cation know anything about birth control...she'd insisted on giving up her job.

Gina had been ticked; as if knocking her up had been his plot to rob her of a life. And without her salary they damn near had to get some public assistance just to keep the family fed. Oh, and if that had happened he would've never heard the end of it!

Gina's dad was a big shot retired engineer who had never thought much of David. He was still a condescending bastard. Every conversation ended with snide comments about his princess' low station in life. Then after grinding David's balls, he would casually ask if they needed money to tide them over. David never took the bait. He would masturbate with sandpaper before he took a handout; and if he had ever found out that Gina took money from him...well, load up the cannons and prepare for World War III.

Yep, it was her nagging that had encouraged the daily trek to Richmond. What she didn't know but probably suspected was how he hated to come straight home. After work, he would hang out with a few of his coworkers at various strip clubs. He wasn't looking for any action, he just liked the freedom. He didn't care if the rooms were too smoky and the drinks were too watered down. He didn't care if he really didn't have the bucks to spare, after all, what was the harm in tucking a few bills into G-strings? It wasn't like he was actually sleeping with any of the

strippers. Although the temptation was there, and he did have a favorite who resembled Gina before she gained all that weight.

He turned up the radio to drown out his thoughts. Again he listened to storm warnings sandwiched between tracks of the good ol' country music blaring from his radio. After a few miles, the music dwindled until all he heard were nonstop reports about the blizzard. The Richmond blizzard was a local phenomenon.

It was a local phenomenon? That still didn't make sense no matter how authoritative the voice.

He flashbaked to the about-to-piss-in-his-pants look on the policeman's face while at the same time he absorbed the subliminal terror emitting from the radio forecaster's voice as he relayed the array of traffic accidents that had closed down the major roadways. The booming voice also encouraged residents to stay in and lock their doors.

Lock their doors? From a blizzard? That didn't sound right, either.

David exited the interstate and took to the back roads.

If the snowstorm was parked over Richmond, then David knew that Gina and the girls were all right. But he couldn't be sure and dammit, he cursed himself for slipping good money in G-Strings, when he could've just bought a damn cellphone. Maybe Gina was right. Maybe it was time for him to grow the hell up.

Bertha's cab grew colder despite the heat blasting from the vents. The ice pellets hitting the windshield thickened and he had to hunch over his steering wheel and peer out just to try to get a clearer view of the road.

This was dangerous, untreated territory and if he flipped out here with only twisted trees and brush as witnesses, he could possibly die. Despite his desire to hurry home, he slowed. He crawled for almost an hour without his high beams hitting on anything living.

David felt like he was the only person on the entire planet; save for the chatter on the radio. When the deejay made another morbid comment, David was forced to flick it off. He was already on edge.

The repetitive beat of the wiper blades filled in the silence. Despite the coldness in the cab, he began to sweat and his heart started to jackhammer in his chest.

David suddenly became aware of new problem. His spidey sense was tingling off the charts. The hairs on the back of his neck raised up. The problem was that he didn't feel alone.

He couldn't stop checking the side and rearview mirrors even though he knew the real problem was inside his truck and not outside. Someone, or *something* had hitched a ride with him. Whenever he dared to stop eyeballing the road, he clearly saw that he was by himself.

"This is bullshit," he said to no one, but the sound of his voice gave him some comfort. He felt better still when he gave the Chevy a little gas.

David made good headway until he turned off the side road and back onto the interstate. He expected to merge into traffic, maybe get waved through a few accidents by some cops, but what he saw had terror squeezing his heart.

There was absolutely no traffic.

Nothing.

He swallowed down his fear. Again, he was acquainted with the uncomfortable feeling that he was the lone survivor of an alien war where all of humanity had been scooped up except him. The silence and his heartbeats filled his ears.

The road had been treated, but he lost control of his truck nonetheless. Bertha gained speed without his giving her more gas, and when he pumped the brakes, gently at first, she didn't respond. For the first time since he had her, David felt like Bertha didn't belong to him. He struggled with the steering wheel and worked it while the rear end fishtailed.

The headlights flashed on the familiar sign. He was so close to exiting the city limits. Up ahead was Henrico County.

His high beams flashed on something else. Bertha jerked to a stop without David applying the brakes. Slowly, he released the steering wheel. Internally, he was screaming his fool head off.

He forced himself to stay calm as he peered through the windshield. There was debris on the road, but it wasn't exactly random. Cars, trucks and semis were crushed together to form a wall.

It was impressive.

It was an incredible barrier and totally unbelievable.

"What in the hell?"

The only response was the idling Chevy and the spew of hot air shooting from the vents. Now David could understand the radio guy's panic. He also realized that dude had been leaving out some pretty weird things. What else did Mr. DeeJay know that he wasn't sharing?

David's gaze slyly swept by his side. While his vision was still telling him that he was alone, his guts weren't buying it. He felt a presence in the dark corner of his cab, he was sure of it. Not only that, he was sure that whatever was there was staring right at him. He rotated the knob to turn up the heat to the highest level and saw that his hand was shaking.

If he understood right, all he needed to do was to get on the other side of that wall. There was real life, people and no blizzard. He held onto those thoughts like a lifebuoy.

The bottom layer consisted of flattened semis and on top of them were vans, trucks and cars all crushed together like tin and stacked up in layers like pancakes. How? Were there survivors?

Were he and Bertha safe?

He weighed whether or not he should get out to see if there were any survivors. He considered his options for a millisecond. His conscience would never allow him to wait for a rescue if there was a possibility folks were hurt and needed his help.

The wall was tall, possibly twenty or more feet tall and seemed to run the entire length of the interstate. He rummaged in the glove compartment and pulled out an extra pair of work gloves and a flashlight. The chance of anyone surviving in that hulking mess was extreme, but if there was life, maybe there was also a cell phone.

He was going to freeze to death in his light coat and work boots, but he had to try to help. He crossed himself like a former good Catholic, zipped up his coat and opened the door which groaned loudly. Winter whisked into the cab like a coldly biting bitch. David jumped, or sank, into the snow.

Ice crystals pelted him instantly as the cold snaked clingy frigidness up his thighs and around his balls. "Jesus!"

He turned up his coat collar and found that his fingers were numb despite the gloves. He clumsily high stepped through the snow to the wall. The hair along his nape stood on end. The closer he got to the wall, the more he thought he heard snarling in his ear.

He knew that he wasn't paranoid. A wall of crushed cars across the interstate told him that he wasn't paranoid enough. He wanted to haul butt out, but he couldn't. What if there were people in those cars? What if someone was still alive and could be helped? If he turned away, then he was the crap man just like Gina's dad, the coot-meister, always said.

The wall was half-buried under a veil of snow. The trucks and vans at the bottom of the pile weren't even worth considering, but he looked into busted out windows anyway. He didn't know what he expected to find, perhaps mangled flesh, pulpy bodies, blood and eyeballs?

The vehicles were all empty. What he could actually see weren't squashed bodies, but things like coats, galoshes and scarfs. He saw discarded or left behind items of life, or more importantly, no indication of death.

He was puzzled. "What the hell?"

Did folks get up and walk away and somehow their cars and trucks got smashed together? And where the hell were the cops?

He looked back at Bertha. Her headlights shone on footprints made nearly obscured by the snow. He couldn't tell how many people had come along, but there had been many, and according to the path that led away from the cars, they had gone back toward the city through the woods that lined the interstate.

David shuddered. There was no way he would knowingly walk in those woods unless what was out here was worse than his imaginings. Every horrendous fairytale he could think of that started with Once upon a time, ended with someone being cooked or eaten. Never mind the newer fairytales about axe-wielding psychopaths, or inbred families that skinned folks alive in rundown shacks. No way. There had to be another choice. He just had to find it before the blizzard turned him into a snowman.

But first things first. He had to see if anyone was hurt. To do that, he was going to have to scale the damn thing...in the snow...with frozen mitts.

Against his better judgement, and maybe to save himself some pain, he called out to see if there was *actually* anyone in one of those husks. The only response was the wind. It howled like an angry beast. David ignored the icy grip of fear that forced his balls to retreat.

In his mind, the crushed vehicles merged under the blanket of snow. They started to resemble an *it*; a big hungry animal that was waiting for him to do something stupid like come inside.

He flexed his fingers, took a deep breath and tested the stability of the wall with a hesitant mount. Sturdy. The damn thing seemed strong. He grabbed the handle of something red, and hoisted himself up using the fender of something blue. He was truly grateful that he had on his work boots with the tough rubber soles. He didn't slip.

"Hello?"

He looked in, and it was the same as below, evidence of existence but no signs of death. He prayed as he reached, careful not to let go until he was sure of his footing and then his grip. His heart hammered at his exertion. He just wished it would just stop snowing for half a second. And the snow did trickle to a slower pace as the wind died down.

David paused. He was being screwed with, he was sure of it. This bit of understanding made him more determined to get the job done and get the hell out of Richmond.

He climbed up to the next row and peered in...then he lunged over, and was greeted with a door that opened as he tried to steady himself. He hung in limbo ready to cry or crap. His muscles promised future pain as he strained forward. Her entire his bodyweight was hanging from that one arm, braced by that one slippery glove. His grip weakened and just when he

thought a hard drop was imminent, a strong gale blew and David felt pushed, yes pushed, to the inner meat of the animal where another shiny door handle promised safety.

He grabbed it, held himself steady and waited for his internal alerts to stabilize. He didn't question his good luck. Once he calmed down, he continued his search but this time with a lot more caution.

The progress he made was painfully slow, but he needed to be sure. Each vehicle was mercifully abandoned. After he had cleared the last car, he crawled down. He had been beaten by the blizzard and was exhausted beyond comprehension. He couldn't wait to thaw in Bertha's womb.

Country music erupted in the silence. David stared at his truck as if seeing it for the first time. He hadn't left the door open and who had turned up the radio?

The big red Silverado with the Vision 375 Warrior rims vibrated in tempo with the song. "Berty?" He trudged forward, he wanted to accept the invitation, back out the way they had come and find life somewhere in the city. He would find a diner somewhere, get to a pay phone and call Gina, and then have a cup of coffee. He would laugh at himself, convinced that he'd made up most of the happenings.

The music stopped but Bertha kept shaking.

David was defeated. He couldn't take in one more strange thing. Bertha moved toward him, her lights turned into high beams and forced David to raise his hands against the glare.

"What the...?"

Snow melted on his face as he shook, but not from the cold. His truck rolled a few feet and then rose up as if on a car lift. Within seconds the tires were skimming the snow, as it continued its upward climb. All at once he was surrounded by a strong aroma of lavender.

“Leave me alone!”

He understood now. Those fools got out of their vehicles just as he had. It had been a ruse.

A search.

He heard, or felt a woman’s voice. He looked around and saw nothing. Bertha halted in midair. He started at the underbelly of his beloved and heard himself beg, “What are you searching for? Maybe I can help you? Just don’t crush my wheels. I’ve got to get home to my wife and kids, please!”

Don’t you know?

He knew. Right through his body and down into his soul. The lavender scent became sickly sweet. He was too tired to gag. He imagined how some poor schmuck would find his crushed truck sitting on the top of the pile. He would have to trek through the woods. It was clear that nobody was supposed to leave the city.

David faced a swirl of emotions, anger, frustration, and fear. He needed to get on the other side of that steel wall. “Did you hear me? Just let me go home!”

The word *home* felt tender and right in his chest. He was freezing to death and he’d give anything to have his beautiful Gina kiss his face just once more time.

Kenny Rodgers blared from the cracked speakers when the truck floated down. For a moment, David was blessedly snared by the headlights as Bertha eased onto the ground.

The passenger side door opened with a groan that sounded much too human and guttural. David had to bite down on a scream as something black slithered out of the cab. Perhaps it was the brightness of the headlights, or his growing delirium, but he couldn’t make out any real

definition. He thought he was staring at a shadow. There wasn't a face, or facial features, except for the eyes which weren't human. It was like staring into a furnace.

The woman's voice in his head. *Did you see him?*

David was enveloped in debilitating emotions, but mostly he felt a terror that didn't belong to him. It was fresh, thick and uncut. His own fear was dwarfed by the newly assumed heartbreak.

He rapidly blinked against images that sped through his mind.

He wasn't David anymore. He was a woman who was thinking and feeling and loving a kid who wasn't his, but at the same time Victor *was* his son. Oh sweet Jesus, he was missing! How did she let him get taken? The not knowing where Victor was or what had happened to him was unbearable.

Her pain was terrific. David groaned and grabbed at his heart. He wanted her to stop sharing, but she wouldn't or couldn't. Her whispers filled him up with her grief like a drip-drip in his brain until she asked her question again, *Did you see him?*

Apparently David didn't react quickly enough because he sensed her burrowing deeper into his mind. They swapped memories and identities. He felt that she had to be a ghost, or something omnipotent. He felt that she knew things about him that even Gina didn't know. He tried to stop her from peeling back his psyche, but she was too strong. Finally, after seconds that extended into a brief infinity, she backed off.

Her grief seemed uncontainable. He couldn't believe that he could sense her crying. He found his voice, "I wish I could help you. You know that, but I haven't seen him. You didn't need to do that to me."

Be on your way. There was a moment of hesitation, then he heard or felt, *Family is important. If you can do the same job in Norfolk, then do so. Be accessible, be loving, and be there.*

He said, “Okay.”

He was immediately fed new images, but they were of his family, his life with the girls and his before life with Gina when they used to laugh together. The pictorial dump was so intense that his head ballooned with pain.

He emerged from the information assault physically rejuvenated, but emotionally beaten. Somehow he was warm, dry and sitting in his truck. The swishing wiper blades and a groovy tune from Eddie Rabbit filled in the numbing silence.

Just as he was getting comfortable in the belief he’d pulled off on the side of the road and had had a nightmare, the intervals where the wiper blades cleared the windshield showed just how close he was to the debris wall. It still looked like a silent monster.

Victor was gone.

The pain drilled his heart. He fought to keep from sobbing.

David didn’t need to look around to see that she was gone. He didn’t feel her presence anywhere. She had left him a gift, though. Bertha’s headlights zeroed in on an opening in the wall. It was large enough to edge his Chevy through.

Freedom? David thought that he should’ve felt joy, but he didn’t. He was terrified to leave with Victor still missing. He had to do something to find...his son?

He cleaned his face with his coat sleeve and contemplated his next moves. He was torn as he stared at the opening. He knew that she wanted him to go, that it wasn’t his fight.

Go home.

Her voice felt faint as if from another universe. He started tearing up again like some weak knucklehead, like he didn't have a macho bone in his body. He sighed regretfully and shifted Bertha into gear and crept forward.

He half expected the beast to close in on them, to crush him into the upholstery as Johnny Cash belted out, *Hurt*. He held his breath as they rolled through the wrecks and it was like emerging through a cave until they arrived on the other side...of the world it seemed.

The contrast was stark.

It hadn't been a grand scale lie. David saw strangeness in his rear view mirror and turned to see it actually happening. The opening uncrumpled and merged as soon as Bertha's rear bumper made it out. The wall had resealed itself.

"Jesus!"

David would think he was seeing things again if it weren't for the shocked faces that surrounded his truck. The folks seemed frozen in their amazement. He would've told them they ain't seen shit, if he'd thought to speak.

He'd rolled out of a frozen hell and into a warm December night. Many lights shone on the wall, and a bevy of firetrucks and police cars blocked the lanes. He saw men with blowtorches and pick axes and brave souls or fools who were trying to scale, but inexplicably were falling down. He looked up to see helicopters trying an over-the-air scope, but he didn't see them advance forward.

Someone rapped on his window. A policeman ordered him to roll it down while another beamed his flashlight inside his car. He handed over his license and registration, answered some questions and given their demeanor he expected to blow into a breathalyzer.

He stepped out of the car, as directed. Men in black overcoats and no nonsense attitudes grilled him with increasingly difficult questions. He couldn't tell them the complete truth and since he was a bad liar, he knew they were suspicious.

Eventually he was released. Truthfully, David couldn't think about anything except going home. He knew that as soon as he crossed the threshold, his daughters would charge him and wrap around his legs like pipe cleaners. He also knew that Gina was ready for him too. She was going to open up a fresh bottle of It's-about-time-your-ass-got-home whine.

But tonight was going to be different. Instead of bitching back, he was going to hustle his daughters to bed and kiss their little noses and tell them he loved them so much. He was going to tell Gina that he would find a local job and help her out with the girls. Then, when he was sure the girls were asleep, he was going to ride his wife like a jockey on a thoroughbred.

After all, he really was a lucky man.

Chapter 9 – Broken Memories from the Asexual

Harry chastised himself when he burst into the safe familiarity of the Homicide division. He was angry that he'd let a bunch of caged up perps stomp on his psyche? Maybe his newly found low threshold had to do with the citywide inertia caused by the blizzard. He didn't know, but he couldn't lose it because of some twinges of agoraphobia.

He wove through dense humanity to park at his desk. He was caught off guard by the noise and congestion. Mason, whose desk front abutted his, glared at his computer screen.

Harry whistled under his breath as he surveyed the chaos. "What the hell is going on?"

His partner shrugged without taking his eyes off his task. "Damned if I know."

Harry locked his gun and walkie-talkie in his desk drawer before he first grabbed and then examined his coffee mug. The cup was clean enough. He zagged through the maze of people to help himself to the coffee and fixings. Once he was back at his desk, he took a couple of sips, grimaced at the burnt aftertaste, and returned his attention to his partner who seemed as animated as he had been in the alley.

Harry figured that now was as good a time. He asked, "What was going on with you and Mr. Bryant?"

"Nothing."

His response was short and sweet and full of bullshit. Mason had been his partner for a decade. Harry was godfather to both his girls. He knew when Mason was lying before he actually lied. And Mason was lying now.

Harry decided to try a clearer tact. "Why were you guys staring at the wall?"

Mason pecked the keyboard with his index fingers. “Don’t know what you’re talking about. I just want to get this report started.”

Harry couldn’t let it go. “When I dropped him off just now, Mr. Bryant wanted to know if *she* was going to let him go or if *she* was still going to hurt him. Do you know who *she* is?”

Mason looked up then. His eyes were vacant. He leaned in and whispered, “I told you that I didn’t see anything. He’d been running like he was hopped up on speed and then he just stopped. I mean that joker was just standing there. I tried to see what he was staring at...and you know what I saw? Nothing. I mean, what did you see?”

Harry shrugged. “Seriously man? I didn’t see anything.”

Mason lifted one corner of his lips into a lazy smile. “Right, Detective. Mr. One Hundred Percent closure rate. Don’t you get it? That guy was on drugs. There wasn’t nothing *to* see.”

Harry asked, “You sure about that?”

Mason dropped his smile and returned to his computer. “Why are you so sure there was something? That’s what I want to know.”

Harry decided not to keep pushing. He would wait, but the topic would definitely resurface. He sipped his coffee as he scanned the room. The folks moping around the division revved up his anxiety. “I’m feeling hinky about some of the goons around here. What the hell is going on?”

Mason said, “Oh that’s right, you were down in the cave with our perp listening to his Pity Me serenade. I hear there are cold cases popping up like zits on a greasy teenager. You know what that mean? I heard the lieutenant was considering calling for a full boat. No sick, no vacation time for anybody. Right in the middle of all that shit, Team B got saddled with a missing kid case.” He shot Harry a warning look. “Don’t lose it. The kid case ain’t ours and we

don't need it. I just told you the lieutenant put her B-team on it. They might not be much to look at, but they can find the kid."

Harry sank in his chair immersed within a tsunami of bad emotions. The last missing kid case had cost him time in the street and a black mark on his record. Not that he cared about his reputation. If given the same circumstances, he would gladly beat the crap out of that monster all over again except that this time no one would've been able to stop him.

He sipped coffee, wished it was bourbon, and then he consulted his watch. It was almost the end of their shift. He needed to get started on his report.

"I've checked out some of the names old Jerome gave us."

Harry had been so deep in thought that he nearly jumped. He grinned sheepishly. "I'd zoned out. What about those names? Real people?"

Mason settled back in his chair as he ran his hands through his hair. He said, "Oh yeah, they *were* real people and now they're real dead. I think Jerome was confessing truthfully. We got to get him in interrogation and track down some collaborating evidence while he's in a singing mood."

Mason got up with his new mission. Harry couldn't help his wild thoughts on such a cracked day. He suspected that finding free interrogation rooms would pose a problem. Right now Richmond seemed tilted toward crazy.

He propped his feet on the edge of his desk. His thoughts wandered.

He was an Army veteran who relished his righteous reputation as a closer. The department bigots had tagged him Charlie Chan despite his Japanese heritage. In fact, some of the other Cro-Magnons hung him, so to speak, with the wussy nickname, Captain Eunuch.

Harry bristled at the moniker. How his lack of a sex drive became internal knowledge, Harry would love to know, but nonetheless his missing libido was too true a fact. Maybe he'd given off a vibe by turning down too many invites to hang out. Or maybe it was obvious that he didn't have a woman, or man, in his life. It could've been because of the way he buried himself in the job. Any one of those flaws boiled over into a steamy pile of career jealousy and voila, he was minimized into a caricature, the weirdly efficient, but generally pathetic, Captain Eunuch.

He hadn't always been that way.

He remembered how he used to love to indulge in raw sex. A lot. Now he waxed nostalgic, but not his Johnson, whenever he recalled losing his virginity in the bathroom of a dirty foster home with Georgette. She'd been a pretty sixteen-year-old with lowly aspirations of stripping. He could still taste her musty-sweatiness and reminisce on how their flesh-pounding interlude had led to his abrupt detour from total self-gratification.

A few years later, as an enlisted private, he had lustily sampled exotic pussies as if that had been his true Army mission. He was handsome and he knew it. His jet-black hair had been mangled into a regulation crew-cut which accentuated his square jawline. He possessed thick eyebrows and piercing eyes which gave his handsome face depth and an additional layer of machismo. Back then he had been a real hedonist who had worked out until he was well-toned.

He used to brag that he could get the ladies to disrobe for him just by looking at them. He had that Master of the Universe swagger and attitude that allowed him to hunt in the seediest districts with a near wanton disregard for his well-being. The more dangerous the locale, or woman, the spicier the sex.

But he never paid for it. He had been a handsome soldier of Japanese descent who banked on his sex appeal. The ladies who commented on his green eyes were the easiest to bed.

As soon as they remarked about his eyes, or said that his eyes looked like emeralds, it was only minutes before they disrobed.

Now he was Captain Eunuch? The damned car accident nearly took his life. Sometimes he wished the smash-up had done just that, but he had survived. How long had that head-on occurred? Ten years ago? Seemed a lot longer.

When Harry had resurfaced from his coma, he couldn't remember a chunk of time, a whole year, in fact. As far as Harry knew, he had also lost a part of his soul. He just hadn't felt like himself. Even his former police partner, Marshall, had shut him out by claiming that maybe he'd come back all wrong.

Maybe?

All Harry knew was that whenever he tried to call up the missing year it was like swimming through a swampy greyness, which was baffling. His life had changed a lot during that single year. Apparently he had been promoted, partnered up with Mason, and moved into a swanky apartment.

The beat cop who used to hang out with his police buds at bars, who had hunted, and then bedded, the less than exotic pussies in Richmond, and who lived in a less than affluent section of the city, apparently had died in that wreck. In the end, the most important thing he'd lost was his desire to pile drive a hottie. God, he missed just *wanting* to do that.

Harry took another swig of cold coffee. He tapped on the keyboard and pulled up the photo of a young kid, possibly eight or nine, wearing a white knit polo shirt and a big grin, which caused Harry's temples to throb. He settled his cup on the blotter so that he could rub just below his receding hairline.

Mason returned and plopped in his chair. "You alright?"

Harry nodded. “Yep, we ready?”

Mason shook his head. “Hell, naw! Look around. I couldn’t get near any of those rooms. We can bring him up here, but I want to get that little serial killing fucker on video.”

Harry did look around. Had he fallen asleep at his desk? The squad room was still bustling with folks, but now, like the perps locked up in the cave, it was eerily quiet. “What’s going on?”

Mason said, with tinge of hostility, “The way I heard it, when it started to snow the city busted a crazy nut and jizzed a conscience on anyone who’d ever gotten away with a felony. I mean people are confessing to crimes they did yesterday or yesteryear, just like our wall-staring Jerome.”

“Why?”

“Why? Don’t know, but I heard the other precincts are getting the same high tide of confessions. Yeah, we thought Jerome was strange for popping, but he ain’t the only one.”

Harry stared at Mason. “Yeah, well he was scared that’s why he popped.”

“If you say so.” Mason turned back to his computer. “In a few minutes, I’m busting out of here. You with me? I want to get my ass into bed. I’m not feeling one hundred percent.”

Although Harry was in a dark mood, he decided to let Mason’s deception ride. He had other matters to consider like man’s perpetual inhumanity to self. That one bit of reality always chipped at his soul.

As he contemplated a lifetime of examining the aftermath of murder, including his mom’s, Harry realized that he wasn’t just burnt out. His soul was turning to ashes. There wasn’t anything endearing about his profession, not anymore. He hadn’t been able to save her and he hadn’t been able to save...

Although as a soldier, he'd a clear understanding of who was the enemy. But as a cop, that distinction tended to be fuzzy. Maybe that had been the beauty of his job, to track down the guilty.

Harry remembered how he had tried to find his murderous dad, but the bastard had hightailed it back to Japan and disappeared. The frustration of not being able to bring that Bluebeard to justice still haunted him. But he could ease his pain by hunting down other murderers.

The last missing child case still haunted him. The perp had been so smooth. Thaddeus Tolliver's stepfather had initially presented himself as a suffering parent.

Harry fought against the memory; he couldn't revisit that road again.

He rubbed his forehead. It throbbed with pain. His attention shifted back to the picture of the missing kid. His headache shifted too and started to spread like a band across his forehead.

Burnt out, yes, but what if he just walked away? What kind of life would he have without his job?

Harry wondered if his desolate thoughts were being amplified by the collective neuroses that was inflicting the city. Even now, some of the self-proclaimed criminals were scrambling to confess.

He noticed how they all looked over their shoulders. And were staring at the same place. There was nothing over there except a row of filing cabinets.

Harry strained to pinpoint their fascination. He saw nothing, at first. He realized that he'd been looking at the wrong place. He should've been looking at the wall.

He saw a shadow that looked out of place. It looked human. No one there to cast it? Fear torqued up his spine while knotting up his guts.

It had a woman's shape. Just then he saw eyelids pop open, at least he thought they were eyelids and the sockets were filled with fire.

Harry jerked and almost dropped his coffee cup. A double-handed scramble saved the desk blotter from being sloshed with liquid. When he looked up again the shadow woman was gone.

It took him awhile, a few tense minutes, but he managed to reel-in his imagination once he realized a simple explanation for his screwy thoughts. Those guilty as hell perps had shafted him with a hefty dose of the power of suggestion. Mix in a weird day with a dash of silent partner and there you have it, a wall shadow with hellfire eyes.

He chuckled at his gullibility.

The missing kid's photograph commanded his attention again. He couldn't help it. He was swirling into regret. This boy's innocence closely mirrored Thad Tolliver's.

Harry remembered when his mom's kid safety warnings had two basic rules, look both ways before crossing the street and never take candy from strangers.

Harry's brutal upbringing had taught him that life had never ever been that innocent. He'd never experienced the kind of innocence dripping off the black child's face that stared at him from the computer screen

The kid looked wholesome, only worse, he had an androgynous appeal. He was a pedophile's wet-dream. Even now, Harry imagined him tied to a ratty mattress with a degenerate porking him... just like that pervert stepdad had confessed to doing to Thad.

Harry's headache mushroomed like an atomic cloud. The pain was bearable, but only just. He struggled to get his desk drawer open. He wrapped his trembling fingers around a bottle of aspirins, and swore silently at the child-proof cap until it popped. He wolfed five white tablets

and washed them down with cold coffee. After a few minutes of heart-pounding and head-pounding pain, the ache began to ebb.

Jesus Christ! Harry wished he could scrub his attention off the prepubescent face that peered at him. His hand hovered over the keyboard, but he couldn't make himself disconnect.

Mason said, "We have the countdown. Five minutes to go before we clock out."

Five minutes?

Harry felt that it was too late. He was pulled back from the bespectacled youngster. He clenched his teeth. The Tolliver case had forced him into counseling and caused him to self-medicate with bourbon just to sleep. Finding the young boy's dead body had been more than tragic.

Harry remembered how he'd easily absorbed the crime scene, and identified the likely perpetrator who he had caught gloating. He knew the type, straight-laced successful businessman who acted worried. Harry had zeroed in on him before the smirk. Yeah, he knew the type, a smarmy psychopath who was smarter than the incompetent police.

Harry's soul, however, had never been able to absorb the shock of just how that young man had been tortured before he died.

"Stop looking interested. That's all she needs. Don't forget the B-team caught this one." Mason's voice held a hard edge. "You weren't the only one who went through hell because of the Tolliver case."

Harry sort of changed the subject, "What else did you hear about this one?"

Mason sighed with a trace of irritation. "I heard the mom was already at the crime scene when our guys showed up but she slipped away. Frick and Frack went to her house and questioned her, but she's not cleared yet. Plus -- get this -- she's holding a press conference..."

he consulted his watch, "...in about thirty minutes. The buzz is that she's going to offer a hefty reward."

Harry cringed. "What? Right here at the holidays?"

Mason gave a sardonic smile. "Yep, thousands of bogus tipsters will want a piece of money pie. Oh and there's more..."

Harry was clocking the time too. They had three minutes left and counting. He followed Mason's example and began shutting down his computer and shuffling papers into his desk drawers. "I don't think I want to know."

"The *more* part is that mom has juice."

"Juice?"

"She's got connections all the way to DC. The chatter is that she can speed-dial a few senators. How about that?"

They both stared at Lieutenant Casey's closed door. Mason said, mournfully, "She's got her B-team on this one."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, but we're her A-team."

Mason said, "We're close to a justified escape. You and I can just get up and leave now."

Harry agreed. "We could, but we ain't gonna, are we?"

Mason powered up his computer and then unlocked his desk drawer. "I should've kept my damn mouth shut." This time his grin was genuine. "Y'know, if you got up from your desk every now and then you might hear some things too."

Harry smirked, "Yeah, but nobody likes me. Everybody loves you, including the ladies." He rocked back in his chair, propped a foot on the edge of his desk and indulged in another slurp of cold coffee. He could see the Lieutenant's shadow as she paced the floor.

He was tempted to punctuate the blandness of his coffee with a splash or two of Jack Daniels. Instead, he found himself drawn into the monotone drone originating at Frank's desk. Frank Worchester was an old school detective, and like Harry, he was a veteran.

Frank was a rigid man, but respectful and highly disciplined. Neat and orderly, that was Frank. He even continued to wear his hair in a military flat top.

His face was as indecipherable as granite while a middle-aged accountant type sitting opposite him, in too neat attire that was anal enough to suggest OCD, admitted to hacking up a cheating girlfriend. The monotonous nature of the confession was startling given the gruesome description of the murder.

Clearly murdering a woman was one thing, but saving and savoring body parts were straight along the lines of Jeffrey Dahmer. The guy had issues.

Harry also thought it peculiar that Mr. Accountant, who had gotten away with the slice and dice for close to twenty years, was copping to it now. So why the confession and why now?

Mr. Accountant went mute in mid-sentence. Harry could almost see the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. The guy's face grew paler under his neatly trimmed and slicked back black hair. His eyes rounded while his jaw slackened before he released a soundless sob.

Harry and Frank looked at each other. Harry knitted his eyebrows while Frank rolled his eyes as he handed Mr. Accountant a tissue. Harry saw the perp do that strange thing too. He followed the man's stare to the wall. It had taken some guts for him to do it, but Harry was relieved when he didn't see anything.

Maybe he wasn't meant to see anything? Maybe only Mr. Accountant was meant to see?

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Yep, that was a weird conclusion. Maybe he was he going crazy too?

Harry's eyestrain was causing his head to ache again. Although he wanted to play the whole thing off as some random rant from a psycho who then lapsed into a catatonic state, he couldn't ignore the hairs rising up on his arms.

Still, he was able to escape the cycle of bat-craziness by chastising himself for a runaway imagination. Maybe the guy was hoping for an insanity defense? Harry decided that now was a good time to concentrate on his report.

The shift change was far noisier than usual. A platoon of detectives, some of them openly hostile, spilled into the squad room although they practically had no standing room in the brooding chaos.

Mr. Accountant's blubbering was minimized by the uproar. There were quite a few protests emerging from the bunch on just how much they appreciated being forced to work overtime.

Harry leaned toward Mason and spoke only loud enough for his partner to hear, "Yeah, and we thought we were going to leave."

Mason added, "Well, she didn't bother to stop us."

Her office door was still closed.

Harry said, "What's worrying me is that I think we're going to get the kid case."

Mason said, "Words of advice? If she does give it to us, then don't panic and don't curse her out. Do that to her again, partner and you're going to end up spending quality time in Psych...again. Or you're going to end up on the streets. A few more of those disciplinary actions and whoever your fairy godmother is, won't be able to protect your Asian ass. Besides, I've had enough of working with Tommy when you're gone. Ethan's okay. But Tommy? That man is the antidote to community collaboration."

Mason ticked off Tommy's attributes with his fingers. "The man has a black problem, an Asian problem, a Hispanic problem, a woman problem...I don't know how Ethan puts up with his dumb ass. He's the only reason why they're the B-Team. That fucker couldn't find his ass with both hands."

Harry laughed. "He's got a small ass, that's why he only needs one hand."

Mason lifted an eyebrow mischievously.

Harry cleared up his joke. "I mean, that's what I hear. Hey, I'm Captain Eunuch, remember? I don't go around looking at men's asses. I'd have to have a sex drive to do that."

Mason retorted, "Don't let those knuckleheads define you. They just hate on you because you have a one hundred percent closure rate. Hell, I hate you too."

Harry was still laughing when he caught the lieutenant peering through the blinds, again. This time he was certain, she was peeping in their direction. "Dammit."

Mason followed his concern and reiterated, "Don't lose it. We found Thad and we closed the case. We can't save them all. We try, but we can't."

Harry needed something to numb the memory of finding Thad bound and tossed in a crate like garbage behind that old barn in Culpeper County. The boy's eyes had been open. Those dead eyes had stared straight into Harry's and silently accused him of being too late. What good was having a perfect closure rate if he couldn't save the most innocent of victims?

Burning tears were ready to fill up his eyes.

Mason seemed to be giving him some privacy by focusing on his work. After a drawn out silence, he asked, "Why don't you come over Sunday? Have dinner with us? The girls haven't seen you in a long time. They're always asking about Uncle Harry."

Spending time with the Family Epps wasn't going to happen. Tracy, Mason's wife, was a beautiful and accomplished surgeon, and the girls, well they were wholesome and loving. Mason may've been jealous of Harry's closure rate, but Harry was definitely jealous of Mason's family life.

Harry couldn't have that life. How could he when every woman couldn't measure up to his mom? The sudden and unwanted memory of her murder caused dry emotion to blossom in his throat.

The lunacy in the precinct *was* contagious. Harry was starting to feel just as reality challenged. Maybe the remedy was to go home and have that drink.

Mason tossed a paperclip at him before resuming his index finger punches on the keyboard. "Come back to Earth, and try to look busy. The guys are mentally giving us the finger."

"If we get this case, I'm giving everybody the finger and it won't be mental," Harry joked. "What are you doing? You're concentrating too hard. You must be playing Solitaire?"

Mason's phone rang. He sneered as he picked it up. "What? Is this another cold case? Yeah, that's what I thought. Bring him back in a few minutes. Yeah, well, we're all busy, aren't we?" He slammed down the receiver, surveyed the room and asked, "What the hell is going on around here? I thought freaks only came out when there was a full moon. Don't they know it's just three-forty five? There ain't a full moon now, right?"

Harry said, "Bitchy, aren't we? No sympathy here. You're rich. Your wife is rich. Why are you working? Please remind me again. I know I have to work to keep my nice apartment and my slick ride, but you? You have gardeners and maids and a big mansion on River Drive."

Mason's eyes darted at him. "Is that why you won't come to dinner? You lusting after my wife's booty and her pocketbook. Yeah, I got money. What? You're jealous? It ain't cool. But...and I've told you this a thousand times, gittin' ain't the same as havin'."

Harry laughed. "I'll try being a rich man any day, though."

After a while Harry just gave up trying not to appear interested as his attention rotated back to the wholesome image on his computer screen. He clicked the menu button and pulled up the background information. The details were scant, which wasn't surprising, but the data had been loaded up more quickly than usual.

He found himself memorizing the timeline that led up to the boy's disappearance. Next he opened up the map of East Richmond and studied the gridded areas that were marked as searched.

Harry wondered if Tommy and Ethan had collected all the witness statements yet. They weren't rookies so they would know to get intel from traffic or home surveillance cameras. What did forensics find?

Detectives knew to look inward first and then out, so what about his home life? Mom wasn't cleared. What about Dad? What about other family members? Had the missing boy said anything odd to school members, counselors, or teachers before he disappeared? Had the boy communicated with anyone online? Did he have a cellphone? Did the B-Team suspect a stranger snatching?

Suddenly pain slit through his grey matter with the precision of a scalpel. He gritted his teeth against the unexpected spasm. The aspirins were losing their effectiveness before they had established a true grip. But he had an alternative.

Harry reached inside his desk and pulled out a pencil. His hand was shaking again. He needed to chill, and quickly. He couldn't use booze on the job to self-medicate, so self-hypnosis had to be his fall back.

Mechanical pencils didn't work, besides he didn't like them. He preferred the standard wooden yellow pencils, the ones with the green tin that held the pink eraser in place. He rolled good old Number Two on top of his desk. Immediately, his pain began to lessen.

He found handling a wooden pencil calmed him the same way he supposed some folks needed to take drugs or smoke weed. He twirled the pencil with a flick of his wrist and a turn of his thumb and index finger. Staring at the spinning pencil was more than hypnotic, it was plain old comforting.

Move the pencil, Harry.

Today was off. First he he'd seen ghost shadows and now he heard his mom's voice. Any more of the insanity drip-drip and he'd be ready to pop to some crimes too. *Yes, Lieutenant, when I was stationed overseas, I indulged in a little coke and occasionally some heroin. Oh and yep, I did lie when I said that murdering bastard fell during my interrogation. So okay, maybe I overreacted, but I still don't know how that talking excrement ended up with life-threatening injuries on his way to lock-up. Now that I think about it, I really don't know how my fist got all bruised or how those tapes got erased either.*

His desk phone saved him from diving too deeply into his macabre thoughts. He recognized Lucy Chang's extension.

Lucy was a crime scene technician. She was also a five-foot two-inch stunner. The Missing Links in the precinct wondered why he couldn't even get it up for Lucy since they were

both slant-eyes. More idiotic remarks from testosterone-fueled dumbasses, although in truth, Harry would've tasted her if he hadn't been rewired by the car accident.

He let the phone ring as he wondered how he could dislodge the grey. Once upon a time, Harry had tried to with drugs, and some of those had been legal, but none of them had been able to crash through that nebulous but impenetrable grey wall.

By year two, he gave up and tried psychotherapy where he'd been forced to talk about how his dad had sliced up his mom and then pulled a Houdini. The horrors of his childhood had continued right after he became a ward of the Commonwealth of Virginia. He'd spilled it to the shrink about being the tiny Asian kid dumped in a succession of group homes. Because of an absurd number of beatings, Harry learned how to fight, but not like Bruce Lee. He'd fought like a back street brawler who discovered that kicking nuts and head butts weren't off limits.

Once Harry had started, he told it all. He talked about the teenaged sex predators who thought he was pretty, and kept going on until he finished up with stories about his sex-fueled days as a warrior for his fickle Uncle Sam. But being a soldier had been his salvation too.

He was untaught the conniving survival skills that helped in group homes. Being a soldier drilled in traits like honesty, integrity and seeing a job all the way through. He'd already been a fighter, but the Army taught him how to be a man.

Surviving psychotherapy had been a bitch. It did make him feel better, but what it couldn't do was restore his memory. Nothing, it seemed, could pierce that greyness or raise his pole. Still, he didn't deserve the nickname *Captain Eunuch*.

Mason intruded on his mental rumblings. "Where are you? You gonna pick that up?"

Harry sneered and picked up. "Hey Luce, what's up?"

Mason made kissy-faces which forced Harry to salute him with a middle finger.

She asked, “How’s it going?”

“It’s going kinda rough right now. It’s like bedlam, and we’re about to get a cold one.”

“I know, I know. We’ve got tons of new evidence to process. I don’t remember it ever being this bad.” Lucy’s pause shifted Harry’s attention away from Mason. Her tone was deceptively conversational. He had never known Lucy to waste time with small talk, but experience taught him not to push. She said, “I ran across a name and I thought I’d better ask you something.”

“Yes, Luce?”

Both men turned at the sound of the Lieutenant’s door slamming shut. The sound rose above the chaotic din and seemed to heighten an already tense atmosphere.

Lieutenant Ellen Casey zigzagged through the human congestion and toward them in incredibly high heeled shoes while wearing a mean look of determination. The ensuing jabber in the room hushed a few decibels as the lieutenant approached in her no-nonsense blue suit and go-to-hell attitude.

Ellen had a fondness for high-heeled shoes. Perhaps she wanted to appear taller than her natural height of five feet four, or maybe she loved showcasing her admirable legs which she did often by wearing very short, tight skirts.

Harry thought, if only she had given an iota of consideration to the rest of her appearance then maybe she wouldn’t appear so plain. Her smile, which she wasn’t apt to reveal, tended to be disarming. So rare was it that Harry assumed she was up to something whenever she did smile.

Her blue eyes always seemed just shy of calculating, as if she looked at situations from an enlightened angle, which Harry guessed was easy for her since she was the one who called all

the shots. Her skin was weathered, clear evidence of too much youthful sunbathing, and her hair was cut short and poorly trimmed. It looked as if someone had used a weedwacker on it.

She seemed to zero in on them with the single-minded focus of a hungry shark. Harry respected her leadership despite her cold-bloodedness. Ellen was politically savvy. The new snatch case might be very high-profiled and that would be a good reason to close it up as a fast win.

Ellen handed Harry a flimsy file. Her perfume was more subtle than the expression on her face. Obviously, she wanted a conversation.

Harry said, “Hey Luce, I gotta call you back,” and hung up quickly. “Yeah, boss?”

Her tone was abrupt. “No eyewitnesses. One parent. No reported trouble at home or at school. Here’s the problem, aside from a lack of evidence, mom is going to hold a press conference,” Ellen consulted her watch, “in twenty minutes. The dumbass is going to offer a reward. Now, I’m not against grieving relatives offering money, but not this early in the game. She could at least wait to see if she would get a ransom call.”

She looked around the room, “If you think it’s bad now just wait until she makes the announcement. Listen, I’ve got tired detectives burning me in effigy. You two probably already joined the fracas. Be mad, but I need you guys on this one.”

Harry heard the plea, but recognized it as a demand. “You look like you can use some help right here.”

Ellen was dismissive. “I need you two to ask the mom nicely if she will submit to a polygraph. The dad is listed as deceased. See if you can get some background on his folks. See if there’s any friction between the mom and his relatives for custody. You know the drill. Look at

home first and then fan out. Talk to the neighbors, the boy's teachers, and see if the little guy has any friends. Like I said, you know the drill."

Harry picked up the file and flicked through the pages. "Ain't much in here either? The crime scene was processed, right?"

"Kinda. CSU got there before the snow, not that it mattered. The school is in old Church Hill. Cobblestone streets. No tire impressions. No cameras. Forensics did find the boy's eyeglasses and they dusted up a partial print. They're running it through AFIS, but that's all we've got. Not sure if they got enough for DNA."

Mason asked, "We got this report mighty quick?"

Ellen retorted, "I don't like your implication. We do this for all tender ages. And you know that the longer it takes to solve this case the more likely we're gonna end up searching for a body. Right? Was this random? Find out and tell me."

She concentrated her cold stare on Mason. "You're going to cause me pain too, Epps? I know the Tolliver case left a bad taste. But you two are working with Tommy and Ethan. I'm not taking this case from them. I need teamwork and a rescue. Not a body recovery. You understand? Teamwork."

Harry's guts spun like the pencil he twirled. His headache had him biting down on bile. He wished he could disappear into the wall like a shadow, then grimaced at the very thought.

She repeated, a little louder. "So let's get to it, guys."

Mason asked, "Hey Lieutenant, just what the hell is going on here?"

Ellen shook her head. "Attitude? Maybe a little insubordination?"

Mason chuckled. “No, I mean around here?” He gestured with his thumb around the squad room. “Looks like more than attitude. The city’s acting like a backed up toilet spreading shit everywhere.”

Ellen shrugged. “I don’t know what’s going on. Seems like everybody who committed the perfect felony decided that chicken soup and confession is good for the soul. I’m hearing crimes so cold they happened when my mom was getting ready for her prom.”

After looking around, Ellen huddled in and whispered, “Stay off the radio on this one. Use the cell. We don’t want to feed the media any more than we have to.”

With her load lightened, she strutted back to her office at a decidedly slower pace and slammed the door shut.

The case was theirs after all.

With coffee cup in hand, Harry shuddered. He dropped his head and froze his stare on the name under the face, Victor Adamson. The kid looked like he was loved. He looked like...

The lights suddenly went out. There was a hiss as the power tried to kick back on, but everything ultimately went dark and eerily quiet.

Harry lost the sensation of time passing. It seemed he sat in darkness for eons.

The squad room grew cold, like a tomb.

He expected an uptick in the chaos, but not the silence as a dankness enveloped him until he felt swallowed by the universe. The only thing he could hear was his heartbeats as it sounded off his terror. In slow motion, and as the chills passed through him, his hand instinctively went to the place where his holster used to nestle. Feeling the emptiness, he remembered that he had locked up his gear.

Before he could feel for his desk key, the wind suddenly cried and it had an unnaturally feminine quality. It sounded like a horrified woman's shriek.

Harry couldn't move, couldn't speak. Where was sound? He thought a word...a name and then there was another hum. The lights flickered on. But the silence prevailed. Goosebumps rattled up his arms.

Sweat trickled down the sides of his face. Although he remained stone-faced, Harry was shocked by their unified proximity. How had they moved so fast?

The nearly forty alleged robbers, rapists and murderers, stood slack-faced directly behind Mason in a crowded semi-circle. They were mostly men, mostly middle-aged, and oddly diverse.

Harry held onto his composure, keenly aware of his vulnerability.

Mason spun around, "What the hell?"

Harry saw that he was the center of their collective universe. What he sensed from him was universal hatred. He felt like food, like if they had a chance to tear him into pieces and eat the bits raw, they would do it.

Mason stood up and pushed a guy. "Back the fuck up!"

Detectives, who apparently had also been caught unaware by the concerted stealthy movements of their perps, began hustling them back to their seats for more questioning. Slowly at first, the chatter and chaos resumed. Harry forced himself out of his stupor. He was aware that he was battling more than confusion, he nursed a bad feeling.

Harry hooked Frank's perp before he had a chance to cart the man back to his desk. Harry asked Mr. Accountant, "Why were you staring at me like that? Did we meet ten years ago?"

The self-proclaimed murderer dropped his head. He bristled and then tried to squirm away. Frank about-faced him again, and asked, "If you got something to say, then say it?"

The guy sounded incredulous. “You don’t know?”

Mason heard enough to chime in, “We don’t know what?”

He gave a silent what-the-fuck shrug of his shoulders before he said, “She knows you’re going to be looking for that boy. She keeps feeling different. When she found me the first time, I couldn’t make her go away. I think she does it like you guys, only better because she can get in your head. She flips through your memories like cards. She digs and she digs. I tried, but I couldn’t make her go away.”

He looked around and started to whisper as if relaying a classified secret, “She gets in your head cuz she’s looking for him, she’s showing you all about him at the same time she’s torturing you too.”

Frank asked, “Who is *she*? You’re not making sense.”

Mr. Accountant teared up. “I can’t tell. I don’t think she wants me to. She took me to that place again. I couldn’t stop seeing myself chopping her up...I couldn’t stop it. She said that she was going to keep punishing me unless I turned myself in.”

Frank’s exasperated sigh hinted at intolerance.

Mason smirked. “Do you wear tinfoil on your head too? When are the aliens coming?”

But Harry couldn’t remove it; the sinister undercurrent that threaded through the squad room, bolstered by the nearly unbearable banshee-like sound that howled in from the outside.

Harry flashbaked to how the douchebags, just moments ago, had crept up behind him en masse, and with no thought to escape, only to surround his desk.

Mason prodded his partner. “C’mon, we need to get going. Press conference? Remember?”

Harry grabbed his gear from his desk drawer and packed it on, then he picked up his overcoat from the seat next to his desk and slid into it. He had hoped he would feel better once they left the precinct, but seeing all that snow set his teeth on edge, both figuratively and literally. Another few inches had piled up since they'd brought in Jerome Bryant.

The violent wind blew into his ears. He raised his coat collar, a meaningless act considering the ferocity, and stared out at the pristine landscape. It should've felt festive this deep into the holiday season, but it didn't. Maybe he was meandering into lunacy, but he sensed there was something hidden in the atmosphere and that it was using the snow as cover.

As they approached their vehicle, Harry tried to smother his apprehension. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't swallow down the anxiety that lodged in the back of his throat. He was acquainted with fear. He wasn't ashamed to admit it.

He was reacquainted with it each time he lost sight of his partner in a dangerous situation, or when some loon completely torqued off before he could get the cuffs on him, but this was different than wondering if the freak behind the door he was pounding had a gun.

This new fear had two edges, either he was going nuts or there was something weird going on out there in the snow-covered metro area.

They sat in the parked SUV, in an unaccustomed silence, as the heater obliterated the cold. Finally, Mason said, "I think your problem is that you need to get laid. I mean, you could use some trim to ease your way out of that scrotum bind."

As an afterthought, he added, "Hell, with the hours Tracy's been putting in at the hospital, I could use a little trim myself. I keep wondering when she's going to doctor *me*? Physician, heal your husband! Shit!"

Harry said, "Maybe it ain't so bad being asexual."

Mason retorted, “I would use palm oil before I would even think about being one of those things.” He chuckled as he started the truck and then sped on the freshly plowed streets like a NASCAR driver giddy on gas fumes.

Again Harry noticed how the righteous snowfall failed to lure kids outside to play. The blizzard did look brutal. Not one living thing seemed to be out in it, except for them. Harry was reminded of his strange feelings while at Centerfield.

As they closed in on their destination, he saw there was more activity. There were cars, news vans from each of the local networks, and amazingly a rather large crowd of onlookers huddled together at the podium.

Mason wrangled the truck close to a curb.

Harry saw that for some irrational reason, the press conference was being staged outside the parochial school. He stepped out of the toasty interior and sank into crunchy snow. He cringed as snow crawled into his shoes, soaked his trousers and even iced-over the remnants of his good nature.

Miffed, he said, “This ain’t happening. I’ve got to change clothes if the lieutenant wants me to do some serious legwork tonight.”

Mason said, “Well, to do some serious legwork, we need to have some leads. Let’s meet up with the gruesome twosome first.”

The fifty odd onlookers were cordoned off by sawhorses and policemen. A bank of microphones was secured to the podium. The scene full of cameramen and reporters, caused Harry to momentarily flashback to the Thad Tolliver case.

In his mind’s eye, Harry could still see Thad’s parents holding onto each other for support, and weeping while they appealed for his safe return.

Harry warned himself, *This ain't the Tolliver case.*

No, he thought, *this could be worse.* Part of his reasoning was the crowd's reaction. Their collective behavior was unnatural and quiet. He was beginning to hate that word, quiet.

The onlookers were soundless. They didn't share even a murmur. Their united appearance disturbed him, but not as much as their silence. They appeared as captivated as the group in the precinct, but there wasn't an inkling of hungry hatred; only a look of anticipation, and a dull sort of cult-like adoration in their eyes.

He didn't like that either.

A news woman was working the crowd. Her name was Poppy something. Her puzzlement was obvious. When Poppy approached the mayor, she was quickly turned away by a policeman. She leaned into a beefy Hispanic-looking guy holding up a huge camera like a cared for toddler and they whispered together.

Minutes before the conference began, a limousine crawled down the snow-covered street. The governor emerged from the limousine just as the police chief took the impromptu stage. The governor joined the mayor in a huddle.

Harry felt ambivalent. Would the appearance of the governor and police chief help or hurt their investigation? He knew the mom had juice, but he was afraid her friends would jam things up.

He crossed the street and took some shelter on the porch of a boarded up house that slanted toward collapse. From his vantage point, he had a good view of things. Plus he was out of the blizzard. He glanced at his watch. It was almost show time. Five minutes or less to hear her plea and then they could get out of the cold and begin their investigation in earnest.

Mason joined him on the porch. “I talked to Ethan. They’re going to wait until after the press conference to fill us in.”

Harry mumbled, “Who has a press conference in the snow during a fucking blizzard? Makes sense to you?” His partner looked neutered. “What’s pissing you off? Did Tommy say something or was it the chief?”

“No man, I’m good.”

Clearly Mason wasn’t *good*. Harry decided for the second time that day not to push. He shivered as he waited, but mercifully he didn’t have to wait long. A woman in a long fur coat appeared from within the school and was helped to the podium.

“Jesus,” Harry muttered, without fully realizing that he was speaking. She didn’t look like a grieving mother; she was too composed and too well put together.

He had expected downcast eyes, sunken cheekbones and pinched in features from too much crying. In her sable coat, she appeared like a movie star readying for a Hollywood strut down the red carpet. The constant camera flashes certainly didn’t take away from his perception.

Harry gaped at her attractiveness. Tracy, Mason’s wife, was elegant, but stiff. This woman was, and he searched for the right word, sultry.

Perhaps it was the way her tears glossed over her pupils that made her eyes seem to sparkle. Or maybe it was how the camera lights shone on her flawless brown skin. Even her eyebrows were perfectly arched. She had a slightly upturned nose, and her full lips were as red as blood. He just knew that her dark hair, dotted with snowflakes, had the texture of satin.

The police chief helped her up on the makeshift riser before he climbed by her side. Immediately, he draped an arm around her in a manner that suggested familiarity. She leaned in close to the microphones as she stared unflinchingly into the cameras.

Harry dipped inside his coat, pulled out a slender pad with his notes from the file Lieutenant Casey had pushed on them. It was true there hadn't been much information in them, but he read that Ms. Adamson was clean. There hadn't been any infractions. Although his notes recorded that she was forty-two, she looked at least a decade younger.

Ms. Adamson cleared her throat, the small sound echoed in the stillness, and she began her appeal for her son's release. Her timid voice was devoid of emotion although the cadence of her speech was soothing, almost hypnotic.

Harry waited. He knew it was coming and braced himself.

She said, as a tear rolled down her cheek, "I'm offering a fifty-thousand-dollar reward for my son's safe return. No questions asked."

Harry expected chatter among the onlookers, but there was none. Only the reporters seemed animated by the chunk of money offered. A few reporters updated their viewers and wondered out loud if the sizable reward would create false leads and possibly obstruct rescue efforts.

Harry wondered about that too. It would take manpower to sift through bogus leads to find a pearl. The department was already stretched thin trying to deal with the sudden influx of perps popping to cold cases. Who in the hell was left to man the tip line?

Harry spotted Lucy as she tried to blend in the shadows while taking pictures of the bystanders. Noticing his interest, she gave him an odd look. She raised her thumb and pinky up to her ear and mouthed, *call me*, and then she fell back into her task.

Harry huddled closer to Mason for a conversation. "So the mother's name is Evelyn Adamson. Adam and Eve? Sounds like a joke."

Mason shivered; his expression was unreadable. He stared at Harry as if he didn't know him. After a minute, he said, "It's a peculiar name. I feel her, though. How many boys from the hood do you know is named Mason? It's rough, man. Kids are mean. I used to get called Perry Mason, or Mason Jarhead. It was a good thing I played ball." He smiled, "I almost made pro..."

Harry finished, "...until you blew out your knee. Yeah, Mase, we all know how the scouts showed up to see you play. And besides, you ain't from the hood. But nice try."

Mason said, "Don't be hatin', man. It ain't cool on you." His expression became somber again.

Harry said, "Hey married man, roll up your tongue."

Mason laughed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

That moment of camaraderie dissolved when Harry's attention was drawn back to the lackluster plea from Evelyn Adamson. The lulling sound of her voice conjured up an image of tulips.

And the world inexplicably slowed down.

Even Mason's yakking dwindled to a slow-mo banter.

Harry pretended normalcy as his focus shifted back to the news conference. The police chief had taken the stage and began spewing words without answering a single question. The chief's super slow drawl had Harry wondering if he was suffering from a symptom that was a prelude to a heart-attack or some other serious condition.

He couldn't go down now at the start of another child abduction case. He couldn't...his attention reverted back to Evelyn Adamson and the odd way she stared mutely into the cameras. Underneath the chief's answers, Harry thought he heard a whispering...her whispering, but she wasn't moving her lips.

He was definitely going nuts, but he couldn't look away and he couldn't turn it off. He remembered what Mr. Accountant had said, *She knows you're going to be looking for that boy.*

Was Evelyn Adamson that *she*?

Harry jumped, a little startled when he saw the appearance of a shadow.

Yes, he was going crazy because the damn thing looked as if it had misted out of her skin, and through her clothing, until she was momentarily blotted out before it draped over her like a cloud.

Harry was speechless. Maybe the brain damage from his accident had taken a decade to fully surface. He was crackers, there was no mistake. Even now, Mason was clueless as he laughed in slow motion at some corny joke about Ethan. He wouldn't have been joking if he had witnessed what Harry had just seen.

Harry couldn't stop gawking. The shadow took on a feminine physique. For Harry, the world seemed to freeze frame the moment the shadow developed eyes. There were no other facial features. And those eyes were just a pair of flickering flames that seemed to sear his soul.

He was incapable of movement. He couldn't swallow or breathe. Cold terror sliced through his marrow. He watched as the shadow woman separated from Evelyn Adamson like an amoeba as they stood side-by-side.

Harry thought the human woman appeared a little duller and less perfect when they divided. The shadow woman leapt gracefully off the ground while at the same time the human *she* pierced Harry with a knowing gaze. Through her tears, she smiled.

Harry eased out his breath as he questioned whether his treasured sanity was skipping reality grooves. The non-reaction from the crowd, and the continued jawing from his glib partner also had him questioning why *he* was the only one embracing this latest lick of Southern-sautéed

crazy. Was there something airborne? Had he picked up the cuckoo germ passed through touch? Had he actually touched that slick-haired accountant? After all, he had seen the shadow at the precinct too.

What if he was wrong? What if the day was backwards because he wasn't actually awake? Maybe he was in the middle of a doozy because of too good a time with his old pal Jack Daniels.

That seemed logical.

The shadow woman swam on the air with the grace of a ballerina, as if she enjoyed her freedom. Harry was amazed as the shadow *she* swirled with her arms upraised while she leapt into a ballet emboîté. Although she didn't have any features, her eyes seemed to burn in a gleeful riot of red and yellow.

Harry forgot that he was in the throes of a nightmare as her hypnotic eyes somehow forced him to calm down even as fear branched out from his guts.

The shadow doppelganger's head lifted up. Her attention no longer focused on Harry. Although he was scared, he had to see what caught her attention and followed the path of her fiery stare even though he had to step out on the porch to get a better view.

The house was old with peeling blue paint and rotted boards. The first and second windows were covered up with plywood, but Harry saw that the tiptop opening, possibly an attic window, was slightly ajar. He saw something protruding out. It looked like a rifle barrel.

The wind suddenly kicked up a notch. It bellowed like a wounded mother's scream. For seconds, or maybe years, he gritted his teeth as he endured the eternal screech. He dared himself not to look foolish by covering up his ears against a scream that seemed to elude everyone else.

He endured the banshee-like wail until he thought his eardrums would explode and drip blood down the sides of his face.

Mason asked, “Hey what’s wrong with you? What’cha lookin’ at?”

Harry was startled out of his painful bubble. In a split-second the world righted and the black essence evaporated. “Do you see anything?”

Mason said, “Up there? N’all man. You all right?”

Harry felt lethargic and shrugged as if trying to wake up. Everyone else seemed to be reading the flyers that may have been handed out during his freefall from reality.

He lied, “Yeah, I’m fine. Why you asking?”

Mason said, “Cuz you look sick.”

Before Harry could answer, he heard a bang followed by a loud crash.

He knew a gunshot when he heard one. Instinctively he ducked. The shot probably came from the nonexistent rifle barrel that Mason just said he hadn’t seen. Harry glared at Mason. His partner had been spoon-feeding him lies all day.

Panic turned the press conference into a frenzied event. The subdued crowd dissolved into a screaming mob as they frantically sought shelter. The reporters, true to their craft, only took cover as they transmitted the turmoil for media consumption.

The detectives, however, were automatic in their responses.

Harry drew his gun as Mason shouldered the door. The thing was locked and it didn’t give under the pounding. The B-team, Ethan and Tommy, helped disperse the crowd as the police chief hustled Evelyn Adamson to safety. Harry saw there was a jagged hole in the school’s window a few inches from where she had stood. Someone had been a lousy shot.

Ethan scurried up the porch just as another shot rang out.

Mason shouted, “Hey, give it up! She’s in the wind. You’ve got a chance to come out of this alive. Take it!”

The detectives mimed their strategy. Mason and Harry would circle the house in opposite directions, break a window and get inside to try and collar the shooter. Ethan would keep banging on the door as a distraction. Tommy would try to enter through the backdoor in case the shooter doubled back and was able to give the duo the slip.

The detectives moved.

Harry could hear Ethan knocking into the door. He jumped off the porch and landed into a thick iciness that wrapped around his legs like snowy concrete. The day and his bravado were waning as mundane shadows took on ominous implications. He scurried, with gun drawn and head low, to the side of the house. The banging sound of shoulder on wood grew fainter.

He was cold, but grew colder still when the black harbinger materialized right in front of him...or had it been there all along, waiting just for him? He was amazed that he couldn’t actually see through it. Did it mean that damnable thing possibly had substance?

Snow fell from the sky like miniature ice missiles. Thunder boomed and lightning flashed as the day rolled to a menacing close. Harry knew for certain that he wasn’t mental. Fear rooted his feet in the snow and stifled the scream in his throat. When he crouched down low, so did she. He was forced to stare into her fiery eyes. If his bladder hadn’t been empty, he would’ve pissed his pants.

He opened his mouth to call for backup. Nothing came out.

Harry...Harry...

He was shocked. He felt her. She didn't speak directly to him. Her singsong chant was inside of him. It was a sweet melody that rolled through him warmly and filled his nostrils with the delectable aroma of vanilla. The song also brought to mind an image of tulips.

His thoughts hooked a sliver of a memory. When he tried to reel it in, bile crept up his throat and Harry started to gag. The vomit was accompanied by a blast of pain that knifed between his eyes. A drip-drip slipped from his nostrils and then blood dotted the snow.

He backhanded his nose, and he saw that once again, the shadowy *she* had disappeared.

Harry wasn't given time to absorb the meaning of her disappearance because a choked scream erupted from within the house. The sound was ripe with pain. Aware that he had been delayed, and maybe on purpose, he stepped up his gait. The scream was followed by a crystalline sound, like glass shattering. Harry doubled back fearful that his lateness had cost his partner's life.

A male, black, mid to late twenties; approximately five feet seven, weight between one sixty-five to one-eighty-five stared up at the sky with unseeing eyes. He was twisted like a pretzel and his every orifice bled out.

Chapter 10 – Lights, Camera, Suspended Action

“Poppy? You ready? You’re on in 5...4...3...”

Poppy Stevens was exhausted although no one would know it by the artificial smile on her perky face. She was told that she had an effervescent personality.

Bubbly, bright – let’s not forget perky – Poppy had emerged out of her pampered mother’s womb into an equally pampered life. She had attended good schools, graduated with honors, and had landed a dream job at the number one ranked news station which immediately launched her into local celebrity status.

The job hadn’t paid that much, and it was too removed from her real desire, the anchor’s chair. She had time, so she didn’t mind covering local interests. She was proud of her Arts in the Park, First Day of School, and other nice human interest segments. Still, her flimsy career had been enough to attract her future husband, Jack.

Jackson McKinley Polk had the name of Presidents. He even looked presidential with thick, wavy hair, a face that seemed chiseled out of marble by Michelangelo himself, and a body that was just shy of bodybuilder perfection.

Jackson McKinley Polk was suave and wealthy. He hadn’t been born a man of affluence, he had cultivated his wealth by learning, adapting and then assimilating. Poppy had been impressed by his rags to riches to filthy riches story. He’d been a surgeon who had dabbled in stocks and real estate until he just dabbled in surgery. By the time Poppy happened upon him at a posh fundraiser, Jackson was worth twenty million.

Poppy made her first mistake by retiring from her passion. Pleasing Jackson had become her new life’s work. By the time they celebrated their tenth year anniversary, she was a

pleasantly plump stay-at-home mom with two kids in elementary school. Once the kids were in school, Poppy devoted her mom time to causes like fighting against homelessness, or helping out at the SPCA. She knew that she was blessed to have a life that was so perfectly *perky*.

By the time they celebrated their eleventh year anniversary, Poppy suspected that Jack was cheating on her. He was a sloppy philanderer. She'd found panties in the Lexus, and receipts in his desk drawer for extravagant jewelry purchases and posh hotel stays. She'd also found cell phone bills which told her the bastard actually had a secret cellphone. It had been an easy guess for her to discover his password. She'd listen to the impatient voice of Deborah as she demanded that he come home...*home*...to satisfy her. Deborah had sounded every bit of twenty!

Poppy's life had descended into a heartbreaking cliché. It became obvious that she was now that woman, the one others avoided at dinner parties, the dumpy housewife that had let herself go. She was the clueless, and career-less, person who boasted about how important being a stay-at-home was to the development of her children, while nannies and maids did all the heavy lifting.

Truthfully, Jack hadn't touched her in months. Their love life had been on the wane right before she conceived Abby, their adorable little girl. Poppy had to admit that she did sort of look the other way whenever Jack worked late or had frequent trips out of town and absentmindedly left his cellphone turned off.

After realizing his deception, Poppy tried, but couldn't ignore the whispers that trailed her from the PTA to the tennis club. At the most recent gala they attended, Jack had openly flaunted his admiration for a stunning brunette. Perky could never describe that exquisitely attired man-stealing barracuda. Plus, the equally fabulous rock on her left hand told Poppy all she needed to know about the next chapter in her life.

Poppy had been an idiot for giving up her dreams just to please Jackson. Going along to please him was officially over. She found strength in her humiliation. She vowed not to lie down and let those two horses' asses grind their hooves into her spine.

The formerly perky Poppy wasn't beaten. She was sneaky. She sought the best divorce lawyer in Richmond and paid her retainer using Jackson McKinley Polk's money before the egotistical prick froze her out of their assets. By the time he'd actually cut her out of their accounts, Poppy had catalogued his portfolios the best she could and approached her old employer, WKLF, for a job. Working had given her newfound vitality.

She stayed in the grand castle on Mulrey Drive, because her lawyer advised against moving, and because damn it, the house was her children's home. Jackson, who had lowered his trousers and tried to crap all over her self-esteem, had assumed that she would crack under his will. He had demanded that she leave her kids, and her extravagant lifestyle, to preferably live in a cardboard box on the nearest skid row.

Poppy was a fighter and she wanted this fight. But lately knocking head-to-head against Jackson just left her drained all the time. Suddenly he started behaving nicely to her...he was too considerate and there was something off about his smile. Perhaps he'd changed his mind and wanted to be a family again.

"Poppy, you ready for the intro?" Carl, her cameraman, centered the lens on her face.

Poppy heard the anchor in her earpiece and focused her blue eyes directly into the lens. She said, "We are at Saint Michael's Catholic School where..."

After her opening spiel, Carl panned the camera, careful not to include any of the other syndicate stations in his scope, and then returned the camera's eye back to her. Poppy explained

all that she had been able to cull from her police sources, when they'd been waiting for the press conference to begin.

"Young Victor Adamson..." She held up a flyer with the boy's face. "...is missing. He was last seen at 2:30 pm and was heard screaming. No one saw the abduction. The only clues to his disappearance are a basketball and a pair of eyeglasses. Victor was last seen wearing the school uniform: dark green slacks, dark green V-neck sweater, black shoes and a dark green down coat. He is described as a quiet and trusting child. A press conference is scheduled for 4:30 pm. If you've seen anything or know anything, call the Richmond Police. This is Poppy Stevens, live at Saint Michael's Catholic School. Back to you, Bradley."

The red light on Carl's camera dimmed. Poppy lowered her mike and checked her watch. They had another ten minutes before the press conference preempted the local programming.

The weather was cold, colder than her marriage.

Well at least *her* children weren't missing.

Poppy would never give herself marks for being astute especially since it took her so long to realize what everyone else, it seemed, knew – that Jackson had been screwing around. But even she could see that something wasn't quite right at this assembly for the press conference.

It was the people. She'd gotten this plum assignment because the real reporters were covering the effects of the blizzard. Crashes, power outages and complete shutdown of the airplanes, trains and the interstates were being covered by seasoned reporters. The stars of the gloomy show were the weather folks who confounded the populace by trying to explain how a system emerged out of nowhere and parked over the city. How can a weather phenomenon respect city borders?

Poppy yawned again, but the simple act of yawning caused her a smidgen of pain in her stomach pit. Strange weather, strange people, strange life.

While she shivered in her parka, the bystanders seemed to have no visible reaction to the blizzard. They huddled around the makeshift riser as men in heavy coats assembled microphones to the podium. Maybe the producer had gotten it wrong? Maybe the real story wasn't the weather system? Maybe the real news goldmine was here and now?

"Come here, Carl."

Poppy scanned the expressionless faces. They were a diverse group who stood three rows deep. What crowd voluntarily stands at a press conference in exact rows? They were like statues, as they stared up at the podium as if waiting for...what? The mother?

Carl visibly quaked inside his coat. He clasped his hands together and blew into them. "Got the engine running. I've cranked up the heat. Let's warm up before the press conference starts. I'll even share my cocoa with you."

Poppy thumbed at the group of onlookers. "What do you see?"

Carl knitted his eyebrows and after a few moments he said, "I see I'm going to have to get my camera."

So it wasn't just her, then. Carl confirmed that her journalistic intuition didn't need resuscitation. Poppy approached one of the onlookers, the young man closest to her, and asked politely, "Do you know the victim or his family?"

The man's demeanor suggested that he found her question amusing. He was cute, but when he smiled, he was even cuter. He had the earmarks of a well-heeled college student; a navy blue pea coat tailored to his frame, and a monogrammed leather book bag. Either way, he

seemed disinterested in a conversation. He turned his attention away from the perky blonde and back to the activities around the podium.

Poppy was a little taken aback. Most folks either wanted their fifteen minutes of fame or begged not to get involved, but she was rarely treated as if she were invisible. Carl returned with his camera just as Poppy decided to question another onlooker. She'd decided that a good human interest point of view would coat the sad saga with more poignancy. That and she was plain old curious.

The woman seemed to use her body to shield the little girl from the elements. The child had a pretty heart-shaped face practically buried under layers of a knitted scarf. She couldn't have been more than ten.

The woman, possibly her mother, gave Poppy a sideways glance. There was nothing confrontational in her manner, still Poppy got *that* message. She wanted them to be left alone.

The little girl said, "Victor is in my class. The orisha is going to find him. It's going to be bad."

The woman said with a smile, "Sssh, stop spouting nonsense. Santa Claus will put you on his naughty list."

Poppy stared directly into the child's eyes. "What is *oreesha*?"

The woman bent down and whispered into the girl's ear. Then they both stared straight ahead as the laborers made quick work of the job.

Poppy didn't know why prickles of hot fear suddenly raced up her spine. She *felt* that she didn't want to be at this place at this time. There was a light touch on her shoulder. She jumped and spun around. Heather Hopkins beamed at her with perfectly white teeth.

Heather worked at a rival news station. She was a statuesque Barbie doll clone who was, unfortunately, more than eye candy. She had true journalistic skills, but it was rumored that her boob size helped grant her access to legitimate scoops.

“Hey, girl! Didn’t mean to scare you!”

Poppy led Heather away from the onlookers. She didn’t want to be overheard, and she didn’t want any pathetic comparisons to the obnoxious beauty. “What’s up?” Meanwhile, she glanced over and saw Carl panning the crowd of onlookers.

“Is this story weird or what? I mean, not the kidnapping, that’s bad enough but these folks standing out here like they’re waiting for a rock star.”

Poppy shivered inside her coat. She demanded, “What do you want, Heather?”

Heather smiled. She had dimples too. “What’s your take on the goings-on? I mean there’s more here than a kidnapping, but what, I don’t know.”

Poppy gave her a half-sneer at the audacity. Did the showboat actually think Poppy was going to give her an angle when they were working the same story? “I guess a missing child isn’t enough for you?”

Heather laughed. “You’re right, I’m a simpleton. Still, there’s more here.”

A limousine rolled into view and half skidded to a snow-crunching stop. Heather, with the prowess of a shark sniffing fresh blood, pointed at her cameraman and directed him toward the new arrival.

Carl, who had been on the opposite side of the crowd, scampered delicately in the snow toward Poppy, but her interest wasn’t on the politicians exiting the limo. She was drawn to the men positioned a discreet distance from everyone else. They were huddled on the porch of the abandoned house located directly across the street from the school.

Poppy was particularly interested in the Asian. He seemed to be observing everything at once, including her. She recognized him as a police detective.

She stood her ground as the other reporters swarmed the limousine. Carl said, “Can’t believe the mayor and the governor are out here. Wow! Hey, now’s our chance to get some real background. Want to catch up with the others?”

Poppy couldn’t explain her feelings. She was being foolish, perhaps even squandering her chance to sit in an anchor’s seat, but she trusted her instincts. Right now, her intuition told her the real story was with that pensive detective. The guy looked troubled. That was never a good look for a detective.

She asked a bewildered Carl, “Who’s he?”

Carl smirked, but there was no humor in his manner, “He’s on this one too? I forget his name, but he was one of the detectives on the last kidnapping case. Kid was dead by the time they found him. Hope they don’t get the same result this time.”

Carl aimed his camera at the sudden activity buzz. Someone shouted, “Here she comes!”

Poppy found it difficult to budge from her stupor. A sudden movement drew her attention. The Asian was looking up too. She had assumed that boarded up windows, peeling paint and general neglect meant abandonment, but she thought she saw someone...or something...flit past the upper, possibly an attic, window. That window wasn’t boarded and the open blackness reminded her of a toothless mouth. Maybe she’d only seen a curtain fragment or a blind remnant, or had it been something not quite as mundane?

“Carl?” It was a whisper.

There was a commotion as a woman emerged from the limousine. She was wrapped in an expensive fur coat and was helped up onto the riser. She positioned herself at the podium and

leaned over the microphones. Maybe it was the lights trained on her, but her appearance seemed surreal, too perfect and at the same time, very false. Still, there was no denying that she was beautiful.

Although the woman gave the cameras her full regard, Poppy was disturbed by her complete lack of emotion. Perception was reality and the woman looked like she was guilty of something.

Poppy thought, *Hey honey, how about a little grief?*

The woman looked directly at Poppy and smiled.

Poppy's heart stopped. *She couldn't have heard that!*

For long stretches, the woman only peered into the cameras. She glanced from one to the other before she spoke in a mesmerizing monotone. Her words, begging for her son's safe return, seemed somehow hollow. At the end of her plea, she announced that she was offering a fifty-thousand-dollar reward for his safe return.

Poppy was startled by such an announcement so early in the investigation. She looked back at the Asian detective. In the waning sunlight, he appeared ghostlike. He wore the oddest expression. Poppy couldn't decide if it was panic or plain old fear. Whatever it was mirrored the undercurrent of...what? Creepy doom? Poppy snickered. The poor fella could just be suffering from irritable bowels. That kind of money was only going to bog down his investigation.

Poppy's attention was drawn back to the top window. Yes, she had seen someone move. Although she couldn't tell who or what she'd actually seen. She squinted as if narrowing her eyes would give her a clearer view, but when she blinked whatever it was had gone only to reappear seconds later. He, or she, was still little more than a silhouette in the dusk, but Poppy was able to grasp what the person held.

“Carl? Do you see that too?”

Perhaps he heard the terror in her voice, but Carl responded without any preamble by aiming the camera in the direction she indicated.

“Yeah, I do!” he exclaimed in an audible whisper.

Although they were live, Poppy couldn’t help it, she screamed. Her shriek was eclipsed by an explosion.

The crowd, once reserved, dissolved into a frenzy of screams as people ducked and dodged for cover. Poppy dipped behind a car with the microphone still clutched in her hand. Her heart pounded as she tried to quiet her nerves and give a blow-by-blow description of the events.

She couldn’t stay behind the car and get a good story. After a few seconds, she scooted from her safe position over to where Carl crouched, and mouthed the words, “Stay on the window.”

She continued to enlighten her viewers as onlookers cleared the street and police officers cautiously surrounded the house. The grieving mother was hustled away along with the politicians. Poppy was going to ask Carl to pan over to the broken window glass next to where the mom had stood when another shot rang out.

This time Poppy didn’t scream, despite the wetness seeping through her clothing as she sank lower into the snow. That last bullet rang just a little too close and jolted her with the reality of their danger.

Her eyes saw, and her voice described how the police had swarmed the house. How plainclothes detectives were trying to enter the home to arrest the active shooter. There were no deaths so far, but...

The unexpected happened.

There was a loud crash. Something, or someone, fell out of the window.

Carl said, “Omigod!”

The body struck the ground and sprayed blood.

Poppy had been cut off. The network had switched to a commercial. She couldn’t believe they had just broadcast a possible death on air. She turned to Carl. “Did you get all that?”

Carl crossed himself. He was such a teddy bear, but seeing a death left her shaken too. The scene was horrific. The guy landed in a bloody splash. Steam rose where hot blood met cold ice. It was haunting.

Poppy asked, “Carl?”

“There was something else in that house?”

She didn’t like his tone. “What do you mean? Another policeman?”

He crossed himself again. “No, I saw...I saw...”

The producer issued new instructions in her earpiece and congratulated her on a job well done. The other networks didn’t have the footage on the shots and the fall. The nation was already looking at Richmond because of the weather system. An assassination attempt on the mother of a kidnap victim was going to go national too. *Let’s face it, if it bleeds it leads.*

Poppy was exhilarated. If she played this right, she could end up at an anchor’s desk in no time. She needed to get a little closer to the new crime scene without the police catching her. Off to the left, and within her peripheral, she got a glimpse of Ms. Fake Boobs preening in front of her camera. *No one else had actual start to finish footage except her and Carl. Ha, take that, Ms. Blow-up Doll.*

The commercial break was almost over. She had the feature story. Although still visibly shaken, Carl lifted his hand and gave her the five finger countdown. According to him, Bradley, the tailor-suited and bleached-blond anchor, was about to toss an intro to her in 5...4...3...2...

Poppy made a couple of faces to alleviate her stress before she looked dead-on into the camera. She was ready to begin her spiel.

All sounds stopped. She didn't even hear the nearly subliminal moan of the wind. The total absence of sound swallowed her in a purer fear than any anticipation of a gunshot.

The microphone felt heavy. She lowered it when she realized that Carl was still holding up a single finger to designate the last second before the anchor's intro. He was like a statue. The red light never brightened into the 'on' position.

Her heart quickened when she saw how no one and nothing moved. It was too quiet. Although she was surrounded by people, not a single soul moved. Poppy felt terribly alone.

Maybe she was looking at this wrong? Maybe she'd taken a bullet and had died? Maybe she was a ghost?

She tried to calm herself down, to think rationally, but she couldn't. Panic swelled in her chest as terror filled her veins. Even the snow looked menacing in this new universe. It swirled in a manner that seemed more predictable. It was starting to look as if it was forming a barrier. But that didn't make sense, and the sky flashed with lightning, and wait for it...the boom sounded loud and close like dynamite.

She wondered if she was wearing the same lost soul expression as that detective, the Asian one whose name she couldn't remember. She turned back to the house and found herself staring into hell.

Poppy screamed as horror washed through her and nearly drowned out her sanity. There was no body, just a shadow. There was no face, but there were eyes. Instead of eyelids or whites or pupils, there was only fire. Staring into those eyes was hypnotic. The harder she fought, the more she was drawn in and she did it. She peed on herself.

Poppy felt the intrusion like tentacles creeping through her thoughts. She tried to make her body move, she needed to run, and to free herself somehow as that thing filled her nostrils with the too sweet scent of vanilla. Instead of running away, she found herself compelled to move closer. Yes, it was a *she* that draped her in that cloying vanilla aroma. It was a *she* that spoke delicately in her mind all the while peeling away layers of Poppy's psyche.

Poppy could feel her power and her darkness. She was afraid the shadow with the hellish eyes would take a bite out of her soul. "Please, I have children who need me."

She wanted to wake up, to hear noise, to see activity instead of being trapped in a nowhere place with...

I have a child who needs me.

The voice filled her with such pain that Poppy went numb. In her mind's eye, she saw the little boy on the flyer except that he was laughing and loving her and calling her *Mom*.

She remembered his first birthday party. He blew out the candles and beamed with a toothless grin while his friends sang Happy Birthday as a big red dinosaur with human hands twisted together a balloon poodle.

She remembered chasing after his sled as he slid down a snow-covered hill in the park while his rascally dog pursued. The dog's name was...yes, Rascal, of course!

Those memories were generous and warm just like his sweet kisses. Their lives were ordinary in that tiny apartment. The purity of her love for little Victor was overwhelming. She loved her peaceful and normal...

Life?

The fiery eyes continued to burn memories of young Victor in her mind while adding spices of rage and heartache to her torment. The brutality of her loss made it difficult for her to breathe, to feel, to function. Death, she was certain, was better than the not knowing and the not having back.

Poppy tried, but she couldn't stop crying. The hell eyes convinced her that she would continue to die in dribbles the longer Victor was missing. How could she continue without her heart, without him?

"Please," Poppy begged as the pain became unendurable. "Please stop."

Her knees sank onto the snow while her agony radiated throughout her body until she thought she couldn't suffer anymore without physically dying. She laid in the snow, on top of her urine, and found the numbing cold somehow comforting.

Then she seemed to receive a fainter final message.

She saw Jackson. She saw him as if she were an omnipotent spirit. The scoundrel had broken their agreement and he was in her part of the house, in her bathroom. He had that look on his face, the one where the warm smile didn't quite reach his cold eyes. What startled Poppy was the syringe in his hand. He was in her medicine cabinet. He sat the hypo down long enough to open up her tube of toothpaste. With a sneaky grin, he injected the contents of the syringe into the tube. What was that?

Poppy said, "He's trying to kill me?"

Jackson hates to lose, you know that. Be careful.

She believed the message. She now knew why she was always so exhausted. Although she just didn't want to believe that he would try to kill her, given his behavior and her chronic fatigue, it all made sense.

Finally, the pain ebbed. Poppy sat up carefully never once removing her gaze from the flaming eyes. She straightened her clothes and swept the snow off her hair. She wasn't scared anymore. "I know you."

Of course you do. We're connected. If you find out anything about my son, I will know it.

"How do you do this? I mean..." Poppy blinked, and she was gone.

The red light came on the camera and Carl dropped his remaining digit.

Poppy was so startled by the abrupt transition back to reality that she couldn't move.

Carl looked from behind the camera and gave her a quizzical expression. Tired, weak and probably smelling of her own piss, Poppy launched, with crisp detail, into the events leading up to the shooting. She exclaimed with just the right amount of zest how some of the police officers valiantly led the onlookers to safety while others stormed the house. She altered her tone to sound reserved as she apologized for filming the suspect's fall from the window. She affirmed in a proud manner that WKLF broadcasted the events live and was unaware the outcome would be so tragic while she heard in her earpiece that her segment was going to be packaged for their national affiliate.

She did a toss back to the anchor. "This is Poppy Stevens, back to you, Bradley."

Red light out.

Chapter 11 – Friction

The black male on the ground wasn't Mason Epps.

His partner peered down from the broken window. "All clear."

Harry holstered his weapon as he whispered a sigh of relief. He cautiously joined Ethan to study the body. What puzzled Harry most was the amount of blood that melted the snow around corpse.

The guy had degenerated much worse than a jumper from that height should have. In a way that was tragic, yet comical, he looked like a bug squashed on a windshield. He was flattened. The scene just didn't make sense. Harry stepped gingerly, careful not to contaminate.

From his perspective, he could see the guy's eyes were open and unblinking. Blood had gushed from his eyes like tears and he wore the remnants of a bloody mustache. His mouth hung open in a silent scream.

Harry move closer and pressed his fingers against the young man's throat. He felt the artery, but there was no pulse, just as he suspected.

Not far from the dead guy's outstretched fingers was a Barrett, a 50-caliber do-the-deed sniper rifle. Harry had to wait until the techies set up an official perimeter and processed the scene, but it was clear the bozo meant to cause a fatality. That fine piece of professional equipment easily cost over ten grand. Harry wondered, how the hell did the shooter miss with a cannon like that?

Ethan was still circling. "What the hell? Is he dead?"

Harry said, a little spooked by the inconsistencies in the scenario. "Yeah, but I can't figure out where all that blood is coming from?"

The unexplainable and excessive amount of blood wasn't the only thing chewing on his conscious. It was the other thing. Harry *had* seen the barrel sticking out of the window. If he had seen that, then Mason should've seen it too. Another lie.

Tommy ran over in time to keep the media at bay. This newest tragedy literally bled in time to lead the evening news. More beat cops showed up to assist in questioning the bystanders. This latest development would begin a new series of neighborhood knock and talks. Had anyone spotted anything unusual?

Mason ran up from within the house. "Is he dead?"

Ethan said, "Yeah, he's never going to sing Christmas Carols again."

Mason rolled up his collar as he sauntered down the porch steps to join them. "The house is clear, but our guy left us some evidence. I called in to Forensics so that a team could give Lucy a hand. They're on their way. Where is Luce?"

Harry did a scan, but couldn't locate her in the multitude of activities that surrounded this latest crime. He said, "I know she's still around."

Mason said, "While we're waiting, we can ask for the tapes, take a look at what they caught."

Ethan said, "I'll talk to the news crews. They might make copies for us without forcing us to jump through hoops." He added, as an afterthought, "Just seems pretty crazy that he would take a dive like that instead of giving himself up."

Harry said, "I don't think he wanted to jump. See the look on his face?"

Ethan smirked, "Maybe the ground came up too fast?"

Mason stifled a snort. “Don’t do that. We could end up on television laughing over a body. Not good PR. Casey would have hairy balls for breakfast. And I ain’t giving her mine. Go talk to the camera ladies, Preppie Boy.”

“Right,” Ethan said. “Everybody’s got a nickname except you.”

Mason said, “I’ve got one too. I’m Mr. Smooth.” He snickered at his own joke.

Harry mused, so much for decorum.

Ethan made his way through the crowd to the nearest reporter while she and her cameraman crowded around a third person, possibly an eyewitness.

With Ethan gone, Mason and Harry huddled near the body. Harry wasn’t sure about anything except that Mason had spoon-fed him another lie. The tension between them thickened. “You sure you didn’t see the barrel sticking out the window?”

Mason’s good nature iced over quickly. “What’s crawled up your ass today? You’re worse than my wife. I’m not lying to you.”

Harry saw it. The expression on the reporter’s face. He tried to place her name. She was a blonde tousled hair morsel of eye-candy. Poppy – Poppy Stevens, yes that was her name.

Their eyes met. Her blue eyes seemed brighter in a pale and terrified face. Seeing that she had held Harry’s attention, she gestured at her cameraman and then leaned in to whisper in his ear. The beefy Hispanic used his large black umbrella to shield them from Harry’s view.

Harry’s internal workings told him that she knew something. He planned to wait to see if Poppy voluntarily gave up any information to Ethan before he questioned them. Harry suspected that he wasn’t the only one who saw the barrel sticking out of the window.

He finally spotted Lucy.

She was at the side of the school having an animated discussion with the assistant DA, Chelsea Proctor. Harry experienced a twinge of regret followed by a thin slice of memory. He and Chelsea had gone out for drinks, and more, once.

Almost as if she sensed his interest, Chelsea looked over her shoulder at him. She gave him a delicate half smile which provoked Harry with unexpected pornographic images of a long ago tryst. Chelsea had been a recent law school graduate, and they had worked together on theft cases, a series of smash and grabs and breaking and enterings by a gang of wannabe bigshots.

As a newbie, Chelsea had been blind to the nuances of sociopathic behaviors and gang mentality. She had relied on Harry's instincts to clue her in on true bravado and false followers. He'd zeroed in on the weak links who snitched and provided evidence.

Chelsea was of the opinion that she never wanted to mix business with pleasure, yadda, yadda, yadda. Then one evening she casually mentioned the color of his eyes. That night they ended up on a fake bearskin rug in front of a real fire.

Harry remembered how she had howled when he pinned her creamy white thighs next to her ears and sampled her hot juiciness. Their lovemaking had been, well, athletic. The harder and deeper he drove, the louder and longer she'd scream his name. To his surprise and primal delight, Chelsea had proven to be insatiable.

He still remembered how her acrylic nails had torn into his skin until he flipped her over and drove himself between the round firmness of her cheeks. Yes, even now he could still hear her screams as he pounded himself into complete gratification.

Suddenly his memories crystallized and then shattered leaving him in an oasis of pain. He snapped his head back. The ferocity was like having a brick smashed against his forehead.

Mason snapped his fingers in Harry's face. "Catch yourself, you're bleeding too close to the crime scene."

Harry blinked himself back to reality as he pinched his nose and swallowed down a bloody backwash.

Mason stood up. "What's up with you? Can't figure out where all the blood came from...his and yours. C'mon over here. Look, no tearing through the skin. I mean a fall from that height...unless he broke his neck, but why all the blood? How many pints in a body? He looks like it *all* came out of him."

Harry searched his pockets for a tissue but came up empty. The only thing he could do was backhand and wipe on the side of his trousers like a little kid. He chewed mutely on his accusation until he couldn't hold back any longer. "How long were you up there?"

Mason got it instantly. "What the hell are you implying?"

"You heard me."

Mason snapped, "This ain't us. You've been acting crazy ever since we got tapped with this case...no wait, before then. I've been trying to let it slide, but the day you accuse me of murder is the day we chitchat with Casey about us gittin' new partners."

Harry gave him a noncommittal glare.

Mason asked, "You wanna know what I was doing? I was taking the stairs! I only got the chance to clear the first and second floor before I heard him scream. Where were you, partner? You were supposed to have my back in the house?"

Harry blinked away the memory of freezing his balls off while staring into a pair of hellish eyes. He stayed silent.

“Okay, let’s play it your way.” Mason asked with derisive snort, “Why? Huh? Why would I go up there and toss this guy?”

Mason fished in his pocket for a rubber glove, and snapped it on as he eyed Harry like a stranger. “You’re drifting out in space. I need you to get yourself together so we can hurry up and close this one. You can’t be off your game, Harry. We need you to work your mojo.”

Mason stooped down again and went through the dead man’s pockets. He pulled out a wallet. Harry cautioned, “Can’t wait for forensics?”

Mason looked up and saw the two women, “Well, Lucy’s all we’ve got right now but I see the ladies are having a heated discussion. Besides, I’m being careful and it’s too late anyway, you’ve bled all over the place. Or did you do that on purpose so that when your DNA shows up you’ll have an alibi?”

Harry said, “Funny.”

Mason shot back at him. “About as funny as you.”

Mason scanned the driver’s license. “First off, we know this guy ain’t no pro. A pro wouldn’t carry any ID.” He squinted in the waning sunlight as he read. “Robert Crenshaw, Jr.” He stiffened up and paused. “Robby?” His tone was incredulous. He leaned in and studied the dead body’s face.

Harry had heard the catch in Mason’s voice. From his vantage, he could see his partner’s eyes mist over. “So do you know this guy?”

“No.”

“No?” Harry suckled his outrage. His fury tasted bitter. He decided to concentrate on the job and started patting down the corpse as gingerly as possible. His scrutiny was rewarded when he felt a slight bulge in the dead guy’s right pocket. Moving the body as carefully as possible, he

dug inside the pocket and pulled out a stone. Harry held it up in the waning light for closer inspection.

The stone was about the size of a quarter. It seemed made of onyx and was etched with writing that didn't use the alphabet. He didn't have an evidence bag, so he slipped it back in the dead man's pocket for Forensics to process.

Mason peered over at him. "What'cha got there?"

"Nothing."

The dark blue van arrived and a team of techies spilled out and with enviable precision, they began their meticulous work. The ME made some notes on a clipboard and called for a bus to collect the corpse.

The detectives stayed out of the way. Mason said, "It was a hit."

"Yeah, but how did he think he was going to get away?"

Mason shrugged. "Martyr? Suicide by cop? Wasn't any chance of him offing her and riding off into the sunset."

Harry mulled the scenarios over. "And no ransom demands on the kid? Do you at least know Robert Crenshaw Senior?"

Mason gave an exasperated huff. "Look, I'm getting tired of your innuendos. I'm going to see what Pammy can tell us."

Why? Harry thought. *We finally have a lead.*

Only Mason could get away with calling Pamela Katz, MD, Pammy. Harry could tell that despite his using all his charm, Mason wasn't able to get Pam to commit to anything. Still, he loved watching the Do-This-For-Me two step.

As the detectives waited for their chance to also thoroughly inspect the crime scene, they huddled to discuss possible leads from the witness statements culled from the onlookers. Harry and Mason were disappointed that Ethan and Tommy had racked up zilch, although eyewitness accounts were usually quite flawed. The only people who had been facing the house were the mother and the police chief. Everyone else had been facing the press conference.

Harry thought, *And that reporter.*

He mulled over Mason's behavior for a reasonable explanation, as the group swept the house once the techies finished dusting and cataloging.

Harry noticed that Mason avoided eye contact.

When they were alone in the attic, Harry said, "My mojo is busted. It's gotta be? Right now it's telling me that Robbie Jr. had been squatting here for some time." Despite the encroaching twilight, the snow-bright illuminance provided good lighting. Also a few swipes with his flashlight confirmed the crumbs from his fast food burger, although the wrappings had been collected by Forensics.

Mason said, "Your mojo ain't busted. That's what it looks like to me too." He added with a drawn-out sigh, "Well, Tommy and Ethan talked to the mother earlier, so I guess now it's our turn."

Harry felt dread rise up his chest as he strolled over to the broken window and examined grooved lines dug into the sill where the shooter had placed the barrel. He guessed that Robbie had probably been a novice, and needed help holding up the cannon, even with a high-priced stand. The lines showed that he had been there long enough to move around, at least long enough to eat and drink. The cup had two purposes, holding a milkshake and then urine.

Shooter and kidnapper, had they been one and the same? If so, where was the kid?

Harry didn't have that piece yet. He did know the shooter wanted to be a murderer, and he should've been able to perform the act with the range on that rifle scope. That dope couldn't have missed unless he closed his eyes at the last minute and shifted his position.

Harry fumbled for a logical explanation on how Robbie Jr. squandered a sure shot. That cannon would've been able to clip a butterfly's wing. His mind couldn't lock that piece of the jigsaw into place.

Harry considered the facts, and he almost laughed at the notion that he actually had facts with any semblance of coalescence. Unless he accepted that he wasn't crazy. Running out of options, he was dipping again into the crazy bag.

What did he truly know?

He knew that he was suffering from a headache. He rarely had them, but today was one big tiger of a pain that ripped through his gray matter with stainless steel talons. And why was he suffering from nosebleeds like some twerpy teenaged geek? Sure before his mom had died, he had been that twerpy geek, but he'd never had nosebleeds.

He stopped suddenly and castigated himself. Why was he thinking about nosebleeds and headaches when young Victor was probably on the wrong end of a meat-cicle? He needed to get himself together.

He had other needs. Among them, he needed to stop hiding behind bullshit fairy stories. Then, he needed to assess their next steps and be grateful for the new lead that had landed right at their feet. Before Robbie Jr. did his fatal swan dive right in front of them, they had nothing.

But the swan dive didn't kill him. She did?

She also made him miss his target.

Although Harry's fingers were numb from cold, he needed help to concentrate. He slid his hand inside his coat pocket and pulled out good old Number 2.

Columbo had his trench coat, Sherlock had his pipe, and Harry had his pencil. He grinned as he manipulated the pencil between his fingers with the practiced aplomb of a majorette wielding a baton, despite the cold. Back and forth, over and over, he wove the pencil along his knuckle line.

He would've looked more macho if he placed the end of the pencil between his teeth like a recovering cigarette smoker. He looked up from his annoying habit and found Lucy staring at him. She regarded him oddly. Harry thought that she acted squirrely like a perp ready to pop.

Mason said, "Don't feel right, does it?"

Harry jumped which caused the pencil to hop off his knuckles. His reflexes were fast and he caught it before it fell onto the floor. By then Lucy was gone.

Harry asked, tersely, "What doesn't feel wrong? Everything is wrong here!"

"Like what?"

Harry started the pencil on a fresh twirl. "Like I'm thinking the same thing you're thinking. Why does Mom hold a press conference outside? Did she get some kind of ransom request to lure her out here in the open? Did she make a drop already? If there was more than one kidnapper, then where's the accomplice? Something's not right. All around me, something is not right."

His green eyes pinned Mason with silent accusations.

Mason appeared mystified at the unsaid allegations. He remarked, "I have my own questions. Why does this guy just fall out the window?"

He stood next to Harry and leaned out. The crowd was gone. The new crime scene was covered up by a fresh inch of snow.

Mason said, “I can’t wait to see Pammy’s report. I just wanna know how’d he break apart like that from a short drop? And how did he bleed out?” He smiled, “You think if I ask, she’d put a rush on the autopsy?”

This was the part where Harry usually chuckled his skepticism while simultaneously admiring his partner’s ability to get the ladies to do things for him, especially Pammy. This evening was different. Tonight Harry realized that his partner was a lying bastard. Even his usual self-deprecating smirk couldn’t force Harry’s lips to up-curl into a halfway decent smile.

Harry said, “I have a feeling higher ups have already demanded a rush job. I think we’re done here, let’s go chat with Ms. Adamson for a bit and maybe talk to Mr. Crenshaw Senior.”

Mason didn’t say anything.

Harry couldn’t evade his notion that his partner knew much more about everything, but wasn’t sharing squat. His calmness was an illusion. The pair wandered through the house in endless silence.

Once they were outside, Harry tried to piece together the events as methodically as possible. He was physically and emotionally in a blizzard. Mason took a few cautious steps down and when he saw that Harry wasn’t following, he said, “I’ll be in the SUV.”

Harry grunted a tepid response. He lingered on the porch too deep in thought, and frankly he was a little fearful too. He gazed up at the sky. Only then did he truly realize that somehow the snowstorm wasn’t benign. It was like an entity. It was meant to subdue the sprawling city. This strange notion had him grabbling for logic.

Maybe it was only happenstance that the fiercest snowfall began right after the kidnapping. But with the airplanes grounded, trains and bus services cancelled and the interstates impassable, it also seemed that no one was going to get into the city...or out.

How does a snowstorm recognize city borders? That was another thing that haunted Harry. The confessions, the snowstorm and the kidnapping all took place too close together to be coincidental. His squirming guts told him the bizarre events were all related...to her.

And damn it, he saw what he saw!

Lucy crept up to him. She was still toting the monster camera that was almost as large as her arm. She shivered in a thick blue coat. A blue knit cap covered her dark hair. She saw his interest and after what seemed like an internal debate, she sidled up next to him.

She asked, "What do you think happened?"

"I don't know yet." Harry stared through her, and asked, "You called me earlier?"

Lucy watched him with a mixture of wonder and adoration. He was a little confused but dismissive. Her eyes were too expressive. He was then drawn to her small mouth. In another life he would've imagined shoving his dick in that mouth just to stretch her lips.

"Yeah, I wanted to talk?" Lucy dropped her gaze. Her sudden laughter distracted him. She said, "You really don't remember us, do you?"

Harry suspected they may have dated before his accident. That was his only explanation for some of their past encounters that ended in her lingering looks, idle but penetrating conversations, and the suggestive cards on his birthdays. She always remembered his birthdays. He had never probed and she had never offered any explanations. But today she wanted to talk?

A thread of pain wove from his right ear through gray matter and hooked just inside his inner left ear. The pain was sharper than the headaches. He said, somewhat apologetically, “I don’t remember us. I’m guessing we dated, right?”

Strands of dark hair had escaped the confines of her cap. The tip of her nose had reddened and her lips seemed to struggle to form words. Her disappointment was obvious. “Yeah, we dated. I mean, it wasn’t *that* serious but we were headed that way, I think.” She smiled in a manner that made her sexier. “I thought I’d figured out a way to tame you, but then you were gone.”

Harry shrugged, again apologetically. “I’m sorry, Luce. After the accident, I sort of lost a year.”

She raised the camera, snapped a few pictures at nothing in particular. She added, “I tried to visit you in the hospital after the accident, but she was already there and...I dunno, I guess I was a little afraid of her.”

Harry tried to recall something, anything about the car accident. His efforts turned the thread of pain in his brain into a steel band. New pressure behind his eyes forced him to grind his teeth. “*She?*”

Lucy talked as if she hadn’t heard the questioning lift in his voice. “I don’t know how to say this, but there is no record of you being in a car accident. I mean, did you ever look for your file? Or talk to your insurance company?”

Harry massaged his temples with his thumb and middle finger. The steel band turned into barbed wire and cranked up the nausea in his stomach. He was afraid that he would spew on Lucy’s shoes.

Lucy continued. "I did some serious digging to find out what happened to you. I mean, I couldn't find any records of a collision involving you or your car. What I did find out was that your car was sold the same day you were admitted into the hospital."

She leaned in close. "Your attending physician was Mason's wife. Did you know that? Don't you think it's odd that before you were assigned as his partner, his wife was your doctor? I mean, you go into the hospital a patrolman and you come out a detective?" She said with an incredulous flair, "What the fuck?"

Her eyes darted about before locking with his. "I started to get a little paranoid. I thought I was being watched, so I had to stop digging. I wish I could've found answers for you, but you seemed to be doing fine and I was scared." She lowered her voice, "I'm still scared."

Harry's interest swept past Lucy. His partner, his best friend, father to his goddaughters, apparently had changed his mind. He was just outside the SUV, hand on the door, and staring at them.

Harry knew his partner. He knew that look. Mason was going to come over, and soon, so he said, "We don't have much time. You found this shit out a long time ago, why are you telling me now?"

Lucy saw Mason confidently stride over before he was intercepted by Tommy who grabbed his arm and jabbed a finger in his face.

Mason yelled, "Not your call, Tommy! You ain't the lead on this one! You guys had media all over the place and you can't get what? Do I have to do everything for you?"

Harry used to intervene when those two clashed. Today he could've kissed Tommy's ass. He needed Lucy to keep talking. Somehow her words were like a foghorn in a gray mist. He

grabbed her when she tried to scamper off. She looked up at him somewhat distraught, no, *terrified*. He pleaded, “I need to know who I am, Luce.”

She seemed to weigh her choices and then she leaned in close and whispered, “I lost you to another woman. I think we both lost you to that *accident*. I could tell after a few conversations that you didn’t remember a lot. But you were doing so well with your career that I didn’t want to get painted as a crazy stalker bitch, so I backed off.”

“And you were scared.”

She nodded and looked away.

He asked again, “So why are you bringing this up now?”

Lucy appeared stunned. “What? You don’t remember her either? I wasn’t sure. When I heard Victor was missing, I wanted to give you my condolences. I don’t know why she did it, but I just can’t believe the Lieutenant put you on this case.”

Harry choked down a rising crest of bitterness. His eyes glazed over and then focused on Mason who anchored him with a guilty expression. “Lucy, you can’t be telling me this.”

She was on the verge of tears. “Harry, you left me for Evelyn...Evelyn Adamson. I didn’t get so much as a goodbye. You were just gone. Have you really looked at the boy? My God, he looks just like you!” Her eyes began tearing.

The world swerved. His nose leaked. He rubbed the fluid pooled on his upper lip and saw blood.

He didn’t have a son, he would’ve known. Somehow, he would’ve known.

Lucy asked, “Are you okay?”

Mason clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Damn man, you bleeding? I don’t have any nose tampons.” He said to Lucy, his demeanor suddenly sinister, “Scat, lab rat.”

Lucy did just that. She ran.

Mason asked, “You okay, partner?”

When Harry wiped his nose again, his hand came away clean. “I’m starting to feel like one of Pavlov’s dogs. Every time I try to think about the accident, or the year before the accident, my reward is pain. Better not to think about it, right?”

Mason laughed. “You hear the old joke about the patient that told the doctor ‘Every time I drink coffee, my eye hurts?’ The doctor says ‘Take the spoon out of the cup.’ Okay, not that funny, but I say stop thinking about the accident and you’ll stop hurting.”

Harry pushed Mason’s hand off his shoulder. “What’s going on?”

Mason said, “I’m not the enemy.”

Harry asked, “Who is she to you?”

Mason laughed, “What you talking about?”

Harry felt the pencil inside his pocket and squeezed it just enough to keep it from snapping in half. “I have a son, and you’ve known? All these years you’ve known? That’s not possible, right, but it’s true?”

Harry was a mere second from going atomic. He got into Mason’s face. The pain of betrayal in his heart matched the agony in his head. He said through clenched teeth, “We’re going to talk to her now!”

Mason was frank. “Are you sure you want to do that?”

“What is it you know that I don’t?”

Mason said, finally, “More.”

Author's Pages of Pitches

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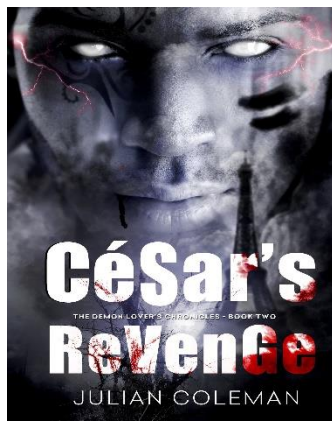
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