

A deadly presence

Sierra's screams penetrated down the stairs. Everyone jumped, startled.

"That's not the movie!" Kenneth said. He was returning from the bathroom. He paused a moment. "What the fu...!"

"Sierra!" Mary Lou yelled. "Ken, upstairs!" Mary Lou was already moving, but Kenneth still beat her to the top of the stairs as he took them two at a time. Carly was close behind as the rest of the gathering followed to fill the doorway.

It took moments for Kenneth to assess what was happening. Carly absorbed the scene a split second later.

"Oh, my God!" Carly exclaimed.

Kenneth grabbed Carly's hand and pulled her behind him. "Everybody, get down! No, wait, Mary Lou, get over here now!"

Sierra cowered in the corner of her room. She sobbed; her white face turned toward a large dressing mirror on the other side of her bed. A large crack expanded and what looked like dark fog blanketed the glass. A huge robed figure came together in the mirror as the face of a more normal-appearing human pleaded for help with his eyes.

"Tyrone!" Sierra yelled. "Go away!"

The glass completely disappeared to be displaced by a void, and two voices issued forth. One of them was the African-American boy that looked out at them.

"Help me! Sierra, how did you get away?" The tall figure behind him stretched forth what appeared to be a black tentacle of darkness and strangled off the young man's words.

"You can't play games with me." The other voice was rich, deep, and sinister. It seemed to drip blood and venom onto the ears. "There you are, little girl," it laughed. "You didn't escape after all. You are welcome to join me, daughter." Contempt and scorn were plain to be heard.

The dark figure moved and grew larger in the split second before Kenneth grabbed both Carly and Mary Lou's hands. It seemed to see the rest of them for the first time.

"Ingegerd! Bitch!" it shouted at the young girl who held Kenneth's hand. It roared at them and forgot all about Sierra and the misuse of the hated beads that had broken open a portal for its attack.

Carly blanched, and her heart began to race. In faint recognition, a fury such as she'd never felt before rose in her.

"Concentrate! Blast it!" Kenneth cursed. "No time, just do what I say!" he demanded. Instinctively they understood and responded. They drew closer and joined their will to his.

"Leave!" Kenneth demanded of the apparition. "I SAID LEAVE!" he repeated with force in his voice born of practiced chi energy. Kenneth managed to mostly shield the girls as they turned their backs to shattering glass.

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SPEAR OF CHAOS

LEGEND OF THE UNDEAD
2ND EDITION

ANNALS OF AETERNUM
SERIES BOOK 1

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This book is a fictionalized work inspired by a true story. All law enforcement officials in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

***Once in a lifetime
a friendship comes along
with the power
to change the world.***

Dedication:

**To the original Shadow Angels
who supported this project,
especially Ken and Bryan
who contributed their thoughts,
and gave permission.**

Editor in Chief: Keira Holladay

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THE VIKING INVASION

SEPTEMBER 7TH, 1066, ORKNEY ISLANDS, BORGAREY
ISLAND: (SOUTH RONALDSAY, ISLAND NORTH OF SCOTLAND)

Dread curled around Ulfr's cold heart like a wild beast in a frozen wasteland. From the highest point on the island, the Viking secretly observed the massive show of power laid before him by the army, which, in his opinion, should by rights be his to control. The island sea breeze carried the scents of salt water and fish to his nostrils as the backlit silhouettes of hundreds of Viking longships landed on the beach far below.

Light flared from many lanterns hooded against the stiff northerly wind. Like thousands of fireflies in the night, the beautiful sparkle of golden lights reflected on the water belied the invading army's bloodlust and the covetous greed of those who led them.

Somewhere across the water, a drum of war sounded. Its rhythm gave voice to the warning, till now whispered that the 'Giant of Norway' King Harald Hardrada¹ was finally making his move south for the English throne.

Ulfr 'The Wolf' Olaffson muttered spitefully at the army, which could not hear him nor see his dark-clad figure, "Every one of you is a traitor to your race, the gods, and Norway, cold mistress of the North. You ignore the motherland to take England while the Christians take over our groves. For your insolence, oh king, change is coming!" He laughed in anticipation of his revenge.

¹ Norwegian king Haraldr Sigurðarson; c. 1015 - 25 September 1066. Hardrada a nickname meaning "hard ruler" or "tyrant." Also unsuccessfully claimed the throne of Denmark.

Until now, fear aided by long years of learned prudence had kept his ambitions at bay. Ulfr's kinsman and king, Harald 'Hardrada' Sigurdson, had been a superior fighter and bully even as a boy.

Ulfr's thoughts dwelled on his plans for the future. *Real power is mine now. My cousin's machinations are pitiful by comparison.*

Ulfr remembered clearly in his mind's eye the cold October Samhain eve two years previous when the veil between the worlds is thinnest, and spirits walk among mortals. Furious at the encroachment of the new Church, then with King Harald's conversion to Christianity, the only thing left was a direct appeal for intervention.

Blood gushed over Ulfr's hands as the sacrificial sheep cooled on the Altar of the Old Ones. He petitioned the Gods of Valhalla² to throw the usurpers out of his ancestral lands. In a vision, his answer had appeared.

Ulfr looked up as the mist across the face of the moon lifted. A spear appeared in the clouds, and within his mushroom-drug-induced trance, he floated. Everything he had ever dreamed as a boy came softly whispered into his ear.

Ulfr, you will have a long life, unimaginable power, and authority. You will sit at the right hand of Loki³ in triumph. You are to help free Loki from his imprisonment beneath the Earth in exchange. To do this, you need a Great Weapon powerful enough to break god-forged bonds. The traitor Odin will no longer be chief of Asgard.

Ulfr laughed. The suggestions from the spirit world fit what he wanted to hear. Further thought and logic were displaced in his mind by base desires. He would drive the usurping Christians from his homeland forever, and Norway would be clean of their taint!

Ulfr felt the weight of the runes in his belt pouch and slowly released his breath as he smoothly rose from the ground. Secretly, he was now equal to any seer, bard, or priest, and he knew he would become famous for his deeds. Loki's sending had granted him true power.

Tall grasses and wildflowers shivered at his passing as Ulfr silently left his vigil above the harbor. Nothing else moved in the

² In Norse mythology, the hall of slain warriors in the afterlife (Asgard) presided over by the god Odin.

³ An entity known as a trickster rather than a true god.

moonlight or sounded nearby except the faint bleating of sheep. Most of the boats were ashore when the Viking made his way through the night to the mead house where he knew the war council would be meeting before dawn. He must make an appearance to throw the dogs off the scent of his plans. The moon, which shone barely past full, lit his way with no difficulty.

Raucous laughter greeted his ears even before Ulfr reached the entrance. He paused outside in the torchlight to let his eyes adjust before throwing wide the heavy wooden double doors.

Ulfr found Harald bent over a map with the two earls and his youngest son Olaf. Nearby, Harald's wife Elizabeth and their beautiful red-haired daughter Ingegerd helped organize the feast and disposition of additional supplies for the army encamped outside. The elder son Magnus was notably missing from the war council, as he'd been left at home to rule Norway in his father's absence.

King Harald looked up as chill night air flowed into the hall. He frowned at the sight of the emblem of Loki emblazoned on his kinsman's cloak pin. Harald had the urge to invoke Odin every time he laid eyes on Ulfr these days despite being Christian. Something dark and slimy cold seemed to wash over Harald when Ulfr smiled.

The king narrowed his eyes in disapproval. No proper Viking ever worshipped the trickster, not even those steeped in the old ways. Harald shivered once and dismissed the feeling. He directed a slave to take his kinsman a skin of mead then returned to his plans. With more important things to think about, he dismissed the rogue follower of Loki from his mind.

"With the addition of your ships and Tostig joining us, we should have enough men to take the Saxon army," Harald said confidently. "It should be easy."

Erland looked at him pointedly. "It may not be so easy and quick as you think," he said. "Earl Morcar of Northumbria and Earl Edwin of Mercia will need to be dealt with first. They hold the lands to the north and southwest. Godwinson, the current king, is to the south. He's mustered his men as well. We'll face him sooner rather than later, most likely."

"And let's not forget the threat from Normandy in the far north of France. William has yet to make his move," Olaf's brow furrowed as he spoke, interrupting his father, the king of Norway. "On the other hand, when the English bow to us, William will go back from whence he came with his tail tucked between his legs."

"The bastard will be dealt with in due time if he dares challenge us," Hardrada assured them. He let his confidence show. "I don't think we'll have much resistance from him this late in the season. William is bringing ships and mustering men from Normandy. When he gets to England, he still must challenge Godwinson for the throne.

"We need to go ahead and establish ourselves in England now. As well, the currents of the pentlandsfyrd⁴ will be too tricky to navigate the sea later in the season."

Their voices droned on for hours, though Ulfr avoided letting his disdain show. *Idiots*, he thought to himself, *the bear rarely sees the trap before his foot is caught*. He briefly considered warning them before changing his mind. Let them go. Soon it wouldn't matter. He sized up his kinsman, King Harald Sigurdson Hardrada, mentally giving him his full correct name.

Ulfr knew that as only one of the three claimants to England's monarchy, Norway's king had the most tenuous connection. His shoulder-length blonde hair and sweeping mustache tended to gray around the edges. His masculine face appeared deeply lined and tan from sailing the sea in all weather.

Still, Harald Hardrada was a giant of a man at five ells⁵. The Vikings were tall, but he was a full head taller than the greatest of them. Harald was confident and aggressive. Opponents rarely beat him in a fight.

The king's frown was somewhat sinister as he perused the maps on the table. His angry expression had more to do with his asymmetrical features than any danger he projected, Ulfr decided.

Toward daylight, unable to stand the pretense of civility any longer, Ulfr quietly got up and left. Tomorrow would see what it would see. For now, the cold stone hate in his heart was enough.



Two days later, the last of the longships pulled out. Over those two days, the constant northerly wind increased in severity. The day the invasion force departed, the breeze threatened to rip Ulfr's cloak from his shoulders. As the last ship's sail disappeared beyond the horizon, he slipped away to

⁴ Also called the pentland firth, an area of ocean between the mainland Orkney island north of Scotland and South Ronaldsay island that generates unusually high speed tidal currents due to geography that make boat navigation of those waters dangerous.

⁵ Ells: A unit of length equal to 18 to 37 inches depending on how a unit of cloth was measured in each country in that time period. Scottish/Scandinavian in origin. A standard unit of measure similar to a yard.

where he had his horse tethered. Ulfr did not leave with the fleet. As part of the Hearth Guard⁶ by Harald's decree, Ulfr's orders were to protect the women until the king called for them. When he did, the wife and daughters of the king and his army would sail to England.

Putting spurs to the small chestnut mare, he sped away. At the crossroads outside the village, he paused briefly to speak to a small group of poorly dressed local men. Ulfr drew his mare to a stop as one of them approached. After talking to the man on foot, Ulfr kicked his mare to a trot. He turned her onto a sheep track that angled across the road. It wasn't long until he stopped beside an earthwork. He took the saddlebags and a large bag from the horse before setting her loose. The mare would return or not; he didn't need her now.

Two concentric rings of earth rose from the ground in front of him. Nine tall stone arches stood like sentinels four times a man's height in between them. In the center, an ancient cairn piled with earth hid the dark chambers of the dead. Thick green grass and moss covered everything in sight. At the apex of the mound above the entrance stood a single stone monolith⁷ with a large round hole struck directly through its center.

Ulfr drew his lips back from his teeth and growled in satisfaction. "Death keeps its secrets well," the Viking whispered into the stillness. Ulfr's heart pounded, and he shivered as he examined the Odin Stone. "Here is my key to immortality." For the first time in many years, Ulfr felt another emotion besides hate threaten to bubble up. All his work and promises to the Powers came to this place.

"I am rightfully the king, a legitimate descendant of King Cnut⁸," Ulfr declared. "I shall rule, if not in this life, then the next. All will fear and worship me," he laughed. The Viking's predatory smile hid the cold hard light in his eyes. With no one there to see his hunger but those already dead, there was no one to remark upon its malicious insanity.

He carried his bags inside the central chamber where his forge, which Ulfr previously brought to this place, lay

⁶ A hearth guard is a group of fighters that protect a home, community or castle while the main army is away from home fighting a war. Similar to the duties of a militia, or a state National Guard it is limited in scope.

⁷ An exceptionally large or giant single stone erected as a monument by ancient peoples such as at Stonehenge in England.

⁸ Also called Canute the Great, son of Danish king Sweyn Forkbeard. Cnut was king of Denmark, Norway and England by military campaign circa 1016-1035. Harald of Norway was his kinsman.

undisturbed. He sorted through a pile of wood fuel and flasks of lamp oil. These he'd shipped with him. The island was primarily barren of trees as they had long since been used to build longboats. He dug a shallow trench and arranged a pile of rocks in the shape of a barrow. Next, he opened another bag that held pieces of iron. He laid them carefully beside the forge.



Ulfr moved back outside of the tomb. He stood on the grass in the center of the sacred ring of standing stones. There he waited and listened.

He broke the silence with dissonant syllables. He spoke forcefully and deliberately to make the air resonate with vibration. The world trembled. In response to Ulfr's chant, the stiff breeze increased. The constant, crashing roar of the surf on the beach grew louder. An approaching storm responded to his summons, turning the distant sea dark gray.

A wall of rain swept in from the horizon. The last light of the setting sun gleamed brightly on the curtain of water. In response, Ulfr walked to the ocean's edge. He cast nine runes of power held by the most exclusive of the priesthood into the waves, shouting the names of each as he did so. Thunder shocked the air, yet the sun still shone.

As Ulfr threw the final rune, a brilliant rainbow rose before him in the salt spray. It touched the earth at his feet with a golden aura. A flash of lightning threw everything in stark relief, and a portal to the Astral Realms opened before him. Light shimmered on the other side.



Laughing madly, the Viking stepped onto the Rainbow Bridge.⁹ He gazed up at Yggdrasil, the 'World Tree.' With its Gates that connect and flow through all realms, the Tree would make his task possible. Upon the priest's second step, the physical plane disappeared. Diminished in mortal flesh, Ulfr shone with a dark, sickly green light even through his armor. Such a severe blight upon the Pathway of the Spirit did not go unnoticed.

⁹ The Rainbow Bridge is often referred to as the portal or road to the afterlife through the veil of separation between the living and dead for people or beloved pets, also called Bifrost.

“Just where do you think you are going, mortal?” Heimdal growled. He moved to block Ulfr’s passage. “Bifrost is meant for humans who are dreaming or dead. You are neither! Turn around and leave, now!”

Ulfr backed away a step, eying the deadly blade in Heimdal’s hand. To slip past him, the Viking darted to the side. He drew his dagger, but it glanced off the heavy armor worn by the Power who faced him. Unnerved, Ulfr shifted to the appearance of a wolf. Heimdal’s sword ruffled the tips of his furry ears as the Power swung once more.

Momentarily confused, Heimdal hesitated. “Fenris wolf?¹⁰ No, I saw Fenris chained. You are not he.”

Ulfr was almost past when Heimdal swung at him again with a mighty blow. Ulfr tripped over his paws, unaccustomed as he was to being on all fours. A stomp from his opponent nearly knocked Ulfr unconscious.

Ulfr rolled away and jumped off the rainbow bridge in desperation. A crevasse hidden in the mists below gave him a place to huddle. Although Heimdal didn’t follow him, his fear grew when a hunting horn blared behind him. Carefully he listened to the tremulous message. Ulfr’s hair rose on the back of his neck. The horn blew one long note, four short, one long note, three short notes, one long, one short, one long, and five quick notes. B.R.E.A.C.H. it said. A few moments later, there was a distant answering horn call. Ulfr felt the first pangs of absolute panic when he heard dissonant baying. Odin, king of Asgard, had loosed the hounds of the Wild Hunt!¹¹

Ulfr kept the light of Bifrost to his left as he ran on all fours through the misty twilight. With his enhanced senses, the shapeshifted wolf quested for what he came to find. Overlaid with pine, otherworldly scents of wood and mint confused his search for the ash tree Yggdrasil.

Foremost in the Viking’s thoughts was his need for a piece of the great tree. Its magic held all of reality within its branches. There was nothing else in the multiverse that would serve his purpose half as well.

Ulfr kept one ear turned backward. Steadily, the hounds gained on him. The wolf jumped onto what he thought was the

¹⁰ Fenris was a son of Loki in Norse mythology who took the form of a wolf who was himself entrapped and chained by trickery.

¹¹ The Wild Hunt in Norse and German Celtic lore was a spectral hunt by terrifying horsemen and hounds said to hunt the souls of the damned, particularly in midwinter. Odin is most often named as its leader but in some tales other gods or heroes may lead the Hunt.

main path to gain speed. The road was silvery and glowed with a light of its own. The moon was much larger than he'd ever seen it. Ribbons of light trailed from it and formed the road where he fled. He whined in dismay, realizing he'd gotten lost in the mist.

His breath came short, and his muscles burned, but he increased his pace, attempting to stay ahead of the hounds. Ulfr was relieved he could see Yggdrasil in the distance, despite the confusing mists surrounding the path.

Ulfr sprinted onward. The moonpath's surface rippled gently beneath his paws. Yggdrasil's branches sent deep shadows reaching through the mists surrounding him. Distantly, he could see a squirrel scampering among the boughs of the great tree. He was almost there!

The hounds of the Hunt bayed in triumph as they rounded the bend behind Ulfr and caught sight of their quarry. Adrenaline flooded his veins as their excited cries scraped across his nerves. He could feel hoofbeats through the ground beneath him, though no sound of a horse reached his ears.

Yggdrasil's trunk loomed large above him, and he desperately scrambled up the tangled roots. There was a sharp gust of air as he barely snatched his tail away from a set of snapping jaws. The dog under him snarled savagely at the near-miss.

Above him, on the lowermost branches of the trunk, the giant squirrel watched curiously. Ulfr jumped upward, clawing futilely at the bark of the tree. He pleaded for help, gazing up at the animal with a pitiful expression.

In response, the squirrel pulled a branch off of the World Tree and offered it to him. Ulfr shapeshifted once more, grabbed the limb with human hands, and pulled himself up onto the lowest bough of Yggdrasil with the squirrel's help.

"Hai, hai, Roxie!" Odin shouted from behind the dogs. He sat a six-legged horse and cracked the whip he held.

Ulfr tried to scramble further up the tree as the lead dog jumped. Her eyes glowed bright blue. It caused an eerie colored wash against the mist. Horrified, the Viking watched the dog begin to climb. All he could see in the light was her gleaming white fangs. Roxie's pack mates circled and bayed with loud voices below Ulfr. As the mist thickened, only their glowing eyes were visible in the eerie gloom.

The giant squirrel chittered at Ulfr urgently. When it had the man's attention, it jumped through a hole in the trunk of the tree.

"A Gate!" the Viking exclaimed aloud.

Ulfr leaped gracelessly for the hole as soon as he realized his escape was before him. Afraid of losing his prize, Ulfr clutched the branch close to his body. In tripping over its end, he reached out with one hand to catch himself. His hand brushed a branch laden with metallic-gold colored apples. When one came off into his hand, he tucked it into his belt pouch triumphantly.

Roxie snapped empty air. She barely missed his ankle when he stepped through the Gate to the interior of the tree. Unfortunately for the man, there was nowhere solid to stand.

Ulfr fell and kept falling. Gates lined Yggdrasil's interior. The Viking had no way to reach any of them as he fell, rolled, and slid to the bottom.

Left alone on the branch, Roxie looked down at Odin. "Come, Roxie!" Odin called to her. "We will go a different way. You will hunt him to ground yet!"

The Wild Hunt's black and tan lead dog jumped down outside to lead her pack. Odin snapped his fingers, and Roxie put her sleek, narrow head under his hand. He leaned over his horse's shoulder and caressed her for a moment. "Good dog," he told her. "You never fail to find your quarry."

Odin then turned his horse and led them away from the World Tree. He didn't envy the human where his Sight told him the man was going.



Ulfr finally stopped. He lay sprawled at the opening of the lowest Gate among the Tree's roots. His branch was beside him unbroken and the golden apple still in his belt. Smugly, he realized he'd escaped the dogs. Light from underneath the exit door beckoned him through to the other side. There he stood for a moment to get his bearings.

Three women sat at looms. They spun thread, rolled it, and wove upon a vast wall of colorful tapestry. Ulfr sucked in his breath. Drawn by the tapestry, he walked around the edges of the cavernous room. He stared at images of beasts, wars, and people in various poses and phases of life. Beautiful landscapes changed and sprouted houses, towns, and cities. Dragons flew above while corpses lined the bottom. Slowly it dawned upon him

where he was. Tales of the realm of the three sister Fates his people called the Norns¹² did it no justice.

The Norns who were busy weaving upon their looms seemed at first to take little notice of Ulfr. When he approached the spinner, she spoke dispassionately.

"I am Urd. I govern the past. These are the threads that weave the future." She looked down upon him as a hawk gazes upon its prey and continued, "You wished to seize immortality, mortal. In your haste, you were foolish. Many opportunities have you wasted." The spindle flashed.

Verdani, who governs the present, was more circumspect than her sister. "You achieve that which you seek, yet there is a price you do not understand. Everything is connected. You do not exist outside the weave." Many colored threads moved from her spindles to the loom.

Skuld, the ancient Unmaker, Seeress, Valkyrie, She who is Fate of the future, was angry. The loom flashed. "You muddle the weave... thus it is difficult to unweave. Your thread is black; see that it is full of loops and causes the rest to tangle. I shall have to cut and remove it." She raised her shears.

Seeing that Skuld was about to cut the thread of his life, he fearfully seized the slender cord and began to pull. The weave puckered and resisted as the Norns shouted. Skuld nearly succeeded in cutting the errant thread when Ulfr stumbled against the fountain of the Norns. The magic of the fountain of youth glowed about him as it watered the World Tree.

Ulfr's determination paid off as the thread came free from the weaving and into his hand. It gave way, and its release threw him backward. Almost by accident, the thread of Ulfr's life was plunged into the Fountain. He felt terrific vigor and life fill his limbs. Now, to drink. He would become a god! He barely heard Skuld cursing him as he bent over. Suddenly and without warning, a giant white swan attacked him. It drove him back from the water before he could take a sip.

Too late, the horrified Fates realized. He held his fate in his hand. The waters of immortality saturated his life. They were powerless to stop him. Or were they? At least no water had touched his lips.

¹² In Norse mythology the Norns Urd, Verdani and Skuld are female beings who create and control fate past, present and future which makes them more powerful than the minor gods of the pagan pantheons (groups of gods common to a single national or tribal mythos) who are also subject to fate.

“You have stolen your fate, mortal, but you do not exist alone in the worlds. We have other threads to weave, and your enemies are not without power,” Skuld proclaimed. “Someone you do not expect will hunt you until the end.”

Ulfr refused to listen and laughed in their faces. “I believe none of this,” he said to them. “You cannot cut what you do not have, so I hold all the power here. Me! I do!” he shouted. “You can’t kill me!”

Contemptuously Ulfr walked away from the Norns. “Stupid women,” he muttered disrespectfully. Seeking a way out, Ulfr walked back through the door he entered. The door slammed behind him and would not open again.

A lightless expanse enveloped him. Every breath and footstep echoed hollowly. He walked, and he walked. Ulfr heard whispers in his head, and a faintly perceived instruction came to his mind. “Use the unmaking immortal to set your master free.”

“I have no master,” Ulfr declared.

“Loki waits,” came the answer. “You must forge your spear of kingship in blood to rule. With the tools at hand, you may rule the mortal realm and overthrow Odin, who was once mortal himself. You must free Loki from his chains to sit at his right hand.”

The seditious whispers continued as Ulfr imagined the voices were those of dark elves living deep beneath the earth. He came to another Gate. Ulfr paused there between dark and light. Beautiful artistic knotwork designs decorated it, and glowing runes moved upon its frame. First, they were wood, and then they were bone. Only black space was beyond.

Patterns formed as he watched. Recognizing its shape, Ulfr reached out and plucked Loki’s rune of power from the design. Dark fire flared as he touched it. Overwhelming pain nearly made him drop it. Yet, Ulfr held the rune with shaking hands. It filled him with its dark taint and burned Loki’s symbol into the palm of his left hand, together with the rune of sacrifice in his right palm.

The priest of Loki felt his humanity melt away as he lost the last remaining parts of his capacity for love or compassion. The new creature that he became stared into the darkness of the bottomless pit. He felt it stare back at him. It demanded his soul.

“Home,” his voice echoed into the void beyond the rune of power. Disorientation and pressure in his ears caused the Viking to reach out to steady himself as his surroundings seemed to

spin. Ulfr fell through its doorway without touching the arch a second time.

Ulfr again found himself underground, breathing the air of the dead. Gasping and shivering, he sat down until he recovered his composure. A growing sense of triumph filled him to accompany the emotionless darkness he'd brought from the beyond. He inhaled deeply and listened intently, holding his breath. No sound met his ears that indicated the dogs still pursued him.

"Nothing can touch me! Not even the Fates will catch me now, and they can't kill me!" the Viking gloated. Ulfr felt his newly won immortality and wore it upon his shoulders like a cloak. "Not even Odin can best me," he said, giggling maniacally in the barrow.

No comment came from the dead. "You have no sense of humor," the living immortal told them. "You're dead, so what do you know?"

Ulfr arose with a broad smile and set about preparing the next phase of his plan. The Viking put coals and wood under the forge to burn and poured whale oil over it to stoke the flames. Next, he piled the dead bodies from the burial chambers onto the fire. He took the warrior chieftain's buried weapons, meant to accompany them in the afterlife to Valhalla, and threw them into the forge's smelter. He added the small chunks of iron.

As the bodies burned, he placed the carbon ash in with the iron. He allowed these to heat while he went outside. The violation was sacrilege to the people who'd buried them, but Ulfr had never cared and failed to see why he should begin now. His people would have set them to burn in a boat set adrift long ago.

Two of the men he'd spoken with earlier waited outside. They began to talk. Ulfr held up a hand to forestall them. "Move those," he pointed to a handful of large bundles lying on the ground. The men nodded. One of them met his eyes, and he gasped.

Whatever Ulfr was before, he no longer stared out of the face in front of them. No longer blue, his eyes were empty and black. The lesser men fell to their knees whimpering.

Ulfr wrinkled his nose with contempt, but he bade them bring their bundles inside. Pulling carefully, they edged the wrapped bundles through the narrow passages. They returned twice more until nine wrapped heaps lay beside the forge.

“Speak of none of this, and you may live,” Ulfr told them. “Return with the rest of my gear. I will reward you as promised.”

“Yes, great lord,” one of the men mumbled. The other man merely nodded. Both local villagers stood a head shorter than the tall Viking. Ulfr dismissed them as a giant dismisses an ant.

Ulfr walked to each stone arch to invert the carved rune standing there. *I will kill them later*, he promised himself. Next, he went to the Odin stone and keyed it with spoken syllables from the old language. Satisfied, he sang a keening to raise the circle of power.

One of the men ran straight to fulfill his task as ordered. The other man contained sterner material in his heart. He turned and looked at the ring of stones.

Power pulsed as if it was hot air shimmering above the rocks. Magic was more than he bargained for. He was spooked. Unsure of what he should do, he trembled as he walked away from the barrow. Ahead on the narrow footpath, a cowled figure slowly walked toward him. He drew his sword in alarm.

“It’s just an old lady,” the man whispered to himself. Relief flooded him.

The woman wore plain brown homespun clothing. Hands gnarled and leathery-looking rested over the top of her walking cane. Thin gray hair straggled from under her hood, and a large bag of wool hung across the woman’s stooped shoulders. She held a small loom with dangling threads in her free hand. Yet, her uncommonly piercing silver eyes were bright. “Good afternoon, young man, and God bless,” the old woman said pleasantly.

“Good afternoon, weaver,” he answered, “and God bless you too.” A hammer of Thor hung from her neck, visible when she got close. Gasping, she came to a halt.

“Ah, it will be a fine afternoon once’t I get home with this load.” She swung her bag around to the other shoulder. “I’m not as spry as I used to be.” She laughed as if her own joke amused her.

The man felt like a spider being examined in a web as she looked him up and down. A comforting smile lit her face. He remembered his grandmother and how she had needed help in her age and infirmity.

“Can I assist you with that?” he asked. Startled by the weaver’s abrupt cackle, he grinned with her.

“Naw, I imagine you have your own business to be about,” the woman told him. “With all the mess going on in these

confusing times, you're probably heading to the village völva.”¹³ She looked him up and down another time or two and continued walking past. “Maybe I'll see you around, but I've got to get this stuff home now.”

The villager forgot his confusion and fear as the older woman's light footsteps faded down the track behind him. An urge to talk to someone about what he'd seen seized him. The völva seemed just the person.

He turned to thank her, but the old lady was gone. Puzzled, he looked for her for a minute or two before shrugging his shoulders. He wouldn't have thought the old woman could move that fast and simply disappear. However, all he could see was an empty green moor devoid of life or movement but for the circling gulls. Resolutely the man from the village quickened his steps toward the jumble of houses in the distance.



Ulfr was satisfied with his progress. Vaguely, a spear-shaped point appeared out of the red hot glowing metal. Patiently he infused it with additional ash and hammered more shape to it. Now for the first quenching. He pulled the smallest bundle over to the stones and loosened the ropes and wrappings around it. Inside was a small ginger-haired girl. Tears spilled from her bright blue eyes.

Tongs protected Ulfr's hands from the hot forge. However, they burned with their own fire as he plunged the glowing hot tip into the child's belly. The runes on his hands responded to the blood.

The Viking glanced at his right hand and nodded at the rune of sacrifice without remorse. “Yes... this feels right. I will take the blood of my enemies with this sign.”

The child's muffled scream didn't last long since she quickly died of shock. Her body stopped twitching. The spear point cooled somewhat, and he put it back into the fire. He hammered the metal again. More ash from the dead burned warriors, more fire from the burning bodies, and he quenched his weapon again in another living body. This was another royal child, a boy of about seven.

One after another, Ulfr committed unforgivable crimes against his clan and gods. Six kinsmen lay dead with three to go.

¹³ Seeress, spiritual advisor, shaman in old Norse society.

Four of the newly dead were grandchildren of the king. He unwrapped the last bundles. Caressingly he released a beautiful red-haired woman and drug her to the side to watch. He'd kill her last... his cousin Ingegerd. He'd always lusted after her. Maybe he'd quench his body in her before he quenched his weapon. He basked in the light of horror in her eyes as she saw the slain children. She could barely move due to her tight bindings. He tasted her terror. Fear would lend strength to his weapon when it ate her soul.

Two more deaths followed, and he dragged Ingegerd to the forge. All the death made him feel ALIVE. The rape didn't sate his lust, so he took her over and over while he beat her until she lay bleeding and barely conscious beneath him. Sadistically he pulled an ember out of the fire and lay it along the inside of her thigh. He bit her viciously as she screamed around the gag in her mouth.

He laughed as he picked up his spear point. He was so pleased he'd let her live a little longer.

He carved knotwork and runes into the hot spear point using a chisel and hammer. It was cooling nicely, so he fitted the shaft of ash taken from the World Tree into it. It appeared as bone and glowed with a faint light. It was beautiful. The steel was shiny with intricate carvings all over it. Forged in death, it was deadly, insanely beautiful. It was POWER.

The Viking spoke a final key phrase to its razor-sharp cutting edge. His symbol of Kingship, his mark of strength and power, and his means to free his god was complete. It was now a Great Weapon like Thor's Hammer, Tyr's Sword, or the Spear of Destiny. Its very name would inspire fear for generations.

Ulfr's back was toward the door as he faced the woman who lay whimpering on the floor. Now he felt only contempt. She was nothing. He was everything. He was poised to finally plunge the spear through her heart when something simultaneously grabbed him from behind and grabbed the spear. Thrown heavily to the floor, his head hit the side of the forge forcefully enough to knock him out and rip the spear away from his grasp.

Cursing and kicking him, the men who'd grabbed him trussed him with the ropes from his victims. "By Odin's beard!" one of them exclaimed. "Look what the bastard has done to the children!"

They placed a sack over his head and dragged him out by his heels. Once outside, they also gagged him and firmly bound his

hands to immobility. Behind him, Ingegerd weakly sobbed in pain and relief.

Barely conscious, Ulfr heard the woman's pitiful cries as they laid her slain children beside her. The Viking didn't care. What he did care about was what these men would do with him.

Arguing voices didn't seem to agree on what to do next. Ulfr felt a sharp blade against his throat, then heard more arguing. Sharp pains ensued as one of the men kicked him repeatedly in the head. Beneath the sack, Ulfr's eyes glowed a sickly red in fury. Still tied up and imprisoned in his body, he could do little. He was eventually thrown over the back of an animal on his belly before being taken for a banging bumpy ride.

More arguing ensued, and he found himself again handled unceremoniously. This time he hit a hard surface and felt the rocking of a longship in the water.

"To the king with him." That seemed to be the consensus among his unseen companions. He was going south to trial where he'd either be put to death or banished, they said. Either way, Ulfr felt like laughing. These idiots didn't know his true nature, nor were they aware he could not die. They'd even brought all of his belongings, including his items of Power.



2

OUTCAST!

Within a day of the army's departure, Harald's men had met up with Tostig's muster at the mouth of the Tyne River. Ten thousand strong, they burned and pillaged their way down the coast. Brutal and lightning fast, the army destroyed Scarborough first, then sailed up the Humber River and hit Ricall. There they encamped. The army marched on York. The English Earls Morcar and Edwin, panicked and furious that the Vikings were invading their land, hurriedly called muster to meet them inland at Fulford on the outskirts of York.

The two armies clashed. Harald kept his invaders with their backs to the river and pinned the English across a marshy meadow. Mustered men of Northumbria and Mercia, which formed the English side broke and were slaughtered. Messengers flew south on lathered horses to spread the news of the huge invasion force.

York gave up with hardly a fight, promising booty and hostages to the Norwegians. Harald and Tostig were confident they'd broken the back of any English resistance at Fulford. Planning to hold the city for a future residence they did not enter. Harald forbade any looting of York.

Harold Godwinson of England was nowhere to be found, and informants said William was still across the Channel in northern France. Tostig itched for a fight with his treacherous brother and chafed at his absence. He loudly proclaimed his brother a coward as well as a traitor to anyone who would listen. Still, he had his sights on Kingship in the North, which seemed all but assured.

Harald Hardrada of Norway, Tostig, and his men withdrew to Ricall for further planning. There, Harald received word that there would be a hostage exchange and supplies would be given at Stamford Bridge. He also received separate word that his

Kinsman Ulfr ‘The Wolf’ Olafsson had been caught in dark sorcery and murder. Harald prepared his men to meet the hostages and ordered a lawgiver to accompany them so that a ‘Thing’ could be convened to mete out justice and other business dispensed.

With the countryside appeased, on September 25th, 1066, Harald Hardrada split his forces. He left a large portion of the army behind to guard the 300 longships of the Norwegian men. The rest he marched over 15 miles to Stamford Bridge. It was a very hot day, and they weren’t to be fighting. Harald ordered them to leave their heavy armor behind, the better to make a fast march and make it easier to deal with the hostages.

Near the river, Harald met with a messenger. He ordered his men to halt and set up a temporary camp. Less than an hour later, a horse-drawn wagon appeared with a heavily trussed man in the back. A sack had been thrown over his head. The prisoner was accompanied by five armed and angry-looking men.

Harald stepped forward, and one of the guards came to meet him. Holding out arms, they gripped one another’s wrists. “Olaf, my friend, what has happened?”

Olaf looked past Harald in hesitation. “Do you wish your lawgiver to witness?”

The king nodded. “We had better do this in the right manner. Bjorn!” he called the man to them. “We will assemble in the field.” Harald gestured to his men.

One hundred of his Housecarls stepped forward as witnesses. King Harald Hardrada led the way to the center of the field by the small river. In the distance, a wooden bridge spanning the water was visible. “Go on, friend. I need to dispense with this.”

The lawgiver reminded the assembled men of their traditions and called two witnesses to step forward. With remembered horror in their eyes, they recounted what they had found when they captured Ulfr. The second witness could barely finish through his tears. He wrapped up his account, “And thus My King, we found your daughter and sent her to the healers. When we left the island, they said she asked to be taken home to grieve her losses.”

Throughout the man’s tale, Harald Hardrada seemed to swell visibly. His face developed a red blotchy hue in contrast to his pale hair. He stood still for a moment with the others looking around at his men’s shocked faces. With a furious bellow, he drew his ax and started to swing at the neck of his kinsman.

Bjorn quickly stepped forward and stopped the king's hand on the upswing.

"My chieftain, I know you are angry, but his trial must be complete, and you must pronounce judgment according to tradition."

"I'll give you tradition! This scum doesn't deserve to walk another minute on this earth!" But Hardrada stayed his hand this time. He worked his jaw while no sound came out. "Fine, do it," he said. "Get it over with before I change my mind."

The lawgiver turned to Ulfr and looked him up and down. "Remove his hood!"

The men gasped when they looked upon his face. There was barely any humanity left... a killer among killers, a wolf among the sheep, and they were the sheep.

The lawgiver noted the black contempt in the other man's eyes. There was no remorse here. What was he to do? Kin doesn't kill kin, but he clearly should die... the lawgiver contemplated uncertainly. He started to speak when Ulfr forestalled any further comment.

Ulfr spat on the ground in front of them. "I am Alsherjargodi¹⁴. You have no jurisdiction here." He slowly smiled at the intake of breath from both the king and the lawgiver.

"You dare claim the title of High Priest! You are no more priest than I am a washerwoman, man of Loki!" Harald broke in.

"Wait," the lawgiver held up his hand, "if he's telling the truth, we could endanger our souls by passing judgment. The gods demand sacrifice at times."

"Gods... I shall send him straight to the goddess Hel's realm and let *her* deal with this traitor!" Harald looked around in fury at the circle of men surrounding them.

Harald's gaze met a circle of closed faces. His men didn't spend so much of their time fighting the elements as they sailed the unforgiving seas or farmed in the bitterly harsh climate of Norway without a healthy respect for forces greater than themselves. In another time he would have called them superstitious, but now a good quarter of them were practically on their knees.

"Get up you Heathen warriors!" Harald said to them. "Alright, here's what we'll do." Turning to Ulfr with a cold light in his eyes, he said, "In deference to the fact that we are kinsmen and in the event the lawgiver agrees you have divine patronage,

¹⁴ High priest of the old ways. An untouchable.

I will stay a death sentence for now. Instead, you are banished, banished, banished forever from your homeland on pain of death. You are outlaw, anathema. Your enemies are free to hunt you down. I curse you and damn you for all time in all places.” He stopped for a few moments thoughtfully. Harald bent inches from Ulfr’s face and whispered.

“If I ever see you again, I will kill you, kinsman or not. Your crimes damn you for eternity, Wolf. God may forgive you, but I will not forget, nor will our shared flesh ever forget your treasonous cowardly murders. Mark my words, you *will* pay for this!” Thus, the king pronounced sentence. He then instructed his men to see Ulfr to a boat.

As they left, he turned quietly to a handful of completely loyal men. His whisper was only for their ears, “Kill him!” With looks of satisfaction on their faces, they nodded and turned after the departing group with their weapons gripped securely.

His men were gone from sight barely a few minutes when a cry set up. “The English, they come! Harold Godwinson!” I response, some of the men who followed the banished priest returned.

Across the river, another army approached. These men were heavily armed and armored. Hardrada’s men, unprepared for battle, carried only minimal weapons. Harald quickly moved to intercept.

The two armies faced one another across Stamford Bridge. Harald Hardrada called a fast rider to return to Ricall and gather the rest of the men with weapons and armor to reinforce them. As the rider left, Harald instructed one of his men to stand and protect the bridge that no one may cross.

At first, the big Viking who defended the bridge gave a good account of himself and bodies piled around him. As he stood fast on the bridge, he was eventually felled by a treacherous spear from underneath. Hordes of Englishmen ran across the bridge and plowed into the Viking army.

The Norwegians were cut to pieces. When the expected reinforcements arrived, they were too exhausted from having run more than fifteen miles in the extreme heat while in full armor to be much help. Many laid down and died on the battlefield with no wounds visible.

Meanwhile, Ulfr and several men who had thrown their lot in with him watched from the trees. “You die kinsman. You *dare* pronounce judgment on *me*, the right hand of Loki! God is on my side, and you are vermin! I am the future... you... are dead.”

Ulfr's sickly smile never wavered as he watched an arrow take the Giant of Norway, King Harald Hardrada through his throat. Thus, history did not favor Norway in the battle for the English throne.

Ulfr then turned away and made the several-mile trek to the longships. Once there, they took two ships and headed out to sea. Storm winds drove them quickly south down the coast. They stopped to raid and plunder with a swiftness that saw them in and out before the local earls could respond. They had cleared the southern tip of Britain past Normandy, passed through the English Channel, and sailed clear in a few days. With few options and the need to avoid the icy winter on the open sea, they headed for Iceland.



3

A LIVING DEATH

MAY 10TH, 1067 OSLO, NORWAY. THE CASTLE OF KING MAGNUS

Ganother scream penetrated to the hallway through the great doors in the women's section of the king's residence. Two guards stood outside but didn't move to respond. Another man paced the corridor.

King Magnus Haraldson II, son of the now-deceased Viking King Harald Hardrada, wanted to curse and throw something. He winced again at the wails of his sister from within. It had already been hours. Golden light from the sun slanted through the windows late in the afternoon. The vigil had begun before daylight, heralded by a messenger who woke his guards. Agitated, Magnus resumed pacing as he strained his ears to hear what was happening.

Within, the patient midwife's calm manner bolstered Ingegerd. "Almost there, my lady. The baby is crowning." She placed another cloth under the tired woman to soak up fluid. She waited bare moments for the next contraction and pushed down on Ingegerd's stomach. "Now, push!" Skuld told her.

With a pop and a rush of pink-tinged water, the baby was released into the hands of the waiting midwife. At first blue and covered in a pale white paste, a vigorous toweling encouraged the tiny new life to flail her arms and take her first gulping breath of air. The midwife cut the cord and examined the child closely.

The mother strained to see her new baby. "Skuldi?"

"It's a girl. She is healthy, my lady, with raven hair and blue eyes, a beautiful child, just like her mother," Skuld said.

Ingegerd turned her head full of matted red tangles to look at her newborn. For a moment, she hesitated. Anger and grief so much a part of her these last months eased as she gazed at the innocent child's face. None of her pain was the baby's fault. She could not replace her losses, but the void eased. *This is MY baby!* she thought fiercely. *That bastard wolf is not going to get the better of me, rape or no rape! Generations of strong Norse blood runs in my veins, and I will seek his death, in this life or the next. I will have my revenge.*

"By the earth, the sea, and the sky, this is my child, not Wolf's child. As Odin is my witness, Skuldi, she will grow up a strong warrior woman. She will not know how she came to this world, but that I am her mother!" the Norse princess declared.

Skuld nodded in agreement. She reached out and touched the baby's brow with a finger.

"Have a blessed life, little one, it shall be long and full, your seed will prosper, discover new worlds to conquer, and will come into their power soon enough," her voice held the ring of prophecy. When she took her finger away, a red mark was visible. Looking closer, Ingegerd fancied it was in the shape of a spear.

"What is that mark Skuldi? I've not seen that before," Ingegerd said.

"It is her birthmark. Her head is large. It's only bruising from your delivery of her. It will fade with time," the midwife reassured her.

"By this sign will she conquer, the spear of Kingship, Odin's mark. That is a fitting sign for my daughter." Ingegerd touched her lips to the baby's forehead.

"Very fitting indeed." An odd light seemed to emanate from steely eyes. "You need not fear for her safety Ingegerd. The gods will watch over her. They see everything, and they know." She reached for the new mother's hand. "The world always seeks balance, and fate lives in this child. Our laws assure us that retribution and balance of events always come when least expected."

Ingegerd searched the other woman's face and found comfort. "Fate..." the Norwegian princess mused, half dreamily. "I shall call her Aesa."

"A good name for a strong child." Skuld nodded in intense satisfaction and looked gently at her namesake. "Now, it's time I left you. This isn't your first child, so I know you don't need my further help. Your wet nurse is on call if you need her."

Aesa nuzzled at her mother's breast, and despite a couple of false starts, she latched on and suckled vigorously. Skuld watched mother and daughter for several minutes before turning her attention to the soaked bedding and the afterbirth.

Gently, she pulled the remainder of the baby's placenta the rest of the way out. A rush of blood flowed and pooled on the bed. Ingegerd's attendant picked up the congealing mass.

"Blood for blood, my lady." Skuld touched a bloodied finger to Ingegerd's brow. The princess' breath hissed between her teeth as it was indrawn. She blinked once and no longer saw blood in the midwife's hand, but she now held a palm-sized blood ruby. Ingegerd looked at her midwife in wide-eyed amazement. She was still close enough to the Old Way to recognize wild magic.

"See Ingegerd, the gods hear you and find you blameless. This is a sacred gift that is rarely given. Wear it over your heart, and it shall lighten your burden as your daughter and her daughters flourish," Skuld said.

Quietly the midwife rose and placed the large beautiful stone on the table beside Princess Ingegerd's bed. Then she turned to go and shut the door behind her.

In the hall, the King looked around at the sound. "Well?" His brows lifted in a pained expression. "How is it? What is it?"

"Fine, my king. The baby is a girl, and her name is Aesa. She's strong and nursing well," Skuld said.

"And my sister?" Magnus was too impatient and upset to speak in more than cryptic sentences. He had witnessed Ingegerd's pain and grieving for her other children firsthand. What cruel irony that the rat who had taken them now gave her another. He would like to strangle the Wolf with bare hands. *Ulfr, you bastard, you will pay for this! As Odin is my witness, you will pay!*

"She is a strong woman," Skuld reassured him.

"Princess Ingegerd has been through too much," Magnus said. "My sister..." Magnus choked on a further reply, himself grieving over his nieces and nephews.

"Wait for a bit and then you can go in and see her," Skuld told him. "Your sister needs you more now than ever." She pulled her dark hooded cloak close around her slender shoulders and sought the stables. Her horse was waiting for her.

"Are you sure you don't want a gentler mount lady?" Fire in the white stallion's eye concerned the stable boy. "He looks like

he could be pretty rough." He looked at her diminutive thinness with a dubious expression.

"It will be fine, my boy!" Skuld laughed. "This old guy and I, we have been together longer than you've been alive," she said. "We're used to each other."

She mounted more smoothly than what the stable hand would have imagined and trotted out of sight. Once far down the road in the wilderness, she threw her head back and laughed wildly.

"Ulfr, you fool! You think you best Fate, but you do not see as I see the tool of your forging that will truly bring you down! The future is yet written, and you'll regret your hubris against the gods!" Skuld's eyes glittered angrily.

"Hai!" she screamed at her horse. Her steed went to a full gallop with an answering bellow, and they headed for the top of a Fjord.

No one was there to see when the white stallion jumped hundreds of feet off the overhanging rocks of a waterfall toward the icy azure water below. Halfway down, he spread his wings with a pop of displaced air and made a graceful turn into the multi-colored rainbow shining in the sunlit mist where the horse and rider disappeared.



JULY 8TH, 1086, SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI RIVER, NEW WORLD

Gtwo large wooden boats cut the relentless river current. Thunder rumbled distantly to the west. Nature's music was punctuated by the rhythmic sound of the boat oars splashing in the water. Huge gray-brown insects sang loudly in the overhanging branches of tall trees growing on each side of the river. Mosquitoes harried the men at oars, who were already marked by many of their tiny cousins. Occasional splashes of large fish rippled the reflective surface to either side of the dragon-carved ships.

Driven by experience, the men kept a careful watch on the shoreline. Hostile skraelings¹⁵, the natives, might appear with their primitive arrows at any moment. Between disease and the

¹⁵ An epithet, referring to the Native American tribal peoples they encountered as primitive subhuman animals.

natives who had proven they would turn on them, they were already down two longships from those who'd joined them in Iceland, and over a hundred crew were dead. Fear did not mark them despite their caution at being in unfamiliar territory with unknown dangers.

Weather-beaten faces and rough-hewn clothes told the tale. These men were seasoned and had not seen real civilization in many turnings of the moon. While they didn't know what they searched for other than 'opportunity,' they knew who they followed.

Ejected from every settlement west of Britain, Ulfr went further and further west until he reached Vinland. Then he and his men went ever south. They explored, killed where they wished, and hunted, gathered, or fished for their needs. With the natural riches of this new land for their taking, none of Ulfr's men mentioned turning around to go home. They slowly made their way up the river over several days, and finally, on the 16th of July, Ulfr called a halt.



Ghe turning of the world's firmament marked that date, recorded in the position of the sun, the earth, and the moon. The Norns, ever watchful, wrote the date into their weaving. Silently they worked on the cloth of life, ever spinning thread, weaving, and cutting. They wove inexorably around the empty hole created by the loss of a single thread.

Even the gods avoid crossing the Norns, and Skuld is not only Norn, the strongest of the three fates, but also Valkyrie. Thus, she is not bound by quite the same rules as the other gods, for she also takes men's souls in battle, deciding who will live and who will die. Skuld sees the future and walks freely upon the Earth in whatever guise she chooses. Hers is the power to make strong men tremble and mighty armies fall.

Ulfr dismissed Skuld as insignificant and the reckoning he owed her unimportant. Thus he felt safe from her wrath as he searched for a location to continue his work for his god.

After fifteen years of searching, Ulfr decided that this would suit him as a place to settle. A great valley opened up on an eastern tributary of the great river they explored from the south. Green and fertile, it was rich in wild game, timber, native grapes, and herbs. They had not experienced contact with any

natives for some time. He would stay here and finish what he started all those years ago.

For the next several months, the priest of Loki set his men to explore the far reaches of this section of the valley, the hills, and the neighboring summits. They built stone markers at each of the high points and mapped out the valley using these line of sight observation cairns.

Their mapmaker drew several copies on skins which were distributed among them. They cut trees and began building a settlement. Later, they told themselves, they would sail back downriver and across the Great Water to bring in women to settle the new village.

Ulfr forgot his debts as he began his new life. He didn't age, and he didn't fear to do so. In fact, he didn't fear anything. He knew nothing could touch him. The World, however, had not forgotten his debts to it. The gods watched and waited.



Tforeign and surrounded by silver light reminiscent of moonlight on northern snow, he arrived at the door of Valhalla. His booming knock brought the hall to silence, and they stared in surprise as he approached. He was tall and slender, not quite wolf and not quite dog. His tongue lolled to the side, exposing the deadly white fangs of a hunter. Yet his expression hinted at good-natured mischief.

"I am CO-YO-TE. We have a mutual enemy," he announced. "I must speak to you and your leader that I ask your assistance."

"I am Odin. You may speak," came the response.

CO-YO-TE padded forward. As he came close, the gods and goddesses saw that he had blue star beads woven into the fur of his ruff. An eagle feather fluttered from his ear. He was larger up close and silver-gray. His blue eyes marked him as a Divine One of the Spirit. Odin raised his Meade horn to toast CO-YO-TE's radiance.

"Lord Odin, the Wolf snaps at the heels of my people," CO-YO-TE began. "I cannot allow this taint to continue in my land. I tracked the scent of his power here, to this place. His magic is foreign to me, and I seek the means to defeat it."

"We do not interfere directly in the affairs of mortals," Odin said. "Yet, The Wolf is no longer mortal, and his plans are of concern to us."

"And yet, he walks the earth in a man's mortal body. How was this done?" CO-YO-TE asked.

"I will answer his question!"

CO-YO-TE looked at the speaker and bowed low before her. Her face was beautiful, timeless, and her silver piercing eyes held knowledge of the ages. "Lady?"

"Ulfr the Wolf wishes to release our greatest adversary, the trickster Loki. In this seeking, he stole his life from my hand. He is the master of his fate," she answered.

"You know as do I, oh Fate, that even the mightiest of the gods may be brought low," CO-YO-TE declared. "I will hunt him to ground."

"He must be brought to account for many crimes." Skuld's eyes were hard as she stepped up beside CO-YO-TE. "Fate moves those around him, and I have seen that he is blind to this. No one may escape me in the end. In this, I have... personal interest."

CO-YO-TE's sparkling white fangs showed in a toothy grin. "Then we have a common purpose, Old One. I ask your aid in this matter as you are able by your laws. Thus, I grant you and your allies limited access in the West."

"Go with him daughter, ride," Odin commanded Skuld. He handed her a golden hunting horn, her shield, and spear. "Ride, O' Valkyrie, O' Fate!"

Skuld's ancient countenance shifted to that of a young maiden. She and CO-YO-TE left the hall in accord. The earth trembled as she once again walked the mortal realm. Touching CO-YO-TE, she shifted once more. The leather enveloping her human form was the soft butter of doeskin cut in the style of the tribes of the west. White feathers were woven into her raven black hair. She relished the feel of earth under her feet and the wind in her hair, but her purpose lay in more than just being mortal. Today she hunted.

Her faithful steed also disguised himself by altering his form. Changed into a white deer, the shapeshifted stallion gracefully strode into the forest with his own purpose. The white buck left his mistress' side, himself hunting after a fashion.



Sweat ran in rivulets down the faces of the men who trudged up yet another steep hill. After months in the humid southern climate, the Vikings were still struggling. Today's quarry had eluded them yet again. Morning found them on the

hunt for venison and hides. Frustration and the heat combined to make short tempers.

For weeks a huge rare white stag had made tantalizing appearances, and Ulfr commanded them to bring it down. None of the men dared object when Ulfr decided to lead the day's hunt. They were on the eastern side of the great valley with the bluetinged, tree-covered mountains rising before them. They followed a deer track into the hills.

In a wooded cove, they finally sprang him. Yet, their arrows fell short of his snowy white hide. "You incompetent idiot! I told you to get closer before you fire the shot!" Ulfr turned on the archer. "If you can't do any better than that, you can do without!" He ripped the bow from the man's hand. "Just go back, you fool. This requires a real man!"

The hart jumped over a copse and caught his branching horns in his hurry to flee. He tumbled and came up limping. He bugled, wide-eyed, watching the men. They could see the sweat darkening his flanks when he turned to run again. His tail flashed alarm, and he bugled again loudly.

The beautiful white hart was slowed but still danced just out of range. He vanished again into a thicket by an overhanging rock shelf. Roaring water could be heard just beyond. It covered the sound of the deer passing through the underbrush.

"Don't worry," Ulfr said in satisfaction. "We've run him into a pocket." He nocked his bow and gestured for the men to follow him. "There's nowhere for that white devil to go now!" Looking at the rise and cut of the ridge in front of him, he knew that it was likely a dead end.

"On second thought," Ulfr said as a whim struck him. "I'll take him alone." The tall, dark Viking strode forward into the ravine. Thorny berry bushes tore at Ulfr as he cursed them roundly. He was forced to stop every few steps and pull the thorns away from his clothes.

Several yards past the entrance to the ravine, it opened a bit and he could see the white rapids rushing between two rocky banks. He moved along the dirt path worn beside the stream by many animals and perhaps also human hunters seeking game and water. The giant white hart had to have come this way, he thought, there's no other way out.

Creeping forward, Ulfr put arrow to bow once more. Ahead the Viking saw a flash of movement at the base of the water. Beyond, there was a cliff face with a recessed space behind the

main waterfall. To either side, it went only up. He saw that he'd been right. There was no retreat for his quarry.

Ulfr licked his lips in anticipation of the kill. With his arrow still nocked, he crept forward as quietly as his large form allowed. Ulfr saw the white hart lying partway in the water. The stag raised his head feebly to look at the hunter and dropped back in resignation.

The white deer could go no further. The deer panted, his breath irregular, spent. Ulfr drew on him and was about to loose his arrow when he saw something else which stayed his hand.

Bathing in the falling water was a raven-haired woman. He saw that her deerskin wrap was thrown to the side on top of a boulder. She didn't notice him through the roar of water hitting stone. She turned, oblivious to his presence, and his breath was nearly taken from him. She was perfectly formed and all-female. He watched her beauty for several breaths and stepped forward, prepared to take her. The white hart was forgotten.

She looked up and squeaked in surprise when she saw him. He knew that next, she would beg and plead and struggle, like so many worthless women before her. Maybe she would scream as well before she died. His black eyes held the promise of violence as he approached her. She made no move to flee. Startled and too frightened to bolt, he imagined.

He reached for the woman. Before he touched her, pain radiated through his body from behind. Simultaneously, he heard panicked shouting from his men on his back trail. He realized that they were standing in a hail of arrows.

Ulfr bellowed furiously and swung at the woman. She merely looked at him calmly and smiled triumphantly. Her uncommon silver eyes bored into him. The beautiful woman stepped back into the dark recess under the waterfall. His attempt to follow her was met with more arrows. He was hit three more times before he turned, dripping blood in the water. Ironically, he noticed that the white stag was gone.

Downstream, he saw a ring of Native men with bows pointed at him. More arrows rained down from the sides of the ravine above. One arrow passed partway through his leg, and another lodged in his neck. These he simply pulled out and threw to the ground. Even covered in blood, he showed no sign of going down. Fear did not touch his face, and he merely laughed. Ulfr drew his sword.

"Who's first!" he shouted at them. "Come close that I may drink your blood!" Light glinted off the fine edge as he swung it

back and forth. “Worthless wretched skraeling scum!” He swung in a wide arc around himself.

An old man stepped forward and held up his hand. Arrows ceased to fall. He contemplated the outsider before him. “Your men cannot help you,” he told Ulfr in his native tongue. Ulfr understood the gist of his speech, if not every word. His contact with the natives had been rather less than sporadic. He spat toward the old man. “And you cannot touch me. I am your living death! Come meet your gods on the blade of my sword!”

“I will not send my people to needlessly die.”

“Then face me yourself, coward.” Ulfr looked at him in contempt. He glanced upward to the rocky outcroppings where he now knew archers were hidden. When he looked back at the old man, he was slowly stepping forward. Ulfr smiled a predatory smile and pointed his weapon at him. The old man stopped several paces away by the side of the flowing stream.

He bent down and picked up a handful of dry stones and another of water. While Ulfr watched in puzzlement, the beautiful young woman reappeared and handed the old man a turtle shell in which he placed the dirt and stones with an amount of water. He pulled a bundle of tobacco and cedar from a belt pouch and lit it from his pipe. Placing it also in the shell, he began chanting while the smoke drifted lazily up and around his adversary.

Curling around and enveloping the space between them the smoke took shape as the chant invoked the sacred elements. The old man waved a hawk’s wing through the smoke, “U-no-le, e-lo-he, at-si-la, yv-wi a-ma-yi-ne-hi. (Air, earth, fire, water),” he sang. “Spirits of our clans, Grandfather Sky and Mother of our people, ancient ones who walk with us, come see this demon that is a man who walks among us with death in his heart.”

Drums as a heartbeat began to vibrate the air, and the smoke thickened, surrounding the People as a thin fog. Between them, a large, long-nosed gray toothy form appeared within the smoke, called by the People and maintained by their life force. It laid an object at the feet of the medicine man and quietly spoke to him.

“We do not interfere in the affairs of mortals. However, this man has committed crimes not only against your people but has committed unforgivable acts against his people, his kin, and his gods.” The medicine man went to his knees as he felt power draining his life force. Yet he still held the fire in his hands, unwavering.

"Because I am breaking my promise to not interfere in the affairs of man, I will not again be able to help your people. I must leave this land for the west. You will not see my like again for a thousand years." CO-YO-TE's blue eyes held his. "When my children return to this valley, your people will know that the means to defeat this evil is nigh. This I can do."

CO-YO-TE nudged the object at the feet of the old man. "You cannot maintain the power by yourself. You must take this and with the best of your people, strike him down. Scatter him to the four winds and bind him with these." CO-YO-TE reached around, pulled a mouthful of blue star beads from his ruff, and placed them also at his feet. "Be warned, you must be ever vigilant, for I have spoken with the Future, and I see great heartache, much death, and many hard lessons before the Keetohwah¹⁶ and the tribes of your children in these Utaka Mountains and valleys. Keep faith, and you will triumph."

The young woman, water still glistening on her naked form, stepped calmly into the smoke and vanished. For a moment, she turned silver eyes, older and wiser than any earthly gaze could produce upon the enemy, and smiled a secret smile as she faded away.

CO-YO-TE turned and sprang with jaws open wide at Ulfr. His form also vanished in the smoke. As he did so, other forms emerged to surround Ulfr. Barely perceived and seen only by those with sensitive hearts, those men who could add their strength did so. Bear, Hawk, Cougar, Turtle, Rabbit, Deer, and Snake held fast to him.

Furious, Ulfr bellowed and fought the unfamiliar bonds. He felt like he was moving and drowning in deep water. He'd never held much with the native populace's ancestor and animal worship. He had dismissed it as foolish superstition just as he dismissed any worth but exploitation of these wretched people. For the first time, he saw his mistake.

One young man stepped forward. He cut a striking figure, dressed in a simple wrap of buffalo hide and painted with red concentric circles. "Grandfather, I will do this." He bent and picked up the object at the old man's feet. It was a carved stone mace covered in designs of the spirit animals. The old man began to waver as he weakened, so he didn't answer but blinked acknowledgment.

¹⁶ Pre-Tsalagi (proto-Cherokee) people, first tribes descended of those who came across the seas by boat with King Solomon's navigation maps, the lost tribe of Israel.

With a loud cry, the man lunged. Sword met mace with a loud clack. Ulfr barely managed to meet the attack. Several strikes produced the same result. Drumbeats increased in tempo, and the old medicine man sat on the ground and continued to chant while many of his people stood behind him. One by one, they began dropping as their life force drained with the heroic effort to continue the flow of Power.

Only half of the People remained standing to chant and drum when finally Ulfr was struck a mighty blow. Surprised, he was knocked off his feet and landed on his back. Wasting no time, the young warrior jumped on him and hit him again.

Dizziness washed over Ulfr, and he felt the cold of the smoke creep deep into his body. Uncontrolled shaking rolled through him as he yelled his defiance. "You can't kill me! I am the right hand of God!" He pulled a long dagger from his tall leather boot and stabbed at his adversary. In the fight over the knife, the young Native sustained a grievous slice across his face. The pain nearly undid him, but he turned the knife and plunged it into Ulfr's black heart. The Viking's lifeblood pumped out in rivulets to pool on the ground beneath him.

Ulfr's mortal body was fading. *NO! Impossible!* Silent screams beat inside his skull. *I can't die. I am immortal. I must complete my mission!* He weakened further. "Loki promised me I would live. He said I would be king and sit at his right hand!" Ulfr, in a last desperate bid to save himself, concentrated on the knife in his breast. He would push it out!

The last of his blood cooled beneath him, and he became disoriented. His spirit, unable to pass as it should, was caught painfully between his body and the dagger in his heart. It finally fell out of his body too late. He was splintered, caught between the worlds by his dark deeds and the spirits of the land where he intruded. Ulfr floated, still connected to his earthly form, unable to move. There was no breath and no blood pumping through his veins. Slowly his flesh stiffened. Ulfr, the mighty priest of Loki, the cousin of King Harald Hardrada and Viking scourge of the New World, was dead.

Miraculously, the Old Man had not fallen with his People who had given of themselves so that the scourge on their land would end. He got weakly to his feet and limped to where the Viking's body lay. Panting, the blood-soaked but victorious champion moved aside.

The old man looked intently at the body. He could see Power shimmering around and over the Viking's remains. The old man

wanted to cry. He was not gone after all. Could he still be alive somehow? Fear beat in his chest. Too many of his people were dead because of this one dark soul. He must end this!

Leaning closer, he looked with eyes of Spirit. Dismayed, he saw that the main portion of this evil was trapped in the dagger. The rest still hung onto its earthly home. CO-YO-TE had spoken truly. He would see it be done as their long-nosed guide had commanded. Stiffly, he picked up the Viking's sword and swung it hard at the corpse's neck. What had once been Ulfr's head rolled free from the body.

Resolutely, he struck several more times, each time cutting another piece of the body away. For fear that Ulfr might even yet re-animate his remains, he bound them carefully in sacred white deer hide wrappings and strands of Coyote's gift. He must see to it that this *creature* was never disturbed!

He shivered with cold premonition when he finally placed wrapping skins over the head. Nightmares dogged his sleep for the rest of the old man's life, remembering the promise of death staring from those black eyes.

Sadly, he summoned the junior medicine men, his students and requested volunteers. No-one refused. "You must each take these and bury them where no one will ever find them," he said. "For the good of our People, you must do this. Run, my children. Hide them well. On your return, you will receive a warrior's death and go with the gratitude of the clans. No one must ever know where this creature is hidden. Your medicine is strong, so I know you will succeed. May Spirit be with you."

With that charge, four fast runners went out heavily laden. As each returned, they were allowed to enter the game arena and die fighting as a warrior against those appointed to silence them.

They were greatly honored, and their names were whispered with reverence for their service. Before each was buried, the old man took from them an item. These were tied together to honor their sacrifice and bind their secret. This was held as a sacred medicine and passed from one medicine man to the next.

The secret of the evil one who had killed so many of their people and was now buried in secure places around the great valley survived in the legends of the Keetohwah for many generations.

The People splintered into younger tribes and almost forgot the story over centuries of safety and peace. Never again was a northern invader seen in the great valley. Never again was the coyote seen east of the Mississippi River.

Mary Lou Wells

Coyote's words were taken to heart, and his wisdom passed down. Medicine men of the greatest power did not forget. They were charged through the generations to see that the evil taint did not escape its bonds to threaten the younger generations.

Slowly, men with eyes to see realized that some areas were contaminated by a malaise, a disease of the Spirit. Anyone who stumbled across the sites ended up wounded in their soul. They watched and waited, suspecting. CO-YO-TE had promised to return and give them the tools to defeat the evil.

After the white man arrived in the great valley and the many deaths of the People afterward, the knowledge that Vikings were ever in southeastern America died out as well. Yet, a few People of full-blood families still related the legend: a scary story to tell around the campfire as well as one lone medicine man in each generation. Thus, the tale did not completely die.

Finally, the children of CO-YO-TE returned as prophesied. In the early '70s, coyote song was heard in the backcountry of the East Tennessee Valley. It then spread to every corner of the State of Tennessee. The old medicine man trembled when he heard their song, for he knew the ancient prophecy was ready to be fulfilled with those high-pitched yips which echoed in the forested hills.



4

VISION QUEST

JUNE 8, 1946

John Holderman set out in the central backcountry of the newly created park in the Great Smoky Mountains. The Great Spirit whispered in the misty breezes, sighed through the treetops, and laughed with the gurgling whitewater streams in this, God's country. Clouds sat heavy, ubiquitous below the majestic blue forested peaks. Here, he toiled toward the highest peak to be close to the Sky Father as he sought his Vision Quest.

Barely thirteen and on the brink of manhood, he followed the traditions of his grandfathers before him. Alone and with only the clothes on his back, his medicine bag, and a few supplies in a small pack, he would find himself and return with his vision, or he would never be seen or heard from again. He was taught to hunt, fish, and gather practically since he was a babe in arms. He felt well prepared and confident when he started his trek through the mountain passes that would lead to the peak the White Brothers called Clingman's Dome.

It was hot in the lower elevations, but the higher John climbed, the cooler the humid breeze became. The trees changed from mixed forests on the lower slopes to fir-spruce at higher elevations. Tall as sentinels, they soared above him. Some slopes were hazardous with plunging drops, so he stayed on established foot trails. Some areas were flat with the endless forest interrupted by meadows of wildflowers, rhododendron, and berries. Bees buzzed during the day as he traveled while the fireflies danced in the evening and the katydid and locust sang at night. It was a peaceful and soul-filling experience. Everything went as planned for the first two days. Trout bit his hook, a rabbit

fell to his snare, and he found edible plants and berries to sustain him.

Two-thirds of the way to his goal, however, disaster struck. Despite the beauty, John began to wonder why the spirits didn't speak to him. The afternoon of the third day, his luck seemed to run out. John was getting tired, hungry and the spirits were still nowhere to be found.

Wildlife scattered or scolded from treetops when he approached. No game had fallen to his arrow, and he was out of provisions. John stopped in disgust. Removing his pack, he threw it in a thicket of berry bushes in a fit of pique. A bear cub hidden in the bushes called out in distress at the sudden noise. He jumped. John knew better but had simply not thought. His breath held between his teeth; he hoped the mamma bear was nowhere close.

Just when he thought he was safe, he heard a sudden roar, and a huge angry female bear charged him. Nearby the mother had been taking her fill of dried berries and short stalks of bear corn that birds had missed. John was lucky. The angry bear only managed to swipe him a glancing blow on his thigh, knocking him over a drop-off. He fell several feet and slid down the slope over rocks and boulders until he landed, bloody and bruised on the lip of a rock face.

Above him, the mother bear roared furiously, but her first swipe had put him out of reach of her wrath. Half dizzy with the pain in his head and his leg, he dragged himself inside an opening in the rocks just a few feet away.

Inside, he realized it opened up into a small dry cave formed by a fold against a crevasse in the mountainside. There, he succumbed to his injuries, unaware of his surroundings. He dreamed, and the Spirits finally spoke. They did so with urgency, commanding, insisting, and prodding John to listen to an ancient prophecy.

John was of a shamanic spiritual line they whispered, tasked with guarding an ancient evil that most men had forgotten. He must take up that task. They showed him the locations which must be safeguarded.

In his mind's eye, he could see the spread of the Great Valley before him, centered on the cave where he lay. On the far western rim of the valley, he saw another peak soaring above the valley's hills with a rough cut being mined for stone at its base. Then, turning of its own accord, the panorama shifted. To the northwest, he saw a Native village destroyed and abandoned

with the artifacts it once protected in danger of being dug up by developers wanting to build a subdivision. Centered within this triangle, set deep in the city of Knoxville, he saw the spine of a tall forested ridge guarding its secret near an oblivious population. He was shown the darkness hovering, threatening the whole valley and its inhabitants.

Tossing and turning in fevered sleep, the Spirits also showed him the deaths it had cost his people to bind the evil. He saw the enemy wore the face of a foreigner, a white man. This white man was an outlaw to his ancestral people from across the sea and John's native forefathers. Human, it had not been in centuries, and the boy understood it was even more dangerous now, existing as it did half in the spirit world and half in the material world. He felt that looming death close by and knew he'd been led here with a purpose.

A woman's voice spoke to him in his Grandfather's native Tsalagi¹⁷ language, but he struggled to understand. "The bindings are weakening, and the kin-killer is near discovery. You must act to ensure these cursed bones are not found by the innocent. To defeat and kill the Seidhmann,¹⁸ you must seek out the child of his loins, a young Volva/Shaman/Witch, for without this child's wyrd,¹⁹ you cannot hope but to bind him. The tainted soul must be pieced together again, or he cannot die. When that day comes, remember these words, for the old magics and the Oathbreaker's Curse are key to final salvation."

What magic? He wanted to know, but no explanation emerged. John remembered a beautiful woman's face with riveting silver eyes, which then faded into a gray canine with blue stars shining on its pelt. He recognized Wa-ya, or 'CO-YO-TE' as his name was known to the white man from pictures of the western lands, for he had never seen one of these wolf-like dogs with his own eyes. Wa-ya's eyes were the blue of the Spirit-sky. He gave John his final instructions.

"By these totem signs you must not fail... unktena, unktena, tlv-da-tsi, i-na-li, ah-wa-hi-li, kwandaioha²⁰. When you find these, you will know it is time. Look with your eyes, look with your spirit. We shall help you and be with you as we may, though already we break rules and must largely act through others. The price of failure shall be a reign of blood in this world and beyond.

¹⁷ A word meaning "the people" in the old language of the eastern central tribes of the Tennessee valley, later bastardized to "Cherokee."

¹⁸ Male priest or magician in old Norse similar to seidhr, the male version of the Volva.

¹⁹ Personal destiny.

²⁰ Cherokee names for animal totem spirits.

Take this." Coyote removed a single bead from his ruff and placed it at the entrance. "It shall help to protect you and remind you of your fate."

John woke to reality with the symbol of each animal Wa-ya showed him burned into his vision. There were six altogether in a circle of fire, a white-winged dragon, green water dragon, black panther, fox, golden eagle, and the rattlesnake; totems of the spirit, each corresponding to a living person. Though he was stiff and barely able to move his sliced leg, he forced himself to sit up.

He looked out of his shelter. It was just barely light outside. John felt his way forward and found a loose blue stone, which he placed in his spirit bag. He shivered in the cold chill emanating from the darkness behind him. Something seemed to call to him, beating its spirit wings against an implacable cage. Yessssss, it hissed.

John recoiled. He thought he could see a man floating in an endless circle in the darkness. He crept forward to look. Fear jolted his body, and he trembled, but he was even more afraid to run. The remnants of a deerskin sack partially covered a large human skull. A long strand of deep blue beads bound it. They glowed with silver fire, slightly illuminating the back of the crevice. A faint red light seemed to emanate from the eye sockets. No wonder the spirit walked this endless circle in the darkness! It was a trapped soul! He thought about his dream, half-remembered and blurred now that he was awake. It wasn't a dream! It was frightening and maddeningly real, and the spirits wanted him to deal with it!

Then, he looked up into eyes of black void and blood dripping fangs. He screamed and understood Wa-ya's commandment. No, the innocent must never find and release the monstrosity the spirits bid him protect. Until he had time to puzzle out the rest of what they told him, he would see that this 'creature' stayed put. Quickly, he unlaced his shirt and threw it over the skull with the beads intact and nothing misplaced. He carefully and deliberately replaced the stone he had placed in his bag on the ground. He would take nothing with him!

Stones piled around and over the covered skull buried it to normal sight. In John's minds-eye, he could still see the angry spirit fighting its bonds. It screamed in silent fury. John felt the mountain shake and heard a muffled explosion a few moments later. Laughter echoed around the rocky opening.

He saw billowing fiery smoke rising from the forest when he looked down the slope. Parts of a large airplane were scattered

everywhere. It took John a couple of hours to reach the site. There was only smoke and unidentifiable body parts. It appeared to be a Boeing-made military airplane.

John looked back upslope toward the evil monstrosity waiting to break free. Did it have enough power to bring the plane down despite the bindings? Or was this crash a purposeful act of God or a simple chance and mechanical failure? He speculatively watched the plane burn for long minutes, then turned away sadly.



5

THE KNIFE AND THE BEADS

JANUARY 1985, ROCKWOOD, TENNESSEE

Unusually warm, December had given way to an icy January winter at last. Wet snow sat heavily on the branches of the dense underbrush across the steep slopes of Roosevelt Mountain. A fire tower soared at its summit where it looked out above the drop-off of the western portion of the Tennessee Valley. The valley's rolling hills and blue, ribbon-like rivers were tucked snug against the Cumberland mountain escarpment.

Rising abruptly from the valley floor in an ancient seismic rip, the mountains serve as a last goodbye to travelers going west on the interstate. Roosevelt Mountain, dubbed 'Rockwood Mountain' by the locals, sits at that junction, the highest peak where I-40 makes its curve across the escarpment westward toward Nashville. An 11,000-acre forested wildlife management area encircles the mountain and provides wilderness walking trails away from private property.

At the fire tower on that Wednesday afternoon, January 23, 1985, the faint blue of the Great Smoky Mountains formed the horizon on the other side of the valley. The light of a late afternoon sky reflected blindingly white across the densely spaced houses of Rockwood. Frame houses that had faded from a once bright array of colorful paint sat pale roofed in the stillness. The worn-out streets, while mostly clear thanks to determined road crews and a thin application of salt, still had some icy spots.

Only a few drivers were out and about on their errands or slip-sliding home from a day's work. Those adults who were not forced to be gone from home were huddled around smoky fireplaces while their children re-built sagging snowmen in the yard. It had snowed over the weekend, but it was still cold enough mid-week for the snow to have stayed.

Straight downslope from the fire tower sat a light blue frame house on the corner of Clymersville Road. Dripping icicles hung from the gutters. No car sat beside it, and no fence surrounded the overgrown yard. Inside, its single resident shuffled slowly from the table to the stove where a teapot had begun to whistle. The old lady's slippers scraped against the tile floor as an echo to the faint hissing from the roof's snow cover as it gradually slipped downward. Sudden laughter and banging from outside penetrated the thin walls of the house.

Cursing, the old lady wiped up her spilled tea. She had little enough to spare. With no money for medicine and hardly enough for food on her small social security check, she had to get relief for her arthritis where she could. She picked up her latest overdue bill from the electric company. The corner of it was wet. At least her name, address, and 'Dear Betty Lovelace' were readable.

More noise intruded. Irritated, she went to the door. The metal screen door banged against the outside wall as Betty screamed at the three neighborhood teens to get out of her yard. One of the kids responded with a thrown snowball. Just in time, she shut the door and went back in to salvage what she could of her 'medicine.' Rattled, she shook so hard she barely managed to pour herself a mug of tea. The woman sighed, sat down and returned to her bills. She wrapped her robe closer around her body. The single small space heater in her kitchen barely warmed her feet.



"hat an old bat!" Sierra threw another snowball, this time at one of her companions. They were walking up the street toward the church and the slopes beyond. Both of the girl's companions were carrying cheap plastic sleds. The girl's cheeks were red from both the chill wind coming off the mountain and the exertion of tussling with the guys. Her light brown hair was escaping her blue toboggan. She was warmly dressed in a brand new ski jacket, but her hat kept riding up. She pulled it further down over her ears and jumped on her boyfriend's back. Obligingly, he picked her up and piggybacked her up the street.

"C'mon Jack!" said Sierra. "Faster!" A few faltering steps later, he stepped off the pavement into the soft snow and slipped, dropping both Sierra and the sled. All three kids laughed as the two of them fell into a snowbank. "Hey, what'd you drop me for! You aren't clumsy, or anything are you?" Sierra said, only partly

indignantly, and slapped his arm. Her shining eyes belied her tone. “I thought football players were supposed to be big and strong.” Giggling, they got up and dusted themselves off. Jack started to pick the sled back up, and Sierra plopped down on it. “Here, pull me!” she said.

Their companion, a boy slightly older than the other two, hung back slightly as they forged ahead. He was wearing a black leather jacket with red sleeves and chains hanging all over it. His shirt underneath proclaimed him a Run DMC fan. The jacket screamed Jackson style.

He was more than a little uncomfortable as he tried not to show how closely he watched Sierra Moore. Jack was his buddy, and besides, in a small southern country town like this, if you valued your skin, you didn’t mess with white girls. Momma made sure to be clear on that point.

“You’re slower than Christmas, Tyrone!” Jack said.

Sierra giggled. Her gaze was drawn ahead to where two more figures were racing down the relatively flat hill in the yard of Clymersville church.

“C’mom Jack. He’ll catch up. Looks like Carol and Jamie beat us,” Sierra said. “Hey Carol, wait up!” She jumped off the sled. Jack struggled to pull and plowed forward through the snow.

The other girl turned around and waved. “Hey, Butthead! Race ya’ to the street!” She turned and pulled her sled back, with Sierra struggling to catch up.

“Look out!” Warned Jamie, who nearly plowed into them. The delay had allowed Carol’s younger brother to beat them to the top of the ‘hill’ and start back down. Jack and Tyrone gave him plenty of room as they caught up to the girls, who also pushed their sleds down the hill.

The two boys took a running dive with their sleds and hit the snow, moving with a whoop. Given the flatness of the churchyard, it was the only way to go fast. Their momentum took them past Carol and Sierra, then carried them across the street. Tyrone was lying prone, and his sled slowed in the ditch. Sitting on his round saucer, Jack bounced over the ditch and spun about. Abruptly and with a loud crack, Jack’s sled stopped. Jack let out an audible groan and fell sideways.

“Jack, what happened?” Tyrone called. Another groan was all the answer Jack could give around gritted teeth. He was lying on his side in the fetal position when Tyrone got to him.

“Oh, no! Look at his sled!” Carol exclaimed. She picked it up, and everyone could see it was cracked down the middle. “What did you do?”

“Aw! Gosh, that hurt! Crap! Crap! Crap!” said Jack, starting to breathe again. “I think I hit a stump.” He began to roll upright and changed his mind. “Aaargh!”

“Are you all right?” Carol looked at the sled dubiously.

Tyrone looked at the snow where Carol had picked up the sled. “Yeah, it’s a stump all-right. Damn Jack, you don’t do things by half.” The stump was raised slightly out of the snow where Jack had plowed into it. It was slightly bigger around than a man’s wrist.

“Jack, baby where are you hurt?” Sierra asked. She was on her knees beside him, pulling at his hand in an attempt to help him rise.

“I think my tailbone’s broken,” Jack groaned pitifully.

“Can you get up?” Sierra asked.

“I don’t know, Sierra... maybe,” Jack responded.

“Tell you what, you can come to my house,” said Carol. “It is the closest. Besides, mom’s probably back from work by now. She called before I left, and they’re letting some of the nurses that live farthest away off early. They think the roads are gonna freeze back up.” Carol offered her hand. “She’ll prob’ly know what to do.”

“Yeah, she’ll prob’ly put ice on it,” Jamie piped up, grinning.

“I think I’ve had enough ice for one day,” Jack said as he tried to get to his feet.

“Jamie, don’t be an ass!” Carol told him. “Here, Ty’. Let’s help him over to my house.”

Between Carol, Tyrone, and Sierra, they got Jack up and headed two houses down past the church. Jamie tagged along behind.

“Hey, Mom!” Jamie bounded onto the porch. “Jack needs his butt iced!”

“Jamie, shut up!” Carol shouted. “Do you always have to be so annoying!”

The wooden porch boards rattled as Jamie bounced on them on the way to the door. “Mom!”

Carol and Jamie’s mother came to the door to see what the ruckus was about. She invited the kids in and had Jack comfortable on the couch in no time. The smell of warm cookies permeated the house.

Tyrone sat by the door quietly, watching the others play a game of Scrabble. Sierra had settled beside Jack and was sitting half draped on his arm while she munched chips and peanut butter cookies. Their closeness made him uncomfortable. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his leather jacket pocket. The chains on it jingled as he dug around in his pocket for a lighter.

N“If you’re going to light that, you have to go outside,” Carol told him. “Mom’s allergic to cigarette smoke.”

“That’s cool,” he said. “I’ll sit on the porch.”

Sitting on the porch swing, Tyrone felt his anger smolder. It wasn’t the cold. He was tired of hiding his feelings.

He sucked in hard and felt his lungs fill with the acrid smoke. One of these days, he wouldn’t have to be so prim and proper. He looked up at the soaring height of the mountain above him. How he hated this place. He wished they’d never moved to Rockwood. There was nothing to do, nowhere interesting to go. Crappy minimum wage jobs were all his stepdad could get. This place was freaking *dead*. He sighed.

“No way for a black man to get ahead either,” he muttered. Throwing his cigarette down, he stomped on it viciously.

He heard the noise level increase inside, and the door opened. The cloying smell of flower perfume mixed with the smell of cigarettes.

“Hey, Tyrone.” Sierra sat down beside him. “I’m heading back. Do ya wanna walk with me?”

“What about Jack? Isn’t he coming back with us?” he asked.

“His sister’s coming to pick him up. She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“Sure, why not?” Tyrone said. He was still glaring at his flattened cigarette. “There’s nothing else to do. Dad will be waiting anyway.” Thinking of his stepfather made him want to stomp his cigarette again. He settled for picking up a rock and throwing it in the street. “I’m not in much of a hurry to get home though.”

“Your stepfather still drinking?” Sierra asked.

“Yeah,” said Tyrone. He didn’t much feel like elaborating.

“I heard your Mom screaming yesterday... I don’t get it. Why does she put up with it? She should just kick his ass out and have done with the creep.”

“She says she loves him. You know.” Tyrone shrugged and looked for a change of subject. “Did you want to get home or what?”

“Sure, let’s go. My feet are getting cold,” Sierra said.

They walked past several houses and this time stayed on the pavement past the little blue house on the corner. Sierra gave it a sour look as she passed but didn’t comment. A large bend in the street gave way to a straightaway that led to apartments further down. Tyrone’s apartment was above Sierra’s. He slowed down a little as they rounded the bend. To the left were more houses, spaced well apart with thick woods behind them and on the right. A small opening in the trees revealed a path worn by neighborhood dogs or deer. On a whim, Tyrone turned toward it.

“Sierra, would you like to see something cool?” the boy asked.

She turned a questioning eye on him. “What?”

“Come on, let’s go look.” He pointed at the path. “Mum said somebody found a cave up there at the cliffs.”

“I heard about that. Wasn’t there a rockslide or something?” Sierra said. “Seems like Carol’s mom was telling us Sam Bradshaw got his leg broke a few weeks ago. She warned us not to go up there. She said it’s too dangerous to go over to the quarry because you can fall.”

“Since when do you listen to anybody tell you not to do something?” he asked. Tyrone had an odd expression in his dark eyes. He felt a faint pull toward the mountain.

Sierra stopped to think about it. For a minute she was torn. Her mom really had warned her not to go in there. The police usually drove trespassers off, so she’d been afraid to do it anyway. Temptation took over. She made up her mind. “Ha! You’re right. Let’s go,” Sierra said. “I was curious to see it anyway.”

The two of them ducked through a rusty pipe gate that was intended to block the entrance to the rock quarry and then turned off onto a narrow track heading up and out into the wildlife management area of the mountain. The underbrush was thick. The curved thorns of blackberry brambles caught at their sleeves and hooked their jeans.

“Not many people go through here, do they?” Sierra was struggling through another patch of briars.

“It’s not far now. But, if we go this way, nobody will see us, and we won’t get in trouble. If we went in the main driveway, we could be seen,” Tyrone said as he helped her pull free. “I’d like to take a look before it gets dark. We have time if we don’t stop.”

“**H**ey, cool!” Sierra’s voice faintly echoed above him. “I wonder how far this goes back?” Tyrone had paused to light another cigarette before carefully picking his way across the icy rock fall. He climbed the last few feet to where Sierra stood.

Rocks had dislodged from somewhere above. The quarry had been cut deep at the base of the mountain. A jagged opening about as tall as his waist showed dark in the glaring light shining on the cliff face. The main drop into the quarried hole was to their right. It would be certain death to go close to the edge of that in the snow, so neither of them did more than peer over from several feet away to see how deep it was. Another big drop was to the left of the embankment leading to the cave.

Tyrone felt something drawing him forward into the cave. He bent down and crawled forward on hands and knees. Behind him, Sierra bent down, trying to see past him. Past the first several feet, it was pitch dark. They could barely make out what appeared to be two darker black spaces in the back of the passage.

“I think there’s two parts to it.” Tyrone’s voice echoed loud in his ears. He could feel the walls close around him. He paused, undecided. Something pulled at him, and he decided to turn into the left passage.

Crawling several more feet in the darkness, he felt the blackness reach into him and pull him forward of its own accord. Faintly he began to feel a slight hint of fear. He bumped his head and dropped his cigarette. Its faint glow went out. Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea after all.

“Ty, I don’t think we should go in there,” Sierra called doubtfully. Suddenly a chill that had nothing to do with the weather brought goosebumps to her flesh. It had seemed like great fun at first, but now she hesitated. *It’s just a cave*, she thought, *and I’m not afraid of the dark*. But she remembered stories on the news of people exploring caves and falling to their death or getting stuck. Ok, so she just wouldn’t go far. “There might be bats in there.”

Hush... something whispered in Tyrone’s head. Over here... Impossibly Tyrone thought he was starting to be able to see. Something clattered as his foot hit loose debris on the floor. A few feet further he could barely make out a raised flat slab of stone. He crept forward. Was that a buzzing in his ears?

Yessss.... Come forward, pick me up... I have spent too long in the dark...

Tyrone heard a slight movement behind him. Sierra's curiosity had finally brought her inside. He turned to tell her to get back out and wait on him when his eye caught a flash of silver and blue on the stone slab. He scooted forward on his knees and reached out.

Tyrone's hand closed about a slender object on the stone. It was warm and felt like metal. He picked it up as the girl crept up behind him. A fierce feeling of triumph came over him, followed by an unexplained cold sense of rage. A flash of blue like a spark zapped him with a loud pop. Small stones bounced to the floor and rolled everywhere.

"OW!" Tyrone cried out.

"What's wrong?" Sierra asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Just static. It probably built up on my jacket." He slid the object in one of his several jacket pockets, making the chains jingle. "Somebody's left an old knife in here. Finders keepers, losers weepers!" Tyrone laughed.

"Oh." Sierra moved around and felt small round pebbles rolling under her hands and feet. "Hey, what's this?" She felt around and picked up a handful. "I found something too, Ty! They're round and feel like beads." She started to put them in her pocket. She could look at them outside in the light. "What if there's buried treasure here?"

"Nah. Probably somebody just lost a necklace. If there's a knife here, I guess there's been people here before us," Tyrone said.

The longer he moved around inside the small cavern, the stranger he felt. After several minutes Tyrone could barely think straight for the buzzing in his ears. Gradually, he realized he was developing a throbbing headache. His energy level dropped as if he hadn't eaten all day. Tyrone just desperately wanted out of here. He backed down the passage. "C'mon, Sierra. We need to get back before it gets fully dark."

"Okay. I'm just going to take these." Feeling around in the dimness, she bumped more debris, and another bunch of round pebbles went rolling. She gathered another handful for her pockets and left several in the passage. "Wait up! I'm coming!"

Outside, it felt much colder than when they arrived. Tyrone was already halfway down to the flat ground when Sierra turned to leave the cave.

"Hey, wait up, I said!" she called out. "Ty? Tyrone!"

Tyrone didn't answer. He hopped and slid down until he hit the ground running with a whoop. He didn't even look back.

"Guys!" Sierra muttered to herself in disgust. She had barely gone a couple of feet when suffocating darkness closed in on Sierra. An involuntary scream escaped her lips, which echoed and re-echoed against the walls.

Horrible laughter seemed to emanate from the darkness itself, shouting in a language she didn't understand. Suddenly Sierra was enveloped in a nightmare with pictures of death flashing in her mind's eye too fast for her to make sense of anything.

Bloody battles, animal sacrifice, a beautiful little girl with her life spraying from her chest, dead men scattered broken and Indian women stripped of their clothes and their humanity lying still in the snow... the drama continued to play out in her head. Sierra screamed again, holding her head and rolling on the cave floor. She began hyperventilating, and frightening fatigue crept into her bones. "Stop! Stop! Oh, God, make it stop!" Sierra begged.

"Loki, I am free! A thousand years we have been imprisoned by fate, my chieftain, but no longer! We yet will conquer! Skuld, you bitch of a she-wolf! Wait 'till I find you for our reckoning!" The voice went silent.

Relieved, Sierra looked straight up at her nightmare. Darker than the shadowed chambers, something coalesced and reached tentacle-like fingers toward her. It pulsed in time with her heartbeat. She had to be imagining this!

Desperately she scrambled backward in full panic. Sierra came to rest against the back wall of the cave. Unable to think clearly, she failed to register that her physical discomfort was due to sitting on a bunch of the round stones she'd scattered earlier.

The shadow-being withdrew in confusion. The thread of vital living energy coming from its prey had suddenly and inexplicably ceased with the girl still alive. Her terror left her immobilized for several seconds. She jammed her hands deep in her pockets as she slowly rose. It didn't come for her again, merely hovered silently. She ran.

Sierra made her way down the cliff face, recklessly slipping and sliding on the ice. The further she got from the cave mouth, the darker it got on the mountainside. Fading light provided a push to get through the woods and back to the street before it was too dark to see. She shivered and hugged herself, wishing for a flashlight. Alone among the trees, she felt very creeped out.

Brambles that were a mere nuisance on the way in now seemed like sharp teeth biting the girl's flesh and ripping her jacket. Uncontrollable shivering from leftover panic made pulling the thorns out of her clothing more difficult. Sierra's hands came out of her pockets with a fistful of beautiful blue stones. They reminded her of blue star sapphires she'd admired in expensive high-end stores at the mall. Keeping a tight grip on them made her feel somewhat better. When a noise rustled behind her in the bushes, Sierra squeaked and sped up. She didn't stop until she made it home. Somehow, she still felt the darkness of the cave hovering over her.

Her day had started so normally. Now it felt like she was in a different universe. She huddled under her blankets like she had when she was a toddler. Only now, she was too big to crawl into bed with her mother.

 cold shadow darker than the surrounding night slowly inched from the cave opening as full dark fell. Malleable, without form, it moved like a clinging ghost. It flowed across the tracks left by the living humans hours before, slowly tracking them. Like a hound, it scented their essence. It felt joyful... if such a being could have emotion.

FREE! FREE AT LAST!

It formed the first real thoughts it had been able to for... centuries? A half-remembered lifetime ago, its last coherent thought had been those damning blue beads; settling, binding, suffocating, then the blood, and the chanting. It was only a shadow of itself, barely a tiny portion of the whole black soul it should be. It felt spread thin, broken, disoriented. It didn't try to puzzle its situation out. For now, it was simply hungry. Its interrupted meal left it unsatisfied. It needed energy and life. It would track and search for the humans. The rest... could wait.

Fear. Cold. Pain. Such sweet pain.

Distracted from its course, the shadow changed direction. The call to feed was irresistible. Blood red and sweet the pain called. It could smell the human's aroma mixed with acrid tobacco stink and lavender. The words came slowly to it like bits of a dream. Yes, this would do nicely.

It crept to the base of a small dwelling and stopped. No wards greeted its senses. Pulsing with need, it crept onward. *Hate. Cold. Fear. Pain!* Drawn forward by hunger, the shadow slid up the outside wall and down through the single cold chimney.

Ancient ash lined the bottom of the fireplace, but not even the smell of fire remained. It coalesced into a round blob. They might have seen a toothy grin in its center had anyone been looking.

In the next room, a small space heater hummed. It barely touched the chill of the interior of the house.

Like an oil slick, the shadow form oozed under the door. Silently, it crept close. The old woman on the bed was sleeping fitfully. She moaned and thrashed under a pile of blankets.

Slowly and agonizingly, it flowed over the old woman. She moaned again, whimpering in fear. She didn't, couldn't wake up. Her dream deepened. She remembered the old vampire movies. In her dream, she saw Dracula reaching for her. He came for her... exciting her senses like an actress on the silver screen. She whimpered, reaching out to him, yearning, frightened, confused.

The shadow form stretched out dark fingers in ecstasy and tasted her fear. It began to pulse in time with the woman's heartbeat. It drew her fear and pain into itself, feeling her life force grow fainter, her body grow colder. No blood drained from her, but the shadow tasted it anyway in the woman's thoughts.

Betty Lovelace was dying. She struggled to wake and couldn't. With one final surge of desperation, her eyes flew open, and she looked into the very face of what she'd always imagined Hell to be. She screamed in full panic, thrashed once, and her heart gave out. Her body cooled, and she never knew when her nightmare, filled with the kinetic energy of her dying breath, exploded upward.

The next day her neighbors would wonder at her frozen body and the tremendous hole in the roof over her bed. The local paper reported her death in a small obituary but had no more guesses than her neighbors.

NIt was still full dark. Hardly any light shone from the tiny sliver of the waxing moon outside Tyrone's window. A small lava lamp provided a soft, eerie ambiance. His slick paper wall posters reflected a little of the green and red light on the object he turned over and over in his hands.

It was a slender dagger. About 9 inches long through the blade, he guessed. Its deadly shape was reminiscent of a broadsword. A stylized wolf and elaborate runic scrollwork were etched into the handle. There were tiny cut marks on it, and it appeared somewhat banged up. He realized the blade was

covered in red-brown stains as he looked closer. He put it down on the table beside his bed.

Tyrone felt restless looking at the knife. Getting up from his bed, he paced from one side of his room to the other. His head hurt, and his body tingled all over. Tyrone settled down on the floor with it in his hands. He reached over to his boom box, plugged in the headphones, and inserted a thrash metal tape. He turned up the volume until it drowned out the buzz in his ears.

He awoke in the morning with the taste of vomit in his mouth, and he nearly gagged on a cloying smell. He glanced down at the knife he still held. He realized there was dried blood on his hands and the knife, yet he had no wounds. He felt sick and staggered to the bathroom to throw up. On the way, he managed to slip the knife into his jacket. He didn't want to be parted from it for an instant. His mother's scream and loud banging from the next room didn't faze him. He was so used to it that he barely paid any notice these days.

The cold emotional void stuck with him through the morning. He barely paid attention to his morning classes. At lunch, he didn't eat. Instead, he walked outside, where several of his buddies stood by the ball field smoking. The teachers hardly bothered to say anything to them about it as long as they weren't in the school lit up.

"Dude!" Rodney Humphrey gave him a high five. "Hey, man. Wassup?"

"Nothing. Just school sucks." Tyrone pulled a cigarette out of the pack in his jacket pocket. Their breaths were steaming in the chill air, so it was hard to tell who was smoking and who wasn't. "I'm gonna cut out of here. What about you guys?"

"Nah, I gotta keep my grades up, or my old man said I couldn't play ball. I need that scholarship, man. I aim to get out of this dump," Rodney said.

Tyrone nodded. "Suit yourself." He shrugged. "I'm headed up to the cliffs. Me an' Sierra found a cave up there yesterday. I'm going exploring."

"Man, you better watch it around the honkeys. Sierra'll get your ass reamed by the white jocks. She's with the preps." The other boy raised an eyebrow.

"Let 'm try it, man. I ain't afraid," Tyrone scoffed.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Rodney said. "This town's racist."

"Screw 'em. Screw 'em all." Tyrone finished his smoke and deliberately ground it out under his faded tennis shoe. "See ya!" He walked off and didn't look back.

There were enough woods to cover the teen from the cops as he walked the few blocks back to his house. Nobody was home. That suited him just fine.

Tyrone grabbed a cold hot dog and a hunk of stale bread from the refrigerator. Going through his stepdad's toolbox, he found a flashlight and batteries. He paused on the way through the door long enough to grab a hat.

The walk to the cave didn't seem like it took any time at all. He looked up at the cut in the rock from the base of the rock fall. Indecision gripped him. Faintly, the track he'd followed here continued. Now that the snow was melting more, he could see the depression in the undergrowth that continued southwest along the base of the mountain.

He slid his hand into his pocket where the knife lay. He pulled it out to look at it.

Oddly, the knife was clean. He pulled it from its sheath, and there were no more stains on it than yesterday. He shrugged and figured he must have dreamed the blood. Replacing it in his pocket, he found himself continuing down the trail. Trees closed closer in on him, and the underbrush grew very dense on this stretch. Tyrone was almost ready to turn back and go to the cave when he spotted something past the bend of the trail.

He spotted the corner of a red building with a sloping roof, nearly hidden by leafless trees. When he approached, he saw a small clearing that opened up to the front and opposite side of the building. Tyrone visually examined it.

Broken glass shone on the ground underneath what once were windows. Boards over the windows made it impossible to see inside. An old steeple sat at an odd angle on its sagging roof. Close inspection revealed peeling red paint over the rotten wooden siding. As Tyrone looked at the building, he noticed that the only sound or movement was dripping snowmelt from the roof. He made up his mind to enter.

Chills tingled up Tyrone's spine at the grating sound from the rusty hinges which supported the wooden double doors as he opened them. Just inside the entrance, the teen paused to look. Jumbles of wooden school desks and chairs had been thrown against the far wall. An old church altar dominated the front of the room, and beside it, a darkened stairwell led downwards. He

realized it was larger on the inside than it had appeared from the outside.

"It's a perfect place to hide until school is out." Tyrone's voice was loud in the stillness. A slow smile crossed his face only to vanish a moment later. From across the room, a low animal moan made him stop. It sounded human, but he wasn't sure. He eased his hand inside his jacket and pulled out the knife he'd hidden earlier. When he touched it, a flash of foreign cold hate flashed through him. He stalked forward.

A balding black man was lying in the cold and darkness behind the altar. This was a brother. Tyrone relaxed and started to put the knife away. A pile of empty liquor bottles surrounded the man on the floor.

Tyrone thought of his drunken stepfather. Anger grew and redoubled. The emptiness inside him seemed to overflow until the hate he'd stored away and the hatred he could feel pulsing in his hand holding the knife roared in his ears. He couldn't think. What was wrong with him? He hesitated. Tyrone felt distant, almost as if he watched himself from afar. *No! Something's not right!* Tyrone battled his feelings. The old man moaned again and opened bleary, bloodshot eyes.

Suddenly feeling soberer, the old man yelled weakly. "Jesus! Help me! Satan done come for me at last!" Silhouetted against the brightness of the open doorway, the figure in front of him was all blackness. An oily shadow seemed to billow around the nightmare like a second skin. He blinked a time or two, trying to clear his vision. The image resolved into a man, a teenager? "Satan's spawn!" Then he saw the light glint off the deadly knife's edge. Self-preservation finally kicked in. Bottles rolled everywhere across the floor as the drunk flailed at the figure approaching him.

"Jesus!" The old man yelled again. His dark chocolate skin shone with a sheen of fear sweat. The sudden movement startled Tyrone and broke what little control he was wresting back from what had hold of him. His mind went blank. The boy lunged with deadly precision. An eerie sound broke from his lips as the long dagger aimed for the old man's heart.

At that moment, perhaps it was luck, perhaps his deity heard him, but the death the old drunkard saw in the empty eyes aiming to take his life stopped short. Tyrone's feet flew out from under him as he landed on the rolling bottles. His head cracked on the wooden floor. While his enemy lay stunned, the old man

staggered up and stumbled over the remaining bottles and out into the cold damp of melting snow.

"Thank you, Jesus! Praise the Lord! Thank you, Jesus!" The old man's feet flew down the trail. "We're gonna warn ever'one! Satan's demon done come to earth, and he's gonna get us all!"

For several days the old man wandered around the town of Rockwood, babbling to anyone who would stop long enough to listen. Most just shook their heads and went about their daily lives uninterrupted. That's just old man Rooker, they'd say. He's finally lost it after his wife was killed on a steep curve coming down US Hwy 70 on Rockwood Mountain in the rain late one night. Don't listen to him, they'd say.

Still, as they are wont to do, the rumors started. Old man Rooker met a demon, went one. Yet another, and the most persistent, was that there was a Satanic cult somewhere in Rockwood. No one knew where and no one had proof, yet everyone knew about it. Rumors finally grew beyond the small town, spreading to the rest of the county and beyond.

No one did anything. The unsolved body count and disappearances began to rise. Something strange was happening that even the most skeptical minds couldn't ignore. Fear crept into the hearts of the town's residents. If you didn't live there, you didn't go to Rockwood.



6

COYOTE SONG

Boxes were stacked three deep around Sierra's room several days later in mid-February. It was with a feeling of relief that she'd been filling those boxes with her clothes and other personal items.

Usually, Sierra hated to move, but this time she was glad. Perhaps her nightly panic attacks would cease once she was away from the mountain and the nightmares lingering there. Kingston wasn't that far away, but she was ready to go. Somewhere outside, a door slammed. A glance out the window revealed the newly arrived moving van. The teen started throwing items in boxes to get her packing done before her mom could yell at her.

Sierra closed the box she was working on and pulled the last empty box over to her dresser. Unceremoniously, the teen began pulling out her dresser drawers and dumping them into the box. *I can sort all this later*, she thought. With the contents of the very bottom of the last of the drawers, she moved more carefully. Loose beads rattled. Due to the distraction of moving, Sierra had almost forgotten the jeweled beads.

As if they were long-lost friends, the girl cupped the beads in her hands and examined them in the sunlight from her window. Rich blue in luster, they were centered by a white star that seemed to move as the beads turned. They felt warm to her touch, and she imagined she could almost hear a low melodic hum when she held them. Mentally, she reminded herself to string the beads. She would wear them when she went to her new school.

All she knew of Roane County High School was what she saw at the football games. Their orange-and-blue school colors usually trounced Rockwood's green-and-white clad players. Despite their school rivalries, the Kingston players and fans seemed pretty decent. Maybe she would find a new set of friends to hang with at her new digs.

There sure wasn't anything left here, she mused, especially after Jack's 'Dear Jane, I'm dating a cheerleader' letter of the week before. She held it in her hand, debating whether to pack it. What a big jerk! She wanted to spit on the picture of them at the homecoming dance that stared back at her from the bottom of the box. He didn't even have the nerve to tell her in person!

She quickly finished up and began hauling her boxes downstairs to the van with a sigh. Several trips had her panting and wishing they didn't own so much stuff. After more trips up and down the stairs, she was forced to stop for a breather. She leaned against the red brick wall outside the apartments to rest.

Sharp movement in the shrubbery caught the corner of her eye, and she looked closer. Perhaps her neighbors' cat had gotten out again? No, she realized. It was a big gray dog. She didn't feel fear as it turned its faintly wolf-like foxy head and lifted its ears at her. Its tongue lolled to the side, and it gave a playful whine and jumped down on its front paws. She smiled when it yipped at her and rolled over on its back, grinning playfully.

Suddenly, one of the men with the movers shouted and started making shooing gestures at the dog. In a flash, the dog was gone, but not before a last look and wag of his tail. Puzzled, Sierra turned a dark piercing glare on the man. The dog hadn't been hurting anyone!

"Are you okay, miss?" At her answering nod, he spoke again, "That was a coyote, a wild animal that doesn't even belong in these parts. You don't want to be messing with them." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "That one was acting pretty tame... must be living close about here and used to seeing humans." He gave her one last warning. "Don't go out there trying to find it; you could get bit. I'm originally from California, and we saw a lot of them out there. They don't usually bother people unless they go into their territory."

Sierra took the warning and got back to work. Still, she couldn't help but remember the friendly and playful look in the coyote's expression. Somehow she couldn't imagine it hurting her. She didn't feel afraid at all, but more as if she'd just made a new friend.

The feeling stuck with her through the final loading of the van and ride to their new rural house on the outskirts of Kingston. The house was fairly small, and it was set back next to the woods, but there were no neighbors stacked like cordwood on top of them. For now, it was an improvement, and she wasn't complaining. She fell into bed exhausted with her boxes around

her in her new room, wondering what the morrow would bring. With the image of the playful coyote in her mind, she had her first peaceful night's sleep in days.

John 'Medicine Bear' Holderman jerked uneasily awake as he had several times a night for the past three weeks. Heart pounding and tangled in sweat-soaked sheets; he listened intently for the screams that woke him. All remained quiet in the room. A sliver of light filtered in from the night sky and waning February moon. For a long time, the chill breeze coming through his slightly raised window dried the moisture from his skin.

As he listened, he heard the coyote pack running the property. They moved in the year before, and he didn't have the inclination to shoot them like some of the neighbors had. Their laughing barks were usually soothing. Tonight, however, they merely seemed to jangle his nerves. That must have been what woke him, he decided.

A faint acrid scent emanated from a turtle shell on a nearby table. Graded school papers were scattered in various piles on the table and in a crate underneath it. The crate and briefcase sitting beside it were ready to be picked up and taken to his office the next day. Deeper shadows lined the walls of the bedroom, shaped by hand drums of various sizes and hanging arts and crafts that spoke of Professor Holderman's true heritage.

John's eyes lit on the sacred pipe hung just over his headboard. Its nearness was as natural as his breathing. Sadly, it was covered in dust from neglect, and he rarely thought about it anymore. John reached toward it but let his hand fall.

He didn't have time for the superstitions of his grandfathers. Once the practical realities of daily life had set in, he left his boyhood dreams behind. He knew the old practices of his clan would die with him, but he convinced himself it was for the best. The paraphernalia surrounding him were mainly for decoration these days. His hand went to the small cross on the chain around his neck while his other hand reflexively rubbed the scars from a bear's claws left long ago on his left thigh. When he realized what he was doing, he jerked his hand away and rolled upright.

Still disturbed, John touched his bedside lamp. Its instant response and warm glow were reassuring somehow. Reaching for his bathrobe thrown carelessly across the back of a chair, he stepped across the cool hardwood floor. Maybe a cup of coffee would calm his nerves.

Unable to sleep, he picked up one of the piles of paper on the floor. They landed on the table with a slap, and John had to steady the stack to keep the papers from cascading back onto the floor. “Ooops,” he muttered to himself and pulled up a chair. When he put his coffee down, it nearly tipped onto the stack of papers. Catching it before it did earned him two scalded fingers. “Ahhsssshhh!” Burned fingers throbbing, he cleaned up the minor spill, then finally sat down.

He put the top paper from the stack in front of him with a red pen in hand. ‘World Religions Midterm Test’ the top of it declared. Beside it, a student’s name was hastily scrawled. After hesitating a moment, he began to scan the page and mark it.

Two hours later, and with a second stack of ‘Archaeology 101’ completely graded, he stopped, rubbed his eyes, and reached for his drink. His coffee cup sat half empty. He sipped at it. As he rolled his cold coffee over his tongue, he eyed the last stack, which lay unfinished on the floor. The red numerals of his digital clock on his wall declared it to be nearly time to get ready for work. He’d have to grade the Anthropology exams at his office, he decided. Swallowing resolutely, he headed for the shower.

Showered, dressed, and refreshed, John popped the trunk on his hatchback. On his second trip to the car, he looked up at the sound of rhythmic hoof beats on the pavement. He wasn’t surprised to see his friendly neighbor from the cul-de-sac returning from her early morning ride.

Eccentric as Moira was, she never missed a day, rain or shine. He could almost set his clock by her ever since she’d bought the old Carver farm the year before. She had two massive stallions of a breed he couldn’t even pronounce, plus a handful of goats, a houseful of cats, and a few exotic birds. She wasn’t married, and he’d never heard her mention having any family.

Most people avoided Moira because she didn’t make a secret of being a Heathen²¹. Locals whispered about animal sacrifice and witchcraft behind her back. John, however, knew better of her. He’d done detailed research on modern Neo-paganism²² and Heathenism, plus his Native American background gave him certain advantages as well.

John took it on himself to keep an eye out for trouble, but he’d also been the one to persuade her that educating people would go a long way toward settling rumors. John looked up

²¹ Norse hereditary religion practitioner, Asatru.

²² Modern pagan re-creationism, new paganism.

from loading the last of his paperwork. He noticed that morning she was out on her red chestnut horse rather than the gray.

"Good morning, professor!" Moira waved to him when she got close.

"Hi Moira!" he said and waved. "How's 'big red' this morning?"

"Bloodwine's feeling his oats today. I've got a busted stall where he and Icewing were playing over the panel last night." She grinned. "Boys will be boys, you know."

"Do you need any help with it?" John asked.

Moira considered. Her silver-gray eyes still twinkled. "They did a pretty good bit of damage, and I'll have to go get lumber. An extra pair of hands would be appreciated. You short day or long today?"

"I have short days on Fridays this quarter," he answered. "I'll be out of class by noon. By two-thirty, I should be free to come over and give you a hand."

"Thanks, John. I'll owe you one." Moira smiled.

"No problem. You can thank me by coming to the college to talk to my World Religions class next term," John grinned.

Moira laughed above his head, and the stallion half reared. She slapped Bloodwine's neck lightly, and he settled down, merely champing his bit to show his desire to be off. John nearly caught his breath. He found her as beautiful as the goddess that she professed to follow. He might get ideas if he weren't still hurting from his breakup and divorce.

"You don't have to twist my arm, you know. I've enjoyed talking to the kids. Anyway, professor, I won't keep you any longer. I know you need to be off, and it's too cold to be standing around. I'll see you this afternoon, and we can chat then."

John recognized a dismissal when he was given one, and she was right. He didn't need to be late. He waved at her back and closed the hatchback as she trotted off down the road, sitting the bouncy rhythm as if she was born to it. As he drove away to work, he still had a smile on his face.

John didn't see Moira stop and watch his retreating car with a troubled look on her face. Nor had he noticed the coyote pack slinking through the undergrowth beyond his mowed yard. Moira saw them, however. Her mouth tightened.

The pack was getting large. Moira knew worried livestock owners would soon call Tennessee wildlife officers to get rid of them. TWRA would likely kill the whole pack since they were considered a nuisance. She didn't have a reason to kill them, and

they avoided hunting at her place. Coyotes understood by instinct that to touch any creature on her farm would not be worth the hide it would cost them. Moira knew that understanding would hold, so she wasn't worried about her stock. Their presence at Professor Holderman's house caused her concern, however. Moira observed the pack watching her for several minutes and then turned her horse away.

When no one was looking, she dug her heels in, and the blood-red horse responded by leaping a fence and taking off with a breathtaking burst of speed.

Riding eased the constraints she put herself under in this place and made her free. Soon, she would need to return to the mundane world. Until then, she would ride with the wind in her hair and her Dad's stallion's familiar mane in her face.



7

THE NEW GUY

FEBRUARY 28, 1985

“**S**o, what’dya think?” The two senior girls were slowly sauntering in the mostly deserted hallway during lunch break. A large piece of art paper was held between them.

Hesitantly, but with deliberation, the other girl answered, “It looks like Mickey Mouse, or at least it would if you turned it the right way up instead of upside down.” Sierra couldn’t see anything special about her new friend’s cartoon drawing but was trying to be polite and smile.

“Well, that’s what’s so great about it. I can’t usually do cartoon sketches very well. Usually, I’m painting landscapes or horses,” the other girl said enthusiastically. With their heads bent together, they made a stark contrast. Sierra’s long wavy brown hair, brown eyes, and curvy outline contrasted with the other girl’s willowy frame, short strawberry blonde hair, and light blue-green eyes.

“Mary Lou, why don’t you turn it right way up?” Sierra stopped. She reached out to take the paper from her friend. “It’s easier to see this way. You know, it’s really not bad.”

Mary Lou was practically bouncing. “Yes, but that’s the way I drew it; upside down, I mean,” she said. “We got this cool book in Art Club that shows you how to beat your mental perceptions. When you do that, you can draw what you see rather than what you know is there. This was my first attempt, and it worked!”

“What did they decide about starting a real art class?” Sierra asked.

Mary Lou’s face fell a bit. She looked around the deserted hallway and noticed they were standing near the guidance counselor’s office. “They said there’s not enough funding to hire an art teacher. I have to apply for the art scholarship at Roane State without having any formal art classes.”

Mary Lou Wells

Sierra nodded. Mary Lou had already told her about her worries. All the other applicants in the area were coming from big schools with formal art programs. Her friend wanted to be an art teacher, and the scholarship was tough to get. She couldn't think of anything she could say that would help.

They looked up at noise and movement from the open doorway near where they stood. Emerging from his small office, the guidance counselor took a few quick steps into the hallway, looked around, noticed them, and went back inside.

Puzzled, the two girls looked at each other. "What's up with him?" Mary Lou giggled. When the guidance counselor re-emerged, he had a slender dark blonde boy with him.

"Ah, perfect, I'm glad I caught you girls, actually," he said. "This is Kenneth DeVault. He's new. I need somebody to show him around."

Kenneth cast a mischievous grin at the two girls. "Hi!" he said. His direct smiling stare took Mary Lou a little aback. She felt curious about him but tried to remain casual.

"I'll do it! You can give me his schedule, and I'll show him where his classes are. I haven't been here long either, but I know where everything is," Sierra piped up. Mary Lou shook her head at the sudden predatory gleam in her friend's eyes. It had just become an interesting day.

"Sierra, I'll catch you later, ok? Lunch is about over, so I'd better get on to study hall." *New kids in school, always interesting*, she thought. Mary Lou, not being interested in chasing them around, however, new or not, took her leave. She could hear the three people behind her muttering over the schedule.

Mary Lou was more comfortable with a good distance between herself and any guy. She knew people noticed, but rumors aside, she was glad they didn't know the real reason.

How could she not know that they noticed, with the painful things that people had said to her since freshman year? At least the constant harassment at school over rumors about her sexual orientation had finally subsided to a tolerable level. Though she didn't give a reason for her peers to think differently of her, the lies still hurt and compounded her abuse trauma.

Mary Lou had already decided she'd leave the guys to her girl-friends that weren't so afraid of them. The few friends she had anyway... she had her art and poetry and her horse, and that was *mostly* enough she tried to convince herself. Isolation was nearly her best friend by now, but she avoided that thought and

went to her locker rather than feel the years of unshed tears. Sometimes, she thought, she just hated everyone around her.

Mary Lou couldn't keep from being curious about the new guy despite herself. Inexplicably, she felt drawn to seek him out. Study Hall, American History, and English seemed to creep by with the slow hand of the clocks in the classrooms. Always a clock watcher, Mary Lou felt especially frustrated that time wasn't cooperating that afternoon. Surely there were better things to do than sit and listen to the Senior English teacher drone on.

Mary Lou jumped up at the final bell, picked up her loose books, and then pushed her way out through the press of bodies jamming the door. Slamming her locker door to prevent the stack of papers and books in her locker from becoming an avalanche onto the floor for the hundredth time, she headed outside to find Sierra.

School buses for the three-fifteen load were parked in front of the building with doors open. Students approached helter-skelter, eager to get home. Some upperclassmen headed for the student parking across the street from the auditorium while others flagged down parents in cars.

Rather than go to her granddad's old beat-up blue pick-up for the drive home, Mary Lou walked toward the other end of the school grounds. Since Sierra was a car rider, Mary Lou knew she could find her waiting for her mom.

Too late, Mary Lou saw her friend waving as they drove by. Since she wasn't going to talk to Sierra before leaving, she finally headed to her truck in the half-empty parking lot. Mary Lou hesitated rather than go home before her aunt would return from work. A chill crept into her from the vinyl seat as her mind wandered.

Tears still sat unshed, burning behind her eyes. Looking out across the busy street, she felt more alone than ever. She could go see her sister at her mom and dad's house in Knoxville, she supposed. No one in the family would stop her from going to visit her parents... except that left a sour taste in her mouth too. She was tired of being treated like a third wheel by her dad, with her mom not giving her any support. She wondered why she bothered. The only bright spot she could think of was her little sister Carly. At least she accepted her big sister without criticism or judgment.

As she frequently did of late, Mary Lou wondered what was so wrong with her that no one seemed to care about her at all. She certainly couldn't think of anything she'd ever done to earn

Mary Lou Wells

this daily enmity. With no love from her family and being ostracized at school, she had nowhere to turn. There wasn't even anyone to talk to about her other problems... the police? She couldn't do that, or her grandfather had assured her he'd shoot her horse.

Her dad tossing her out to live with her grandparents had simply made her situation all the worse. Trust for her classmates was non-existent. They'd probably harass her even worse and carry more tales. She desperately needed help, she knew, but where was the way out?

The depression seemed to overwhelm Mary Lou with a black finality as her thoughts looped around and around simply to confuse her. Almost of its own accord, her head popped up from where she'd draped herself on the steering wheel. Suddenly alert, she imagined she could feel eyes on her back. She shivered as a chill went up her spine.

Looking around at the other parked cars, she didn't see anyone but couldn't shake the feeling someone was watching her. So many years of protecting herself from being in situations where she'd be compromised had honed a heightened sense of awareness of her surroundings. Unable to pinpoint the feeling this time, she started the truck and drove out of the high school student parking lot to finally head home. It wouldn't do her any good to delay any longer, she thought sourly.

Mary Lou's bad mood worsened when she arrived at the ferry which was supposed to take her across Watts Bar Lake, where the Clinch River met the Emory just outside Kingston. Abruptly ending at the water's edge, the road dipped at an angle to where Centers Ferry was moored. With space for six cars on the flat pontoon and a small green tug that pulled it across the lake, the ferry was an antique relic. One could never count on it working at any given time. When it didn't, Mary Lou's ten-minute trip home via the water crossing turned into a thirty-minute journey to drive around. Today was going to be one of those days it appeared. The girl gritted her teeth.

While driving around through the rural K-25 area was aggravating enough, it was still better than the alternative to her. Since their house was on the Harriman side of the water just across the lake from Swan Pond and the Kingston Steam Plant, Roane County High School wasn't really where she was supposed to attend. She didn't want to be bussed to Oliver Springs High, so she refrained from more than light complaining most days. RCHS was a bigger school. After attending school in Knoxville,

she did have a few criteria that didn't include being at 'Hickville,' she thought. Even though she knew her private thinking was uncharitable, given that some of her old classmates from Dyllis were going to the other school, she had her own opinions about going there herself.

Mary Lou backed the vehicle up the hill and turned around as she had many times before with a resigned sigh. She'd simply head home through the long end of Sugar Grove Valley. By the time she made it home, others would be there, and she wouldn't be facing her grandfather alone. She shuddered at the thought. She clamped down on the feeling of hate she felt then. Mary Lou knew it didn't do her any good to brood on it when what she needed was to stay focused.

With no alternative living arrangement, at least she had a roof over her head, food to eat, and clothes on her back. She was at least smart enough to know there were people in the world a lot worse off than she. She sighed again and looked for the interstate on-ramp. Besides, her horse would be waiting for her and their afternoon ride. Maybe they would ride the lake bank today, even though a chill February wind blew off the river. With the reservoir still pulled down by TVA for the winter, there was plenty of room to ride without going onto anyone's private property or the road.

The thought of the freedom of getting away to ride despite her horse's perverse desire to swim in the water even in winter cheered her somewhat. Instead of allowing herself to brood further, Mary Lou concentrated on thinking about her pretty pinto half-Arabian mare. Knowing her 'girl' would nicker when she drove into the driveway carried Mary Lou the rest of the way home. At least Thora was always eager to see her.



“nteresting.” the single word came to mind as Kenneth sat in his car and watched the cute strawberry blonde girl he'd met briefly earlier in the day. He didn't think she could see him from this angle, but he could see her sitting in the light blue pickup. He remembered the sad look in her eyes behind the ready smile with which she disguised it. Even though he'd nearly missed it in the bustle and the brevity of the moment, he recognized the brief flash of pain when he saw it. It had made him curious.

Mary Lou Wells

At first, he didn't intend to eavesdrop. Pure chance had him where he was now, but he always closely observed the people around him.

Kenneth was no stranger to the ways of the world. He knew all about the games people played and had come to expect it. He didn't trust easily, and he really didn't care much. However, there was something about this girl that caught his attention. He'd spent the day with the other girl Sierra who had been friendly and talked his ear off. It was nice to make a new friend on your first day, and she was helpful. He expected he'd be seeing more of her, but he hadn't seen this one again after their initial hello, until now.

As the afternoon wore on, he began to get a feel for the layout of his new school, the people, and the social order. He didn't belong with most of the cliques he observed. He wasn't one to follow meekly along with a crowd. His gut feeling told him he'd find friends who were more like him, individualists and rebels. He grinned at his thoughts. Maybe he'd find a few willing girls in the process! A guy does have his priorities after all, right?

What had that girl Sierra said this one's name was... Mary Lou? She remained sitting with her forehead against the steering wheel for several long minutes. What was she doing? When she finally looked up, it was with a 'deer in the headlights' expression. She cast several glances around, but apparently, she still didn't see him. He watched her drive off.

"Well?" he said aloud. "The girl's got good instincts."

Kenneth's brow furrowed in puzzlement as he unwrapped a piece of gum and popped it in his mouth. What was with her? He shrugged. He didn't expect he'd find out any time soon, so he entirely put her out of his mind. Stuff still had to get done at home to finish unpacking.

With his radio blasting at top decibel on a hard rock station, Kenneth peeled out with squealing wheels on the pavement and gunned the engine. He drove away from the high school in the opposite direction Mary Lou had gone. Forced to slow for traffic through the slow zone past Kingston's Hwy 58 landing park, he punched the accelerator after he was across the blue bridge. Not that he was in a hurry, of course. Kenneth simply liked the sound of the souped-up engine in the old blue Ford. The long straightaway past the golf course and Hilltop Market south was an excellent place to open up a car with a good engine. He'd discovered the cops didn't patrol the highway for speeders very

often several days before. If he had to admit it to himself, he gained an adrenaline rush from the danger of driving too fast.

Once again, he slowed, but he turned off to go to their new small rental house this time. His mom's new job had forced them to relocate in the middle of the school year. It all worked out in the end, Kenneth knew. They frequently moved anyway.

He began removing his things from their packing containers in the back bedroom to set up his room. His bed, dresser, and bookshelf were already set up, so he started with his clothes, books, and small items.

Working his way to the larger boxes, he set his guitar and amplifier in the corner and followed those up by hanging his sword rack on the wall along with a variety of throwing stars and miscellaneous martial arts equipment. He didn't have a place to store those yet, so he placed what wouldn't fit on the racks in a large drawer or tossed it in the corner beside his guitar. By the time his mother checked, he was hanging the last of his posters on the back of the bedroom door.

"Son, take all the empty boxes out back and break them down. I picked up some extra trash bags today, so we'll bag the boxes and take them to the dump."

"Sure, Mom," he said, putting a thumbtack in his mouth to hold it. "I'll be there when I get this up."

"I wish you wouldn't use tacks," she said. "They poke holes in the wall, and it looks ugly." His mother walked on down the hall with an armload of boxes.

"Mrph-huh..." Kenneth agreed around the tack. The folding chair he stood on leaned precariously as he pushed the next to last tack in. When he finished, he jumped off the chair, spun around, and kicked it just hard enough that it lightly thumped the door.

"Ken, no karate in the house!" his mother yelled at him. Her voice was muffled by distance. He didn't answer, simply grinned and returned the chair to his brother's room. As he began hauling the empty boxes outside, he noted that the backyard was flat and private. Good, he thought, he could work out without being disturbed. On the other hand, he didn't care if anyone watched or not. They could all kiss his butt.

Flattened boxes were piled in a neat stack at his feet, and he was collapsing another when Kenneth's mother appeared again. "So, how was school?" she asked. "Did you have any trouble finding your way around, and did you make any new friends?"

"Yeah, I met some people. One girl was nice enough to show me around. It's pretty small, actually, like two hallways. It wasn't hard to figure out, ya know?"

"That's a lot smaller than your other schools have been," his mother observed. She picked up the box of trash bags, pulled one out, and opened it. Kenneth started stuffing the boxes in it.

"Yes, well, I'll be glad if I don't get too bored. There's not much to do at the school or even in Kingston at all," he told her with a bored expression.

"Kingston's a bedroom community of Oak Ridge and Knoxville, Ken, and it's a small town. I'd rather be here than somewhere you boys can get into trouble. If there's hardly anything going on, I won't have to worry about you."

"I can take care of myself, Mom."

Kenneth's mother looked at him and had to agree on one point. Her baby boy was all grown up and in his junior year. She felt a flash of nostalgia for a moment and shook it off. She knew he could handle himself, but still, she worried. She was his mother, so how could she not? She had done her best to raise both her boys right with what little she had. Where her sons went, trouble seemed to follow.

"I know you can, son. Just be careful, would you?"

"I always am!" Kenneth declared.

"And don't get into any more fights! It's a new school and a new town with a chance to start over." His mother's dubious expression said volumes. But this time, she left further comment and went back inside to continue setting up their new living quarters. Kenneth finished bagging the trash. He pulled his denim jacket tighter then wandered out into the woods to explore.



St was a few days before Mary Lou saw the new student again. She had not made any effort to find him, though she'd remained curious. He wasn't in any of her classes, so she casually cornered Sierra and asked her what she'd found out about him. That he was nice, did karate, and recently moved to town from a neighboring county was about all the feedback she'd gotten.

Experience had taught Mary Lou not to show more than casual interest in anyone. Therefore, she was careful how she asked for information. She'd made that mistake when she was a freshman with a crush on a senior and didn't intend to repeat it.

Talk was one thing, but Mary Lou frequented the school library as an avid reader. Some of the other oddball students who didn't fit with any particular clique also hung out there. It was almost a refuge. Because she was usually left alone by most when her nose was in a book, she spent her spare time reading.

The morning of the third day after their first brief introduction, Kenneth was in the library when Mary Lou entered with Sierra. He was absorbed with something at a table holding several computers and didn't see them walk in.

While Mary Lou spoke to the librarian and returned a stack of books, Sierra crossed the room and sat down beside Kenneth. He was explaining the intricacies of a computer program to her when the other girl approached with a new armload of books.

"You know how to use these?" Mary Lou inclined her head toward the two computers sitting on the desk. "I've never used one, and the school just put these in this year." She pulled out a chair further down the table and sat stiffly with her books in front of her.

"Of course!" he told her with a slight smile. Slumped back in his seat with one arm hung over the high-backed wooden chair, he relaxed. "We had a bunch of computers at my other school."

"What does it do?" she asked with genuine interest.

"Well, you can play games on them for one thing, or it works like a calculator so you can do math, and you can even type on it like a typewriter," he answered. "Watch," he said. Kenneth leaned forward and hit a few keys, which caused the screen to change.

"Oh, I know that one. That's hangman!" she said. "When I went to the Atomic Museum, they had some touch screens where you could play that. Huh, neat!"

Kenneth, still wondering what this girl's angle was, watched her closely. He noticed when she became absorbed in the moment, her face cleared, and her eyes sparkled a lighter shade. He continued talking and showed the two girls how the computer worked for several minutes. Sierra leaned forward to see while Mary Lou looked over her shoulder.

"Can you show me one more time how to get into that game?"

"Sure, just let me put this in..." He switched a large flat piece of square blue plastic for another. "This is a floppy disc. All your programs are on these, so you just pick the one you want and put it in."

"Cool. I can do that," Mary Lou told him cheerfully. Just then, the bell rang. "Whoops, gotta go, see you around," she said.

Mary Lou Wells

Everyone rose for class change and walked out of the library in different directions.

Mary Lou headed for the bus that would take her to Graphics at the vocational school. Along the way, she heard one wolf whistle behind her, and when she passed a group of jocks, one of the black football players grabbed his crotch and made an obscene gesture at her. Rather than give them any satisfaction by responding, she held her head up, kept her eyes ahead, and ignored them. Laughter followed her down the hall. If she indicated she was bothered by the sexual harassment, experience had taught that it would get worse.

Sierra had left moments after Mary Lou while Kenneth packed up more slowly. He picked up his book bag and swung it smoothly over his shoulder. When he turned to leave, one of the guys who had been sitting at a nearby table drew him aside. They walked out together, talking.

“So you’re new here, aren’t you?” the other student said. It wasn’t a question since both of them already knew the answer. “Hi, I’m Alan. You’re in my psychology class, so I’ll walk with you there.” He held his hand out, and Kenneth took it for a brief shake. “You play any sports, dude? I’m on the baseball team, and we could use a few more players.”

“Name’s Ken,” he told him. “Sorry, man, but I’m not really interested in playing right now. I’ve got a bunch of other stuff goin’ on, you know?”

“Well, suit yourself,” he said casually. “Hey, I saw you talking to those chicks earlier. My advice? Don’t waste your time with the blonde.”

“And why is that?” Kenneth asked casually.

“Everybody knows she’s gay, man. She’s a damn dyke.”

Ken’s eyebrows rose. “So, why do people think that?” He hadn’t seen any indication of anything of the sort. That she was walking around with a chip on her shoulder was obvious, but was that the problem?

“It’s because she doesn’t date.” Came the answer. They were nearly to class, and Kenneth stopped to look at Alan. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“And that means she’s gay?” Kenneth asked incredulously.

“I’m just telling you what everybody says,” Alan answered. “The other girl’s a snob and gossip, so she’s trouble too. I’d back off if I were you. You don’t have to listen to my advice, though, so you can take it or leave it.” The door was open, and they went

on into class. The teacher hadn't shown up yet, and everyone was talking.

Kenneth plopped bonelessly into a chair, muttering under his breath. "Of all the...." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly through his teeth. That was just messed up, he thought. So, Mary Lou didn't date. Could be her parents were strict or something? He was confident in his own ability to figure things out for himself and didn't need tall tales carried. Shaking his head, he couldn't believe the stupidity of it all.

Rumors were nearly always either lies or contained barely enough truth to recognize. In other schools, he'd seen the same patterns. He doubted these rumors were any more accurate than others he'd heard, so he resolved to watch and see.

As for the other girl, Sierra, he didn't really believe what was said about her either. She was talkative and seemed to be concerned that people like her, but that was most of the girls he'd seen. It all just seemed petty to Kenneth. *Why can't people get off their high horse and see what's important?* he wondered.

Over the next several days, he paid attention whenever he ran into the two girls and their friends. He concluded that the rumors about them were false.

Sierra wasn't much different from any of his other classmates, he thought. Mary Lou had a problem, though. She didn't look at the other girls with desire. She looked at the guys with interest while at the same time shying from any contact. It wasn't hard to see it if you cared to look. Obviously, nobody did. Had she been date raped... or? He was friendly and respectful around her, and she responded to that. Maybe she just needed encouragement. On a whim, he had an idea.

Kenneth approached Mary Lou in the hallway one morning and casually walked with her. He handed her a flyer. "Hey, listen, if you're interested, I'm starting a karate class at the Community Center on Tuesdays. Here's the info on it, if you'd like to come." He walked off as she held the paper he handed her in surprise.

Mary Lou was on her way to class, so she tucked the flyer into her notebook and saved it throughout the day. The more she thought about it, the more excited she became about the idea. She remembered her mom telling her about her cousin, who was a black belt and had won a bunch of trophies. It sounded fun, and besides, she'd like to know how to protect herself when it came right down to it. She'd been bullied and victimized long enough.

Mary Lou Wells

She carried the flyer home, and fast talked her way into getting what she wanted despite her grandmother's objections. Girls don't do karate! She heard that evening over and over. But, making the 'girls need self-defense' argument finally won her way.



8

BOMB SCARE

Go the casual observer, Sierra was a normal teenage girl. Regardless of appearances, however, all was not well in Sierra's world.

Recurring nightmares dogged Sierra's sleep, and panic attacks were wearing her down. Her mother was oblivious, as were her friends. She didn't want her mom knowing she'd been in that stupid cave. What had she been thinking? She simply didn't talk about it, but the memory of the suffocating blackness seemed to follow her everywhere.

When every shadow seemed to hold threat, Sierra had nowhere to run. She went through her days stoically wrapped up in herself. Others mistook her emotional distance for coldness, and they reacted by giving Sierra the cold shoulder.

She still tried to maintain her accustomed standing in the social order. She'd been popular, and that was important to her. Being liked made Sierra feel like she belonged. However, like sharks, some of her peers smelled 'blood in the water.' The occasional cruelty became magnified when the sharks got together.

Tuesday evening, March twelfth, Kenneth gave his first class. The shadows retreated. They had been provided a large circular room at the community center with a batch of tables and chairs folded or pushed up against the wall. Sierra sat down on a tabletop to watch. Feet dangling and blowing chewing gum bubbles; she gave every indication of being ready for the show.

"Sierra, are you going to join us?" Kenneth asked.

"Nah, I'm good. You guys go ahead," she answered.

Mary Lou Wells

Kenneth, dressed in a white karate uniform, faced her and made an inviting gesture with both hands. "You can come to class, you know, I won't bite," he teased.

"I don't like to sweat," Sierra said.

"Ok, suit yourself." He grinned and turned to address his small class of five willing victims. "We're going to start with a warm-up and stretch."

Mary Lou seemed to be enjoying herself, but it looked like too much work to Sierra. She'd never enjoyed calisthenics in P.E. at school so why anyone would do it deliberately was beyond her. Kenneth explained the reasons for warming up the muscles and the basic mechanics of kicking and punching. He walked around correcting their stance and showed them how to move correctly to avoid injury. Halfway through the class, they took a break.

"Whew!" Mary Lou giggled, wiping sweat. "I'm thirsty. You wanna walk with me?"

Sierra jumped down from the table. "There's a Coke machine around the corner."

"No thanks. I don't like sodas. I'm going to go get some water," Mary Lou groaned. "You know? I sure wish I hadn't eaten such a big dinner. I'm getting a stitch in my side."

"Yeah, you always want just a light snack before you work out." Kenneth had come up behind them. "Otherwise, you just feel heavy and slow," he said.

"Well evidently, spaghetti is not the thing to eat before class," Mary Lou said.

"No, that's not a good idea," Kenneth told her, grinning.

They stopped by the water fountain in the hallway between the restrooms. Kenneth went into the men's room while Mary Lou got a long drink. Sierra waited. "I'm going to go get a soda. I'll see you back in there in a few minutes."

"Okay," Mary Lou said.

While Mary Lou wandered back to karate class, Sierra fetched her drink. However, as class ended, Mary Lou and Kenneth realized that Sierra had not returned. Mary Lou went to find her. When she finally saw Sierra, she was just outside the glass doors beside the library talking to two strangers. For a moment, she hesitated. Mary Lou didn't want to intrude, but she was going outside anyway to leave. Rather than break in on the conversation, she hung back shyly at Sierra's shoulder. When her friend realized she was there, she turned to introduce her.

"Hey, Mary Lou, this is Rachel Cox. She's my neighbor and my third cousin on my dad's side. This is Bryan Crawley. He says he's a local fireman."

"It's great to meet you! But I'm only a part-time volunteer." Bryan grinned real big. He reached out and gave Mary Lou a hearty handshake. "I work down at the K-25 plant in security... near Rachel, actually."

"Hey, that's top secret!" Rachel laughed. Everybody grinned. "Just don't ask to see his gun collection," she declared. "He'll bore you for hours."

"Hey, I've just got a few for target practice!" Bryan laughed too.

Rachel snorted. "If you say so."

"No, really! I do skeet and competition shoots, archery too for that matter," Bryan told them. "It's no big deal."

Mary Lou looked from one to the other. Rachel and Bryan were a study in contrasts. Rachel was tall, raven-haired, statuesque, and her body language said she was also reserved and a bit nervous though she was being friendly. Bryan was brown-haired and shorter, practically stood on his toes bouncing with contained energy, and had a smile pasted on his face. She wasn't sure what to think. She wondered if Bryan was Rachel's boyfriend but searched for a better question. "Do you hunt?" she ventured.

"Nah, it's just for fun! I don't like to kill anything," Bryan answered.

"Don't let him fool you, girls." Kenneth had finally come out after putting the chairs and tables back where they belonged. "This guy's a real douche bag."

"Watch your mouth, dude! Hey, Ken how's it going bubba?" The guys gave each other a high five and finger shake.

"Not bad man, not bad. What's up that's got you in town tonight and bothering these lovely ladies?" Kenneth asked.

"A call went out about a house fire. It was a small kitchen fire, and it was out by the time I got there. The homeowners managed to put it out. I saw Rachel as I was going home and thought I'd say hi. I was just getting introduced to these two."

"Oh, ok. You're allowed. Hey, are you doing the Johnson City tournament this year Bryan?"

"Why? You afraid I'll kick your ass?" Bryan eyed Kenneth, still smiling but with an added gleam in his eye.

"What the heck? If you think you can try, then bring it." Kenneth threw a playful kick at Bryan's head, which was neatly

Mary Lou Wells

blocked. A shoving match ensued, with the girls watching. Mary Lou was trying not to roll her eyes. Why did guys always have to show out? She wondered.

"Well, I guess I'll see you around Sierra. It was nice to meet you, Mary Lou. I need to get on home and feed the cats and go to bed. I have work early in the morning," Rachel said.

With that, Rachel walked to the most eye-catching car in the lot, a black Pontiac Firebird convertible. Mary Lou had eyed it with admiration when she arrived earlier. It was custom painted with sparkle glitter that made it catch the light like sequins. It reminded her of the fancy speed boats she'd seen on the lake decorated with similar glitter paint.

Sierra looked back and saw that the guys had finished shoving each other and were then engaged in friendly conversation. They were ignoring her and Mary Lou.

"Well, girl," Sierra said. "I guess I better go home too before mom has a conniption. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Ok, see ya!" Mary Lou said. Her beat-up blue truck was parked at the end of the sparse line of cars. When she arrived, the lot had been full, but it was getting late, and most people had already left. She headed for it. She didn't think anyone noticed her leaving.

Mary Lou had thoroughly enjoyed the martial arts class. It was the first physical activity she could remember going and doing that made her feel good about herself since middle school and baton twirling classes. Those had ended abruptly when her parents punished her for a minor theft of a pack of chewing gum. She was determined that this would be different. For once, she would be in control.



Sierra waited in her mom's car until Mary Lou pulled out, then she headed home. It had been a good evening. Sierra almost forgot all her troubles. She liked hanging out with these people. They were accepting of her. A good feeling followed her all the way home. Once there, however, it all came crashing down. Her mom was already in bed. Instead of turning lights on, she dug around in the utility drawer for a plain candle to see by.

Sierra sat on the screened porch with the candle lit to keep the dark at bay. The stars and moon provided some extra light as she stared into the night, thinking. She felt lonely. She wondered what it would be like to have a father, or maybe a sister.

Rockwood was behind her, as were her former friends. They never called her and didn't return her messages. They were all too busy doing their own things, going to the movies, going to the arcade, dating, all the things she used to do. She thought things would be better when they moved. But instead, she was only more isolated and afraid of being alone. Things had gotten a little better since she'd found new friends, but it wasn't the same. Something felt wrong, missing.

Through the fog of self-misery, she noticed movement. Her sharp intake of breath alerted whatever it was and the bushes quit shaking. Was the dark creeping up on her again? She felt the tightening in her chest that preceded the panic attacks and hyperventilation. However, as she watched, a dog-like face poked out of the bushes. A coyote! She recognized it as it emerged. Sniffing the air, it turned a circle, then looked straight toward Sierra, lit softly by the small golden flame. It sat down, simply staring at her.

As they looked at each other, Sierra slowly rose from her chair. Everything in the house was still silent. No one was around to chase it away except for her. Without thinking about what she was doing, she carefully opened the screen door, so it wouldn't squeak. She didn't want to frighten him away.

His head tilted to the side, and his tongue lolled out. He reminded her of the coyote in Rockwood and looked like a big friendly dog. She hadn't had a dog since she was a child. Like a child, she was drawn, mesmerized by his intelligent stare. The coyote yipped once softly and lay down as Sierra approached.

Holding out her hand, palm up, as she'd long ago been taught to approach a dog Sierra came close. The coyote responded as would a dog. He half rose and snuffled her fingers cautiously. She smelled like a friend. A hint of old wild magic lingered on her and tickled his nose. Something dark and blood-tinged was there as well, and it made him hesitate. It smelled like a coming storm, heavy with a threat. Scents of flowers and smoke also lingered, and all the confusing scents together made him sneeze. He weighed her with his nose and eyes. Abruptly he decided, and he bumped his head under her hand.

For the first time, he experienced the pleasurable sensations of a human petting him. She ran her hands through his thick ruff, and he responded by licking her hand.

Sierra's fear left her. Gently she simply touched her new friend. It felt companionable and without the loneliness she'd been feeling. She smiled at him and spoke softly.

"Thank you," she said simply and with wonder. "The night doesn't seem quite so dark now."

He whined and sat up, looking into the trees with ears pricked. Sierra followed his look with her own eyes and didn't see anything. She thought she heard rustling, and then a chorus of yips broke out. Sierra smiled. "It's not so quiet anymore either," she said. "Go on, buddy. It sounds like your family is calling you."

As her coyote friend ran off, the porch light behind her flipped on. It was nearly blinding after the darkness.

"Sierra! What on earth are you doing out there?" her mom yelled. "Don't you hear the coyotes? Get your butt in here right now before you get bit! They might have rabies."

"I'm coming; I'm coming!" Sierra answered.

"Don't you talk to me that way, young lady! I'm just looking out for you."

"Yes, mom," Sierra said with a resigned expression.

"What was that out there with you anyway? I couldn't see it very well in the dark," her mother asked.

"It was the neighbor's dog," Sierra lied. She could never explain to her mother what she'd felt and how friendly the coyote was. Avoiding the issue was the only option. Two doors down, one of the neighbors did have a big German Sheppard dog, so at least she had a plausible tale.

"Well, it better be careful, or the coyotes might eat it. Mongrel pests is what they are," Sierra's mom declared. "People need to start shooting them." She missed Sierra's quick intake of breath as she turned her back. "Listen, if you're hungry, there's leftover beans in the crockpot and cornbread in the 'fridge. Just clean up after yourself. I don't need more dishes to do in the morning before work."

"No thanks, mom. I'm sleepy. I'm going to bed," Sierra said.

"Suit yourself." Her mom went back inside and didn't speak further.

The next morning Sierra awoke refreshed. Mercifully, the night had passed with no nightmares after she went to sleep with the song of the coyotes ringing faintly through her slightly raised window.

She rolled over in bed as her alarm sounded. When opening her underwear drawer searching for a clean pair of socks, her hand again touched the beautiful blue beads she'd found in that infernal cave. With the bad feelings away in a distant corner of

her mind, she promised herself she'd string them when she got home.

Pulling her drawer out, Sierra dumped them all out on her bed. Somehow they seemed like old friends that morning. Her mood lifted, and she felt... safe. Looking out her window, she didn't see her new friend, but she knew he was out there waiting for her to come out and play. Instead, she sighed. She'd better get ready for school. No help for it, she had to go.

Sierra heard the car start outside and rushed to get ready. If she made her mom late for work, she'd get yelled at. The beads were still scattered on her bed as Sierra closed the door and left for school.

Sierra met up with Kenneth and Mary Lou in the library before they scattered to their classes. Outside in the hall, lockers slammed. The normal noise level of pattering of feet on the tile floor and students going both ways in the hall chattering to one another provided a familiar backdrop as they gathered at a table where Mary Lou had sat down with her books.

Several were open in front of her, along with a notebook of blank pages. She was tapping the table with the end of her pen in a habitual nervous tic that indicated she was deep in thought. Nevertheless, she was getting constant interruption. She finally gave up and put her pen aside as Sierra sat down at the table across from her. Kenneth was engrossed in the computer and acting moody rather than talking.

"Good morning," Sierra said cheerfully.

"If you say so." Mary Lou glared at her blank paper.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm trying to work on my research paper for English, but I can't seem to figure out where to start," Mary Lou replied.

"Try the beginning, maybe?" Sierra suggested un-helpfully.

"What about you? Don't you have one to do too?" Mary Lou looked up as a bunch of guys came in. One of them came over and also pulled up a chair.

"Morning!" he said even more cheerfully than had Sierra. He was a tall blonde, a little on the bulky side, though not really fat or overly muscled. He'd started hanging out with them lately between classes.

"Hi Richard! What's up with you today?" Mary Lou asked.

"Nothing much. I'm just up," he said matter of factly. "Hey, you wanna hear a joke?"

"Sure," Sierra said.

"How many rednecks does it take to change a light bulb?"

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Mary Lou grimaced. "That's so over-done," she muttered.

"How many?" asked Sierra. Just then, the bell rang.

"Ah, well. I'll tell you later. Gotta go!" Richard went out laughing.

"What a goofball! But at least he's harmless. He reminds me of a big lapdog," Mary Lou laughed.

"Oh, speaking of a lapdog, you'd never believe what happened last night," Sierra whispered excitedly as they went out into the hall.

"What happened?"

She kept her voice down to private conversation levels and explained. Her friend stopped by the door of her class and stared at Sierra.

"It let you pet it?" she said incredulously. "Let me get this straight... you see a wild animal out in your yard, and you just waltz up and pet it?"

"Yeah, basically," Sierra said.

"Wow. That's pretty neat. So you have a pet coyote. I thought those were just out west somewhere."

"He's not really a pet, just friendly. He didn't stay very long," Sierra explained. "I don't know much about them, but a guy I met said they aren't native to this area. He told me that they swam over the Mississippi or something not long ago and moved into Tennessee."

"Huh. That's cool. I wonder if it will come back?" Mary Lou said.

"I don't know, but I'll tell you if it does," Sierra told her.

Second bell rang for class to start, so they separated, and Mary Lou went on into her classroom. Sierra was going two doors down and was close enough to the bell not to get sent for a tardy slip. However, she found it difficult to concentrate as she thought about her new furry friend.

By the time third period came, the weather looked like it was threatening rain. A cold wind was blowing out of the north across the lake in front of the school. Students going outside shrunk down into their jackets and jammed hands into their pockets. A few students chattered about the possibility of a late snow as heavy clouds darkened the sky.

Sierra had just gone to the bathroom during class change when the fire alarm sounded. She jumped, startling at the sudden teeth-grating noise. "Ah, perfect timing for a fire drill!" Sierra muttered sarcastically.

Shut inside the stall; she was determined to finish when she heard two girls giggling, and the door to the bathroom opened. As it squeaked shut, the lights went out, and everything went silent. She couldn't see anything at all but pitch black.

"Hello?" Sierra said hopefully. Despite her willing it not to, the dark started closing in and with it the familiar chilling fear. Goosebumps rose on her arms while her hair seemed to stand on end. "Hello? Hello!" she shouted. Only silence and the dark answered her.

Sierra's sudden growing terror took her back to the cave. She faced that terrible shadow creature again in her memory. She could almost feel the remembered beads digging into her legs as she cowered away, but there were none. There was only the suffocating hate and laughter.

Then IT came crashing into her psyche. It gripped her mind in a vise. No! Please go away! Sierra wanted to scream. She began grinding her teeth and breathing like she'd been running. There was no one there but Sierra, or was there?

She strained to hear. Sierra dreaded any response. She rose and hurriedly fixed her clothing. Just as she unlocked the stall door to run, a noise grated in the darkness. She was trapped! Sierra threw the bolt back home and waited.

Faintly a breathy hiss became a voice. It was the voice of her nightmare! Sierra shrank back with her heart pounding. Why me and why here? She wondered desperately.

Faint light suddenly filtered to her eyes, and footsteps echoed softly, hollowly on the tile floor but she still couldn't see anything. She nearly started sobbing as the words came. She struggled to understand because the voice was heavily accented and sibilant, with many sounds choked off or rolling.

"If you think you can hide from me little skraeling you are sadly mistaken. I have power you cannot dream of, and your destiny awaits, little Christian. Your entrails will bathe my spear. Loki will have his revenge, and I? I will prove that neither Ingegerd, nor Harald, nor that bitch Skuld have bested me. I will have my kingdom!"

"Wha... what are you talking about?" Sierra sobbed in the darkness behind the door. "I haven't done anything to anyone!" His spear? Sierra wondered. Was that what he said? Is he going to rape and kill me? She desperately searched with her hands for an alternate way out to no avail. "My God, somebody please help me!" she shouted.

In answer, the doors slammed open, and the bolt on hers flew off in doing so. Huge hands grabbed her, and impossibly the blackness was even blacker as it dragged her into the room. An outline of the damning figure that had been haunting her nightmares had hold of her.

“Don’t act all innocent!” it hissed in her ear. “I know from my time trapped in the void while Loki whispers to me that Ingegerd’s seed lives and seeks after me. Why else would you wake me skraeling, but to exact your blood vengeance? I might let you live long enough to enjoy my victory to pay my debt for my release. I yet have use for you, daughter. You will serve our Lord in both life and death!”

His outline was surrounded by a dark aura backlit with a hellish fire to her eyes. His eyes were completely black, and he opened his fanged mouth as if he was about to tear her throat out. Scrambling backward, she groped blindly. Where are my beads? She was desperate to find her beads. Surely they would protect her! He came closer, and he put his hand on her chest. His fingers began to dig in through her ribs around her heart.

The darkness thickened, and she could smell blood and a stench like rotting meat. She looked into his face to beg for her life and only saw an empty skull with fire in its eye sockets.

Sierra recovered enough sense to begin to fight in earnest, but she also retreated terrified into her head. Her situation took on a dreamlike quality.

Sierra struggled physically and spiritually. She writhed in his grasp and whipped her fanged head and her tail? He dropped her and pulled a knife. She coiled in on herself, rising in fear and anger to strike as a rattlesnake. Laughing, he cut at her, and she was suddenly outside the snake and back in her own body. The rattlesnake interposed itself between her and her enemy, weaving, threatening as it protected her. It struck and missed. The blackness came for her again. She saw light and a picture where the bathroom mirror should be instead to its other side. She fought to get away as it grabbed her again and dragged her toward that light.



Outside, no one could hear when the screaming started in the girl’s bathroom. Students assembled, milling around in an organized jumble by homeroom classes at assembly points. Everyone shivered and griped, wondering what was up. Why of all days would they pick today for a fire drill? Then the police

pulled up in front of the school. Two officers with K-9 got out and went into the school. Some students figured it out - bomb scare. Word went down the line.

As miserably cold and shivering as the rest, Mary Lou suddenly became aware of a wrongness in the school. Her head popped up. She turned with eyes wide and stared at the middle section of classrooms past the library. Was there a bomb? She examined her feelings and opened her mind. Where was it? That didn't seem right to her. Not a fire or a bomb; someone probably pulled a prank to get out of class. Then what? Mary Lou had long since learned to pay attention to these feelings. She was almost never wrong.

Scanning the school with her eyes and her second sight, she wondered where Sierra was. While she wasn't in the same homeroom class, she still should have been at the front assembly point... unless she was elsewhere when the bell rang. Where was she, and why hadn't someone gone looking for her? That had to be it. Sierra was in trouble. She knew it just as surely as if someone had told her. She needed to get back inside!

She started to cross back over the street, and a teacher yelled at her to get back in line. What was she to do?

When the bell finally rang the all-clear, Mary Lou ran across the street and was one of the first back through the doors. She went right down the hallway, questing with all of her senses. When she came to the girl's bathroom, she stopped and listened. She heard faint sobbing. When she reached for the door, she discovered that it was locked.

"Sierra? Are you in there?" she shouted through the crack of the door frame. She heard a muffled response. She looked around for a teacher and saw Coach Powell coming down the hall.

"Hey, Coach! This door's locked, and someone's in there!" Mary Lou called to him. "Can you open it?"

"We'll need the key from the office. That shouldn't be locked with the school being searched," he said, frowning. "You better stand back from that door. Better yet, you go get Principle Prater, and I'll keep people away from here. And hurry!"

When she returned with the vice-principal and the key, Coach Powell had everyone clear of the door. He unlocked it and opened the door. Mary Lou peered past him as he flipped the light switch. Sierra was on the floor, and there was blood on her hands! The few people who could see gasped.

Mary Lou Wells

“Suicide attempt! Get away, all of you go to your classes!” Vice Principal Larson quickly scanned the scene and made an assumption. He waved his hands at all the wide-eyed students standing around trying to see.

“It’s lunchtime now!” A few students objected and only slowly began to move away. Some didn’t budge.

Mary Lou ducked under his waving arms and rushed in, landing on her knees in front of her friend. Outside, she heard Coach Powell volunteer to call an ambulance. She ignored them after that, even when Vice Principal Larson came in behind her.

“Sierra! Sierra! Are you ok?” Mary Lou shook her friend’s shoulder.

“No! Someone turned the lights out,” Sierra answered tearfully. “Panic attack... I... Someone’s coming for me... kill me.”

“Sierra, you aren’t making sense. Where did the blood come from?” Mary Lou grabbed her hands fearfully and turned her palms up. Sierra’s hands were cut, but not her wrists. She was relieved. Glass crunched under Sierra as she struggled to move. It wasn’t a suicide attempt after all.

“Tell you what. You can explain later. Let’s get you up and to the nurse.” Mary Lou offered her elbow for Sierra to shakily pull herself to her feet.

“We better call your mother,” Vice Principal Larson stated matter-of-factly.

At his words, Sierra’s stomach clenched. She allowed herself to be helped to the office and the Nurse’s Station.

Two hours later, with her hands bandaged, the ambulance gone, and Mary Lou in class, Sierra miserably waited for her mother to pick her up. How was she going to explain what happened? That she was afraid of the dark? It sounded so childish. Everyone seemed to understand so far, that she’d been accidentally locked in the bathroom and forgotten about before panicking in the dark.

But Sierra knew there was much more to it. It had been real. Somehow she’d been attacked. Somehow her hands had been cut as she defended herself. Was she going crazy? Who would believe her? She felt more alone than ever.

Her mother hadn’t arrived yet during class change. Kenneth had heard wild rumors about what happened from most of the school and poked his head in.

“What you doing in here? Everybody thinks you tried to kill yourself. I know that’s a line of bullshit, so tell me, what happened?”

"I don't know," Sierra said. "I was in the bathroom when the fire alarm went off. Next thing I know, I'm being attacked by something."

"Attacked by who?" Kenneth's raised eyebrows were nearly in his hairline. "When they found you, they said you were the only one in there."

"You don't believe me," Sierra whined.

"I didn't say that. I just want to know who attacked you!"

Sierra let out a frustrated sigh. She considered Kenneth, biting her lip. *This whole thing is out of control. He'll think I'm crazy, so I can't say anything else.*

Just then, the nurse walked back in. "Sierra, honey, your mother is here to pick you up. Do you need help getting out to her car?"

"No, thanks," she answered the nurse.

Sierra turned to Kenneth when the nurse returned to the front office. "I... don't know. Maybe I just thought I saw something in the dark."

"Well, don't go running into any more mirrors, OK?" he looked at her sternly.

"I won't," Sierra said.

"Good. Now listen, I'm having a little bit of a get-together at my house on Saturday. Why don't you come? It'll take your mind off things," Kenneth told her.

"What kind of get-together?" Sierra asked.

"Just people hanging out. We got some board games, and we're ordering pizza," he answered.

"I don't know. I'll have to ask mom," Sierra said.

"Well, if she says yes, here's my phone number. Call me, and I'll give directions." Kenneth pulled out a piece of notebook paper and pen, then scribbled a number on it. "Hey, and while you're at it, you can invite your friend Rachel."

"My cousin," Sierra reminded him.

"That's right, your cousin. Bring her if you want," he said.

Sierra considered. "If I'm with Rachel, Mom's more likely to let me come. I'll ask."

Kenneth continued chatting as he walked her outside and saw her off. Maybe he'd find out more if he could talk to her away from school, he thought. Something didn't seem right about the whole incident. Telling half-truths and avoiding an explanation was not going to be where he let her stay without question. However, Kenneth had no choice but to let things go for the time being. He had to get to class.



Later that evening, Sierra had a chance to ask whether she could go to Kenneth's for the party. Sierra's mother had called Rachel and told her about the incident at school. Concerned, she'd come to check on her cousin.

"I don't know, Sierra. I have a craft fair on Saturday," Rachel told her when Sierra asked if she'd like to go with her. Sierra had waited until her mother was in the kitchen banging pots and preparing dinner to ask.

"Please? I want to go, and mom's more likely to let me if you go too. I like Ken, and he's invited me over to his house. I might not get another chance. I want him to like me," Sierra pleaded.

Rachel looked at Sierra and down to her bandaged hands. She pursed her lips, thinking. Maybe she could manage if the get-together didn't start too early.

"What time?" Rachel asked.

"I think he said around seven o'clock," Sierra answered.

"Hmm. That's doable. Things are usually winding down around five or six in the afternoon. We might be a little later than that, depending on how soon I can get packed up and get home. If he doesn't mind that, then I don't see why not."

Sierra squealed a little, threw her arms around Rachel's shoulders, and squeezed. "Thanks, bunches!"

Rachel gently disentangled herself and shot Sierra an amused look. "No problem." She flipped her black hair over her shoulder and looked up as Sierra's mother came in.

"Rachel, you're going to stay for dinner, aren't you?" Her tone didn't invite the younger woman to refuse.

"Sure, Edith, I'll stay and eat. I was going to have cold leftovers, so some of your good cooking sounds great."

"I didn't have a chance to stop by the store, so it'll be a simple meal."

"That's fine," Rachel told her. "I'm not picky."

"Okay, you girls sit there, and I'll have it ready in a jiffy." Edith returned to the kitchen. Sierra, still preoccupied with getting to go to Kenneth's house, tried to figure out how to broach the subject with her strait-laced mother. Even when Sierra had a steady boyfriend, her mother was strict about her going anywhere she didn't know the people involved.

Soon, Edith returned with a large steaming bowl of spaghetti and a bowl of salad. She set these on the table. "This should do," she said. "Sierra, set the table while I fix the drinks... Soda will

do, right?” Without waiting for an answer, she went back to the kitchen, where ice could be heard clattering into glasses.

“Yeah, thanks, mom,” Sierra said. She nearly dropped the plates but saved them at the last moment. Her hands hurt and weren’t working right, not that she would let on anything.

“Let’s eat!” Her mom smiled, but her cheer seemed forced. “Rachel, would you say grace?”

“Sure... bow heads?” Rachel paused a moment to gather herself together and relax. “Our Father, bless this food and the hands that prepared it for the nourishment of our bodies, and we thank Jesus in your name, amen.”

“Amen,” came the answer around the table.

“Dig in!” Edith told them. “Food’s a’wastin’.”

After several bites, Edith looked up thoughtfully. “Rachel, how’s the job going? Does it look like there might be anything for Sierra after she graduates?”

“Mom!” Sierra objected. “I’m going to be going to college in the fall semester. I won’t have time to go to a job and do school at the same time.”

“We need the money, girlie. Don’t be too proud to do your share!” her mom admonished.

Rachel interrupted the glare Sierra shot at Edith. “They have a hiring freeze on right now at all the plants. They are waiting to see if they get the new contract with the government.”

“Hmm, well, maybe she can find something else. There’s always contractors hiring temps, or she can work down at the gas station.”

Sierra wrinkled her nose but avoided comment. She still wanted something, and arguing with her mother wasn’t going to get it for her. She couldn’t see a good opening, so she took a deep breath and held it before she let it out and wriggled uncomfortably in her seat. Why was it always so hard to ask for anything?

“Mom, there’s this guy at school I really like, and he’s invited me and Rachel over for a party on Saturday. Is it ok if I go?”

“Is that the boy you were with outside the school?”

“Yeah, it is.” Sierra smiled at her mother to encourage her.

“I’ll think about it, Sierra. It depends on how your hands are doing and if Rachel’s going?” She looked askance at the other woman.

“Planning to...” Rachel said. “I have a craft fair Saturday, but I’ll be getting out in time to go with or take Sierra to the party.”

“There’s not going to be drugs, is there?” Edith frowned.

Mary Lou Wells

“No!” Rachel and Sierra both answered at the same time. “He said they’d be playing games and just hanging out,” Sierra said.

“It’s ok, Edith, I’ve met and talked to him, and he’s a really nice guy. It will be fine.”

“Alright, but only if Rachel goes with you,” Edith agreed. She was feeling generous because her ‘baby’ was hurt.

“No problem,” Rachel said. Looking at Sierra’s pleading eyes, she wasn’t about to refuse. *And, Rachel thought, I’d like to ask her what happened today in more detail.*



9 FATE

APRIL 6, 1985

Black on black, the subtle pattern drew Rachel's eyes like a magnet. If she didn't blink for a moment, Rachel felt like she was falling right into the huge tapestry.

The central theme of the weave was, in its way, repulsive. Rachel's first impulse when seeing a spider was always to shrink away and find something to kill it a shoe, a book, whatever happened to be handy. But, she had to admit this was pure genius. Regardless of which angle you viewed it from, you could see holographic layers of spider web created not by color but by the texture of the weaving itself. How did the artist do that?

Rachel was benefiting from being set up next to the weaver's booth. Her stained and cut glass creations were selling more steadily than usual to the crowds of people wandering around the craft fair. Those unable to afford the expensive items next to Rachel's table were attracted to the much cheaper shiny items at hers.

During a lull, Rachel had gotten up to examine more closely what kept people coming to their section of the building. While Rachel's booth was light and airy with crystal pieces hanging on tinkling strands of acrylic and colored animal and flower shapes of all sizes, the weaver's booth was dark and almost gothic. Creatures of legend, unicorns, pegasus, monsters, and dragons flew across the blankets, pillows, tapestries, and other woven art. The central theme of the weaver's booth was a large loom with a partly finished tapestry. The woman sitting at the loom had been working at it all morning. When Rachel moved to see what she was doing, the weaver looked up and smiled at her.

"Hi!" Rachel said. "I was just admiring your work. It's really beautiful."

"Well, thank you," the woman replied. She looked at Rachel's table. "You have some lovely pieces of art yourself. Are you the

artist?" The loom flashed and slid across the strands of string as Rachel watched.

"Yes, I do all of it myself. I have cutting tools and tables of glass set up in my basement at home."

"It looks like you are a very creative young lady. You're doing well today, I noticed," the weaver said. She paused and turned to Rachel. "My name is Moira." She stuck out her hand for Rachel to shake.

"Ow!" Rachel jumped in surprise at the sudden pop when their fingers touched.

"Sorry," Moira smiled in amusement. "The thread tends to build up static electricity."

"And I'm Rachel," she laughed a little. "No problem."

Moira inclined her head toward Rachel's booth. "You're from Kingston, I see."

A sign on her table in big, bold letters declaring her section 'RACHEL'S CREATIONS, Kingston, TN' identified her to attendees. Every table on their aisle had similar signs. The weaver's booth, however, didn't have a city listed. It said simply 'Moira Postremo, WEAVER.'

"Yes, I am from Kingston. What about you?" Rachel asked conversationally.

She turned her head to watch as the weaver returned her hands to the loom. Taking shape on the loom was an epic scene out of medieval heraldry. Armored knights and horses in battle and the base of a castle were taking shape. The picture was confused by a riot of color and action but was very clear, almost like a painting. Death seemed to be the central theme. Despite herself, Rachel shuddered. The weaver's hands moved so fast Rachel couldn't tell how she was creating the picture. Her eyes were drawn again to the spider tapestry behind her and back.

"Oh, I am from everywhere and nowhere," Moira answered with a mysterious smile. At Rachel's raised eyebrow, she said more seriously, "I move around a lot due to my work. Lately, like you, I'm living in Roane County." Moira's gray eyes twinkled. "Beautiful Rockwood, Tennessee, to be exact."

"That's cool! We're practically neighbors then," Rachel told the weaver cheerfully.

"Practically," Moira agreed.

"My cousin was living in Rockwood, and she recently moved over near me outside of Kingston. Do you know her? Her name is Sierra Moore."

"I've heard the name but haven't met her. I know some of the kids at the school," Moira told her. "They came over to swim in my pond last summer. I had to put my horses away whenever they'd show up. According to the kids, the previous owner allowed them to come unannounced to swim. One of them was surprised when they almost got trampled the first time they came after I got the property. Bloodwine, he's one of my stallions, is a bit antisocial."

"Nobody got hurt, did they?" Rachel asked.

"No. And I changed my fencing and barn access to where it's no longer an issue."

Rachel watched the weaver quietly at work for a few more minutes without an answering comment. When she turned to go back to her glassware as the crowd increased, Rachel tripped over a set of boxes of books on the floor. One of them spilled its contents all over the booth. Rachel caught her balance as the weaver stopped work on her loom and reached out a steady hand.

"Sorry Moira, I didn't see those there," Rachel apologized. "I'll pick them up for you." She bent down and began gathering the books that had spilled across the floor. Some appeared worn about the corners and had creases in their spines. In surprise, she noticed the titles of some of the books. Some occult books were mixed in with a handful of romances and history textbooks.

"You can slide those boxes there under the table. Those are used books I was planning to unload at yard sale prices," Moira said. "I should have been more careful not to leave them there for someone to trip over." A slight smile played about her lips, but Rachel didn't notice. She'd gotten distracted looking through the contents of the box.

"Witches?" Rachel looked up at the weaver. She was holding a red hardback book that declared it a witch's diary and another an encyclopedia of witchcraft. Under her knee was another book on candle magic and ritual. She paused with them in her hands rather than placing them in the box.

"Yes, those are books on modern witchcraft," Moira said, looking at Rachel over the loom. Her gray eyes twinkled, but her expression was bland. She waited for Rachel's response.

"Are you a devil worshipper?" Rachel asked. Still, she hesitated.

At Moira's unexpected sharp laughter, Rachel jumped slightly. What was so funny?

"No, dear. I'm a priestess of a religion that goes back way before Christianity or Satanism was thought of." Moira said, still giggling a little. "In the modern era here in the United States and the United Kingdom, even elsewhere... it's called Wicca, but it has roots that are thousands of years old in heathen and druidic practice."

"I've never heard of it," Rachel said.

"That's because most Wiccans are afraid to 'come out of the broom closet,' so to speak, and be known. The few who have dared to speak publicly have made headway educating the masses, but only slowly, and they've suffered for it. It's dangerous, in fact. Some have lost jobs or lost custody of their children because of speaking out."

"What about you?"

"Me? Oh, I'm not afraid," Moira answered, still smiling. "In fact, I have been giving talks on the subject to the World Religion classes at the local community college. One of my neighbors happens to be an Anthropology professor there."

Rachel's opinion of the other woman, which had just taken a nose-dive, rose back up a notch. Witches were afraid? That was a novel concept she decided she'd examine later. She'd been brought up being told that witches were evil, had green skin, and wore funny hats, or else they were Satanic devil worshippers who sacrificed children.

Looking at the weaver, she couldn't believe she was evil. Everything about her said she was a harmless middle-aged woman, perhaps slightly bookish like her old school librarian. Her white-blonde silver hair was pulled back in a severe bun, and the wire-framed glasses that slid halfway down her nose contributed to that image.

Rachel realized the other woman was beautiful, and now that she thought about it, she wondered how old the weaver was. Her initial impression was that the weaver was an old woman, but her skin was unwrinkled and still in the full bloom of youth. Rachel blinked, and she again saw an older lady sitting harmlessly weaving her art at a craft fair.

Rachel laughed a little at her perceptions and pre-conceived notions. "I guess I don't know everything," she admitted with a smile. She looked down at the books in her hand, considering. On impulse, she decided.

"Since you were going to sell these, how much do you want for them?"

"Well... I was going to put 25 cents each on them, but tell you what... since you're interested, I'll sell you the whole box for a dollar. Will that work for you?"

"Sure, I'll give you a dollar for all these." Rachel dug around in her pants pocket and pulled out a wad of folded paper money. Some of it dropped on the floor when she unfolded it and handed Moira a wrinkled bill.

"That'll work!" the weaver said. The money disappeared into a cash box at her feet. "That's one less thing I'll have to pack up and take back home." The loom flashed left and right as Moira took up her weaving again. "You can take my business card with you in case you have any questions and want to call me... they are there on the table."

Rachel picked up a card and tucked it into one of the witch books. If nothing else, it'll make a good bookmark, she thought to herself. She didn't see any reason she'd ever call. Lifting the box that was heavy for its size, she toted it back to her booth and shoved it safely under the table next to her boxes of packing materials. Rachel missed the triumphant smile cast her way by the weaver. She got busy talking to customers and forgot the weaver entirely.

Late in the afternoon, after people had begun to clear out of the building and only a few stragglers still wandered past, Rachel looked at the time. She realized she'd have to go ahead and pack up so she could keep her promise to Sierra.

Looking across the aisle, she realized suddenly that the weaver was already gone. Only a few bits of string from the loom remained at the other woman's booth. When had she left? Rachel shrugged. A closer glance revealed a piece of material crumpled in the corner. Moira must have dropped something Rachel realized.

After getting her things packed, Rachel went to the other booth and picked up what the weaver had left. It was a blue circle on a field of black. In the center, a white wolf howled to a silver moon. The piece was lovely. It was also nearly big enough to be a throw blanket. Rachel decided she'd take it with her. She carried it to her car and draped it over the last of her boxes.

All the way home, her curiosity piqued, she thought about the books in the back seat of her car. She'd never met a witch before so she wasn't quite sure it was a good idea to explore the subject. However, something about the other woman drew her and made her want to trust what she said. But, she wondered, what were they afraid of? Were they hiding something... some big secret

that nobody else could know? Did they cast spells on people and sacrifice animals? Rachel shivered at the thought.

Rachel usually trusted her senses about people. She considered herself a good judge of character. That was probably what led her to take the books. What she knew about witches didn't match what all of her senses were telling her. Answers to all of those questions were likely in the box.

When she arrived at her house, the bottom nearly fell out of the box under the heavy load of books. Rachel grunted in relief as she plopped the box down on her table. She'd have to leave the reading for later. Almost, she regretted her promise to her cousin to go with her that evening. Parties didn't hold much interest, but Sierra seemed to need some kind of support. So rather than sit down with a cup of coffee and a book on her lap, she readied a sandwich to eat on the way.



Rachel followed the directions to Kenneth's house. By the time she pulled into his driveway, a handful of other cars were there. Instead of everyone being in the house, a mixed group gathered on the covered porch or in the yard. Rachel was even more surprised to see Bryan. He and Kenneth were sparring while the others watched or chatted.

"Hi, Rachel!" Sierra welcomed her cousin.

"Hey!" Rachel said.

"We were waiting on you before we started," Sierra said. "Here, there's another chair in the corner."

"So! What's with world war three out there?" Rachel asked, nodding toward the combatants. Rather than pull up the offered chair, she sat down on the top stair. A heavyset guy sporting a short haircut and a dark five o'clock shadow moved his spit can to make room for the new arrival.

"How you doin'?" He smiled broadly. "Name's Billy." Rachel could see his teeth were brown-stained and he had a bulge in his cheek. "Nice set of wheels ya' got there... Firebird, ain't it?"

"Yeah, and I'm good actually. I had a lot to do today, but I made it." Rachel smiled back.

She resisted the urge to retch when he spit beside the porch rather than the can. The three or four people behind him were engaged in a conversation that caught her attention as she strained to hear past Billy.

"Well, it's good you did come tonight," he drawled. "You know, my uncle races a Trans Am on dirt down at the speedway in Lenoir City. He rebuilt the engine from the ground up and it's

one hot machine. If you wanna soup up your own, just let me know. I'll give you his phone number."

"Thanks," Rachel said.

"Hey, Ken!" Billy yelled. "Let's not keep these lovely ladies waitin'!"

"I'm coming dude, keep your britches on!" Instead of leaving off, he jumped on Bryan and both tumbled to the ground rolling.

Rachel turned her attention to the three other guys sitting with Sierra. What were they saying? Sierra leaned closer to the clean-cut guy with a mullet and glasses sitting next to her. Everything about him screamed *geek!* He was speaking animatedly with his hands.

"Well, what happened? What was it?" The third chair held another blonde curly-haired, blue-eyed kid that looked a bit younger, his earnest expression was pinned on his geek of a friend. "Was it a zombie?"

"It wasn't a zombie, it was an effing Wight! It took out Thomas with one shot."

"Whoa, dude!" The blonde kid nodded knowingly.

"Without you there Brandon, we didn't stand a chance."

"Sheesh Eric, what did you do?"

"What do you think? We ran!"

"Yeah, you wouldn't be ready for that level an undead without a cleric or a magic weapon."

Sierra and Rachel looked at each other. Each found her own puzzled expression mirrored in the other's face.

"Have you gone mad?" Sierra asked them. "Magic's not real... what are you talking about?" Her expression was dubious as she sat back and draped herself on her chair. She looked up as if to study the porch overhang. Rachel just waited for an explanation.

Both boys turned to look at her with eyebrows nearly to their hairline. Eric went still with his mouth hanging open. "Don't you know anything?"

"Know what?" Sierra shot back.

"That you can't beat something that nasty on a wing and a prayer! You gotta have someone in the party who has their shit together." Kenneth bounded up on the porch, brushing grass off his clothes and hair, followed closely by Bryan.

"Well, C'mon, let's go on inside." Kenneth held the door open for everybody to stomp into the cramped and sparsely furnished living room. "It's not fancy, but it'll do," he said.

Most of them sat down on the floor around a coffee table piled with boxes of board games. Sierra and Rachel, still

Mary Lou Wells

wondering what was going on, plopped on the couch. “You all still aren’t telling me anything,” Sierra complained.

Kenneth sighed. “You are obviously not a gamer. They are talking about an adventure that they went on last week. To keep our characters from dying, we had to get out and not finish until we have our cleric with us, that’s Brandon.”

“Oh!” Sierra said. “Now I understand. I heard all that stuff’s Satanic and makes people commit suicide. It was on TV.”

“Phffftt!” Eric shook his head in denial. “There is nothing Satanic about gaming. Look, anyone who has ever watched a movie or read a book and said, ‘I would never do something like that’, or ‘I would have done that differently’ has roleplayed. Most of the adventures that our characters go on have their basis in popular fiction.”

“It’s just a game,” Brandon agreed. “Anyone who does something like suicide has got other problems, they’re crazy already, or their family’s giving them a hard time. It’s not the game’s fault.”

Rachel nodded. That made sense to her. Sierra had a hard look in her eyes but didn’t comment further.

“So, what do you all want to play?” Kenneth asked them. “Do you want to run a campaign or play a board game?”

“I like Monopoly!” Sierra piped up. “Can we play that one?” She pointed to a white box on the bottom of the pile.

“That works.” Kenneth cleared the boxes of games off the coffee table and opened the game up. “Who wants what piece?”

After they’d played a couple of hours Kenneth’s mother walked in with four steaming hot boxes of Pizza Hut pizza and two-liter Cokes.

“Anybody hungry?” she asked them. Choruses of “Oooh, yum! Pizza!” and “I’m starving!” greeted her question. She laughed. “Go ahead and dig in kids! If you need anything else just holler, ok?” With that, she disappeared to the other side of the house. The ravenous teens in the living room attacked the boxes with gusto.

“Mmm. The stuff of life,” Rachel commented as she finished the last piece of pizza from the last box and rolled her dice on the table. “Ha! Beat that!” Rachel said with a huge smile. “Straight sixes, three in a row!” They had gone from Monopoly to an Aggravation board game, and Rachel was winning.

“Hey! That’s just not fair!” Sierra complained as Rachel put her last marble home.

“Roll of the dice, baby!” Rachel laughed.

“We need to take you to Vegas,” Kenneth said grumpily.

“Or Atlantic City,” Bryan agreed. “Listen, folks. I think I’m done for the evening. I’m thinking about heading into town for some coffee. Anyone else want to go?”

“Coffee? You haven’t had enough caffeine in the soda?” Eric asked.

“Where are you planning to go? Everything is closed this time of night,” Kenneth said.

“What time is it?” Sierra looked around to see if she could see a clock. “Mom wants me home by eleven o’clock.”

Bryan looked at his watch. “It’s almost twelve or thereabouts, and I was going to the gas station and then maybe riding around.”

“Ohm’gosh! I’m dead! Mom’s gonna kill me!” Sierra told them, eyes wide. She hesitated only a moment and gathered her things in a near panic. “I have to go everybody, sorry,” she told them regretfully.

“Hell, dude, we’ve done it again!” Billy said. “We’d better git outta here too. Eric, Brandon, I’ll give you boys a lift back home. I know you don’t want to call your parents this time of night.”

“Thanks Bill,” Eric said and picked up a large backpack as he rose to leave.

Sierra went out the door, calling “Bye!” over her shoulder. Her mom’s blue station wagon started up and pulled out with headlights flashing briefly in the windows. Sierra leaving was everyone else’s cue to break up the party.

“I’ll ride with you, Bryan. I’m in the mood for a candy bar and slush drink for dessert.” Rachel looked around the living room at the empty soda bottles and used pizza boxes, spit can, cups, paper plates, and towels. It looked like a hurricane had hit the room. “Ken, do you need help cleaning up the mess before we go?”

“Nah, you’re ok. I’ll go with you guys. Just give me a minute to grab a trash bag and toss all this stuff. I can handle it and meet you outside.” Kenneth said.

“See you all later!” Billy told them before following the two younger boys out to his rusty brown pickup.

“Bye Billy! Hey, will you be able to come over here to my house and help us in the campaign next weekend? If we can’t beat the Wight, we’ll start a new game campaign,” Kenneth yelled out the door.

"I don't know. It depends on whether we have a dirt race next week! I'll check with my uncle. See ya, dude!" he yelled back. Billy waved from the truck as he pulled out.

Bryan and Rachel were out the door and standing by the cars when Kenneth joined them. "Who's driving?" he asked Bryan.

"Why don't you all meet me in town?" Rachel suggested. "You can park your car at your Granddad's house since it's on the way. Then we can go drive around in my car."

"What about getting me back home?" Kenneth asked.

"I'll drop you off, no problem," Rachel told him.

"Sounds like a plan! We'll take both cars and leave mine in town. Hop in Ken, let's go!" Bryan agreed.

Bryan pulled out slowly and quietly so it wouldn't disturb Kenneth's mother, who had gone to bed. When he reached the curves he hit a higher gear and opened up his engine. He grinned at the headlights in his rearview mirror. He wouldn't lose Rachel with her driving THAT car. Unbeknownst to anyone else, he'd drag-raced her, so he knew. He let out a whoop and threw the gear into fifth, with Kenneth grinning approval.

Bryan's car was practically race-worthy itself, though you'd never know just looking at it. The only clue it could go fast was the red light bar on top that marked a firefighter. He knew that was the reason Rachel offered to drive after they got into town. His car was conspicuous, although hers was the picture of bling, so it was noteworthy itself.

When they hit highway 58 into Kingston that late, there was no traffic, so both drivers stomped the gas. They were almost to the top of the hilltop above the golf course when a state trooper turned his blue lights on and started to pull out from the shoulder. Bryan slowed then hit the switch for his red lights a moment and flipped it again. The trooper's lights also went off. Bryan grinned triumphantly. No one would be coming after them. He saw the state police patrol car pull back over after they passed.

"Cool!" Kenneth laughed. "I guess technically you're not supposed to do this," he grinned and laughed again.

"No," Bryan said, "but I have to be a good driver to drive emergency vehicles. I'm not going to wreck or run over anybody, and he knows it. Besides, for all he knows, I could be going somewhere important with somebody in tow."

Bryan and Rachel slowed when they reached the city limits across the bridge and coasted slowly to Bryan's house in town. They parked and paused only long enough to hop into Rachel's

car. Smiling, she unclipped the top and hit the button to put the top down.

It was an unseasonably warm spring night for April, even though the wind still had a slight bite to it. Rolling through the quiet town with the convertible open was pleasant. The contrast from the dimly lit street to the bright lights of the gas station was nearly blinding. There were a couple of newer model cars getting gas and a Kingston police car pulled up to the door. The officer was also getting coffee when the three young people walked in. Rachel recognized the African-American lady patrolwoman but didn't know her. She settled for nodding and saying "Hi," as she passed. Her tag said Officer 'D. Stanley'.

"You kids are out late," Officer Stanley observed casually. "Hello Bryan," she nodded to Bryan as he walked over to get himself a cup of coffee.

"Hello, Diane. How's Roane County's finest tonight?" Bryan asked politely.

"Everythin's quiet," she smiled slightly, stirring her cup. "I like it that way."

"That's good. Hopefully, it will stay that way," Bryan said. "Do you know my friends? This is Rachel Cox and Kenneth DeVault."

"Nice to meet you, Rachel. We've not met. But, Mr. DeVault and I have had a conversation or two, haven't we?" She nodded and gave him a stern look.

"Only one or two," Kenneth replied with a shrug.

"Let's keep it at that young man," Officer Stanley told him. "No trouble."

"I won't," Kenneth said innocently.

"I'll hold you to it!" Officer Diane Stanley turned away as the radio walkie-talkie on her hip crackled. Rachel, unused to hearing the dispatcher over the airwaves, wasn't able to discern what was said. Officer Stanley however, stopped dead in her tracks, going out the door to her patrol car. She turned up the volume and listened closely as the broadcast repeated. "What the?" her shocked thought slipped out as she listened to the radio. "...report of ...going on (crackle), Roane... Park... stand by in case backup needed."

Officer Diane Stanley headed to her car with purpose. *So much for the peace and quiet*, she thought. She pulled onto the nearly deserted street to continue her work shift, but not before noting the beautiful Firebird convertible in which Bryan and his friends arrived.

Diane possessed good instincts and gained respect in good part because she paid close attention to everything going on around her. Her dad always told her, “The devil is in the details, my girl. What you miss will bite you.” Diane took that to heart. Not much got past her these days.

Officer Diane Stanley’s reputation for having integrity helped and hindered her at times. Sometimes her job required her to look the other way. At those times, she kept her head down and her mouth shut. On the other hand, whenever Diane could make a difference in the lives of others, she did. Like when she was called about a possible fight at the local arcade. Rather than haul that kid Kenneth to jail, she’d settled for reading him the riot act and letting him go with a warning.

Dispatch crackled again, and she shook herself. She’d better stop woolgathering and get her mind on business. No new news came through on the situation at the park. Otherwise, there was just a domestic disturbance in Harriman. Diane turned around, drove down Kentucky Street, and passed the gas station. The black Firebird was pulling out.



10

A NIGHT ON THE TOWN

“**S**o, where do you guys want to go now?” Rachel asked. Her mouth was full of chocolate as she waved to the lady cop going the other way.

“I don’t know. Where do you want to go?” Kenneth asked.

“I don’t know. What about you, Bryan?” Rachel mumbled.

“I don’t know,” Bryan responded.

The three of them laughed. “Well, somebody’s got to make a decision, so I guess it’s up to me,” Bryan said. “Let’s go down through Midtown by the lake. We can loop back through Harriman past the college. I’m ready to enjoy some spring weather instead of being stuck in the house. Nobody will bother us this late.”

“Sounds good to me!” Rachel drove up the ramp onto I-40 west, and just across the bridge at the Kingston Steam Plant, they took the Midtown exit. “I swear this is the dumbest interstate ramp ever! Why would they have half an interstate exchange? It’s an off-ramp, but there’s no exit the other way, and you can’t get back on without going through Kingston or Harriman!” Rachel shook her head.

“Maybe they’ll fix that sometime,” Bryan said thoughtfully. “That’s the biggest reason that Midtown is so dead, I think. If they’d finish the ramps, there’d be more business coming in.”

“You’re probably right,” Kenneth agreed. “But for now, it sure does bite.”

They cruised through Midtown, the only car on the road. Without street lights, everything was dark shapes. The dilapidated buildings didn’t show as much at night, nor did the eyesore of burned-out shells of walls where buildings once stood. They enjoyed the wind in their faces and the freedom of being out at night. There was a faint smell of fish in the air when they got close to Roane County Park.

They noticed that the gate was open. A sign at the entrance read: "Park hours: Daylight to Dusk. Speed limit 20."

Rachel glanced at the guys, grinned, and pulled into the darkened park on impulse. Avoiding hitting the giant billboard welcoming visitors, she drove to the right through the entrance and then pulled into the left split down the hill. They cruised to the first pavilion at the lake slowly and with headlights off.

Scattered lights from houses across the water and an odd boat on the lake shimmered on the ripples created by a faint breeze. Kenneth hopped out without waiting to open the door, with the other two following more sedately. A picnic pavilion sat by the water just past the children's playground equipment and a large sandbox. Somewhere close but unseen, they could hear the resident ducks or wild Canadian Geese chirping or quacking to themselves in their sleep. Wet plops of fish jumping interrupted the quiet and sounded loud in the stillness. Sitting companionably on a picnic table and looking over the water of Watts Bar Lake, they talked. Rachel finally broached the subject that had been bothering her.

"Ken? What do you make of what happened with Sierra in the bathroom? Her mom said you were there when she picked Sierra up from school," Rachel asked.

"How the hell should I know? She won't talk to me about it. I mean, all I know is what I was told second-hand - that she was in the bathroom when the fire alarm went off and the lights got turned out on her. Rumor says she tried to kill herself, but that doesn't add up, you know?"

"What makes you think she wasn't? Just because," Bryan hopped off the table and walked a few steps toward the water. He crouched and tossed a pebble. Looking up at them earnestly, he continued. "Just because rumor says she was doesn't mean that she wasn't. I've seen several things happen out on calls where people have done dumb crap. It almost always comes as a shock to their family or friends. Maybe the rumors are true. I don't know Sierra that well at this point, but maybe she's capable of trying to kill herself?"

"Nah, that's bull," Kenneth said decisively. "People are full of hot air. I'm telling you she didn't. I didn't see the bathroom, but I saw her. She said somebody attacked her, or she panicked in the dark when everyone left her, but she wasn't suicidal... and the cuts were on her hands, not her wrists."

"Who was there to attack her?" Bryan asked.

"That's the problem. According to Mary Lou, there wasn't anybody in there but Sierra. They looked," Kenneth responded.

"Then she must have broke the mirror in her confusion," Rachel said.

"Broken," Bryan grinned.

"Whatever!" Rachel told him. "Be serious! Now's not the time to correct my grammar."

"He might as well. We can't do anything about Sierra right now anyway, can we?" Kenneth observed.

"No. But I'm worried. She's my cousin, you know," Rachel huffed.

"Worrying won't change anything," Kenneth and Bryan said at the same time.

"I can't help it! Maybe there was somebody in there they didn't see. Maybe somebody has a grudge, and they are going after her," Rachel worried.

"Do you believe in conspiracy theories?" Bryan asked her. "You can't believe everything you hear. I have to agree with Ken. If no one was there, then they weren't there."

"If you're that easily convinced I've got some beachfront property in Arizona I'll sell you," Kenneth told her. "Rumors fly, but most of the time, it's all lies."

"I guess you're probably right," she said. Rachel still looked uncertain.

Another fish plopped in the water, sending ripples to disturb the smoothness of the surface. Rachel and Bryan sat in companionable silence. Kenneth, unable to sit still for long, spun around and threw a kick at his friends.

All three of them jumped as a blood-curdling scream split the air. "What the heck was that?" Kenneth went into a cat-like crouch. His eyes narrowed. Another scream sounded fainter this time.

"It sounds like somebody's dying over there!" Rachel pointed back the way they had come in. She scanned the area. Her eyes were huge when she looked back at Kenneth. "What do we do?"

"We go see," he replied. "Let's go." Kenneth took a running start, and putting his hands on the door, hopped over the side and into the car.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Rachel said. "If something's going on, we shouldn't be here."

"It was your idea to come in here in the first place! Come on!" Kenneth urged.

"Maybe Rachel's right. We should probably call the police or an ambulance. It sounds like somebody needs help," Bryan suggested.

"By the time they got here, it would be too late. Let's go!" Kenneth said.

"Ok, we'll go see, but I think we should just leave. Whatever it is, we don't need to be involved," Rachel declared with a spooked expression. Reluctantly, she started her car and backed up to turn. She looked around at the two guys with her. When they didn't say anything else, she turned the lights on and slowly pulled the car up the hill.

"You got any first-aid supplies with you?" Bryan asked Rachel. "It might be a fisherman pulled up to the bank over there. If we're going to go over there anyway, maybe we can do something for them."

"I've got a small kit in my trunk," she replied. "But it's not a very good one."

Bryan told Rachel to cut the lights and cruise slowly in response to a sudden gut feeling. He could sense something but wasn't sure what it was. It made him want to creep out of there silently. The screams had stopped, and chills were going up his spine. He could see the whites of Rachel's eyes by the dashboard light, and she was gripping the steering wheel. Bryan looked around at Kenneth and got a hard stare in return. A thumbs-up sign was all the comment Kenneth made as he too scanned the darkness.

Rachel stopped at the intersection, unsure of what to do next. "Over there, to the left," Bryan whispered to her. "I think I see a fire down by the water. Turn here."

Black as the car was, it was visible in the faint light coming from a bonfire at a lake access point to the right and down the hill at the water's edge. Something was hanging from a tree near the fire. The three of them could make out people standing around in what appeared to be hooded robes.

"What the heck are they doing?" Rachel whispered urgently.

"They aren't on no holiday picnic, that's sure!" Bryan said. A sudden realization dawned on all three of them at the same time as the thing on the tree swayed.

Suddenly, Kenneth did the unthinkable as far as Rachel was concerned. He stood up in the back seat to see better and yelled at the group of people at the bonfire. "Hey, you morons! The park's closed!"

Bryan grabbed Kenneth and Rachel stepped on the gas. Only they were going the wrong way! They had to drive around the loop or turn around to get out of the park. They would be forced to pass the same group of people to leave.

“Shut up!” Bryan hissed at Kenneth. “Those are Satanists!”

“So? Let’s go kick their ass!”

“Oh, my God! Ken, stuff it! We’re getting the hell out of here!” Rachel said. She was scared. As the Firebird roared into the parking lot at the swimming area, Rachel cut the wheel, braked, hit the gas, and counter steered to spin the car, straightened it out, and braked the car to a sliding stop. She barely maintained control.

“The other way is blocked!” she yelled. “We have to go back out the way we came in!” A temporary concrete barrier stretched across the drive access. On it hung a yellow caution sign that said “Construction Zone.” Rachel turned her lights back on so she could see better.

“Well, punch it!” Bryan yelled back. He braced himself with one hand on the dashboard and gripped the seat with the other. Kenneth cursed in the back seat as he was whipped around. Rachel didn’t pause to look and see if he was ok. She stomped the gas again and headed for the park exit with her engine thundering in response.

When they got halfway to their goal of leaving the park, they found their way blocked again. Several indistinguishable figures in hooded robes ranged across the pavement. When the car neared them, they moved to surround the intruders.

“Go! Drive on. They’ll move!” Bryan told her urgently. In the glow of the headlights, it looked like about a dozen people blocked them. At least one or two men in street clothes rather than robes held baseball bats.

In a split second of panicked indecision, Rachel slowed the car. One long muscled arm reached out and grabbed for her and the steering wheel. Simultaneously, another robed figure jumped, leaned over the car, and tried to grab Kenneth.

Kenneth gained an angle where he could hit the man grabbing for him and furiously punched him in the face. Rachel screamed. Bryan grabbed for Rachel as her attacker attempted to pull her out of the car. Bryan cursed him roundly and applied a finger lock to the other man’s hands until he released her. In mere moments Bryan was having problems of his own as hands also grabbed for him.

"They're going to kill us!" Rachel cried. "I can't get the car through them!"

"Like hell, you can't! When they're clear, Rachel, drive!" Kenneth's ire found an attacking target, and the fight was on! With one hand braced on the door, Kenneth exited the car up and over with a flying sidekick. Something crunched under his foot when it connected with his opponent's chest. As the man fell back, he knocked into two more who also fell. Enough space was produced that Kenneth kicked his way free. Dancing backward in a boneless bounce, he dared them to come after him.

"Well? Come on! Bring it, you mutha-f...s!" Kenneth taunted them. Sparing a moment of attention, he called to his friend. "Bryan!"

"Got your back!" Bryan saw Kenneth's purpose to clear their path. He also rolled over the side of the convertible car.

Several of them came after Kenneth. A feral grin crossed his face when he saw them jumble together with the apparent intent to dog-pile him. He didn't ask for this fight, but he was damn sure going to finish it! He intended for the three of them to get out of here in one piece! In the meantime, if these other guys wanted a fight, he was more than willing to oblige.

The wind whistled off a swinging baseball bat aimed at Kenneth's head. He ducked and grinned wider as he came up under the swinging bat and grabbed the man's hands, and twisted him down in a painful arm lock. When his robed companions tried to pile on them, the man couldn't avoid being used as a human shield. Kenneth slung him around as the man yelled in helpless fury and tripped up his buddies. The baseball bat also then belonged to Kenneth. He wielded it to good effect.

Bryan, in the meantime, dealt his own damage to their attackers. He took down four with quick strikes and foot sweeps. Bryan also realized the advantage of their enemies coming at them all at once and made it work for him.

Bryan looked up to realize Rachel was being attacked again. She struggled with the man who attempted to pull her out of the car a second time.

Desperate to find something, anything she might use as a weapon as she tried to fight him off, Rachel's hand lit on a cold unopened Coke can. She grabbed it up and slammed it into the man's face. She hit him twice, hard enough that the can exploded in his face the second time. Sputtering, he let go of her and staggered back. What Rachel didn't notice was that the man had grabbed her purse. He dropped it as he yelled and attempted to

wipe the stinging drink out of his eyes. Bryan grinned and dragged his attention back to his attackers.

Bryan tussled with another robed figure who also wore some kind of furry animal pelt. This man was more muscular and taller than the others. The animal skin made him look even larger. Unlike the others, however, this man evidenced some knowledge of fighting. Bryan threw a punch and a kick which was neatly blocked. The return punch was hard enough to knock Bryan off his feet.

“Son of a...!” Bryan wiped his bleeding mouth, and he saw teeth flash in a feral smile.

Mocking laughter joined jeers and catcalls from onlookers. “Get ‘em, Nash!” a deep voice called out.

“Skinwalker will take care of these guys, and we’ll eat well for days! Don’t worry. This one’s blood will sweeten my wine,” a heavily accented male voice added. The speaker’s words dropped like a warning beacon in the stark shadows nearby as Bryan paused, trying to get his bearings.

Bryan struggled dizzily to his feet. Crouching in a low stance, he readied himself for the next assault. Bryan was on the defensive and losing ground. The giggling maniacal laughter from his opponent made him feel like he was toying with him. Bryan got hit again but kept his feet. Suddenly, Kenneth was there too.

“Bryan, get in the car and help Rachel! I’ll deal with this guy, and we can get out of here!”

Barely able to see straight, Bryan stumbled back to the car. He pulled Rachel down in the seat to shield her.

“As soon as I tell you to,” Bryan whispered to his friend, “you put it in gear and hit the gas!”

Rachel nodded in acknowledgment. She avoided whimpering in fear by sheer strength of will.

“Where’s Ken? We can’t leave him!” she whispered urgently.

“He’ll be here in a minute!” Bryan replied. He watched the scene unfold and didn’t feel as confident as he sounded for Rachel’s benefit.

The combatants were directly in front of the car lit by the headlights. The rest of the cultists still standing stayed back. They didn’t want more, Bryan figured. But the tall one was a different story. In the light, the pelt hanging off the man’s head looked like a cougar with its eyes and face in a permanent snarling expression.

“Freaky!” Bryan exclaimed.

Kenneth's large opponent was lightning-quick. His first strike landed a glancing blow as Kenneth dodged. He drove in with purpose and knocked the teen off his feet. A near miss by a heavily booted foot aimed at his face told Kenneth this man was tougher.

Kenneth rolled away to his feet and tried a foot sweep as the other man came for him again. It was neatly blocked. Kenneth circled, trying to take the man's measure. He wasn't in the mood to play around, and he still needed to get this guy away from the car. Decisively, he lunged forward with a palm strike to the sternum, or where he thought the sternum should be. Following up with an elbow strike to the throat, Kenneth fully expected the big guy to go down. Any normal person would go down with at least a crushed trachea.

"What the f...?" There was no reaction. The big man was still on his feet and grabbing at Kenneth. Finally, the man spoke with an eerily guttural voice that sounded like a mountain lion screaming. Unintelligible and threatening as the words were, that wasn't why Kenneth blanched. He blinked as the darkness thickened around him. He could no longer see anything.

"Holy shit!" Bryan exclaimed from the car as everything around Kenneth went black. Even with the headlights shining on the two, Kenneth simply disappeared. "We've gotta get out of here!" Bryan exclaimed. "We're in way over our head!"

Inside the aura of darkness, Kenneth was beginning to agree. Unsure, but determined not to go down easy, he blocked two punches and connected with a kick of his own. He was grateful he'd practiced blindfolded. What had been for fun before was now in deadly earnest as Kenneth fought, utterly blind. This wasn't supposed to be possible! Finally, the big man landed a blow to the side of Kenneth's head, which knocked him down again.

Was he dizzy? At least he could see again, he thought as he rolled again to his feet. Confused, he struck at what he thought was his opponent, and hit empty air. The big man seemed to be everywhere at once. Kenneth was hardly hitting anything while several blows gave him what he knew would become convincing bruises.

"Ken!" Bryan shouted. "Just come on, get in the car!" He eyed the other cultists who appeared emboldened by the big man's success. Several were moving toward them again, albeit more slowly.

Kenneth looked away toward the car and discovered that his peripheral vision was more accurate. He could see his opponent better. He changed tactics. Crouching low, Kenneth went in close and underneath, exploding upward. The big man was finally knocked off his feet with physics on Kenneth's side. Kenneth ran to the car and vaulted over the side into the back seat with that opening.

As soon as Kenneth was in, Rachel threw the car into gear and punched the gas. They roared through the exit of Roane County Park about the same time as a half dozen sheriff and local police cars arrived.

"The cops!" Rachel cried. "We're safe now! Hey, look, they're pulling us over!" Rachel looked in her rearview mirror. Blue lights flashed behind them. "I don't think I've ever been happier to see these guys!"

"I dunno," Bryan told her when she stopped. "They saw us leaving, and we know there's somebody dead back there."

"Whoever these people are, I don't think we've heard the last of trouble," Kenneth said. He tried to sound casual with little success.

"I hope you're wrong!" Bryan looked around at him. "But I have a bad feeling, and I'm not usually wrong about those." Bryan watched the silhouette of the officer approach them from behind. "Maybe we can talk our way out of this."

A moment later, the officer turned on a blindingly bright mag light. He shone the flashlight around the car and into each person's squinting face. "Let me see your hands," he demanded. His other hand was on his sidearm.

None of them had a weapon that he could see, but the officer noted Kenneth's disheveled state and bloodied mouth. "What in the hell happened to you?"

Rachel was stunned for a moment. Bryan was right, she realized. They were probably going to get blamed for whatever happened. Yet, there was nothing to be gained by lying. She was frightened again and tried to stutter out an answer. Bryan beat her to it. Kenneth didn't try to say anything. He didn't trust the Roane County cops.

"Look, officer," Bryan began. "We were out driving around enjoying the evening. The park gate was open, and we dropped in to talk and look at the water. We got attacked while we were in there, and we were trying to get away."

"Do you know your assailant?" the officer asked.

"No, sir!" Bryan shook his head for emphasis.

"Have any of you been drinking? Are there any open containers in the car? Do you have any drugs?" The officer shone his light around the seats and looked in the floorboards. They appeared clean aside from used candy wrappers, empty soda cans, and a coffee cup.

"No, sir!" Bryan said again. "We've only had coffee and soft drinks."

"Give me your license and registration." The officer shone the light onto Rachel's lap.

"Sure, officer," Rachel answered. "Just give me a moment to get it. My registration's in the glove box. Bryan, do you mind pulling it out? I'll get my license." She groped around for her purse. Bryan found her registration, but Rachel could not understand where her purse went. She looked at her companions in dismay. "Guys, my wallet is gone, along with my I.D."

Bryan whistled through his teeth. Kenneth was more direct. "Ah wtf!" he said, grimaced, and looked at the floor. "I bet that asshole grabbed it when he was after you."

"Now what?" Rachel asked them. She looked at the officer and raised her hands helplessly. "My purse has been stolen, along with my driver's license."

Static and voices crackled over the radio as the officer considered. "Stay right here. Don't move," he told them and walked back to his patrol car. They could hear him talking for several minutes. They waited nervously. Rachel could see another set of blue lights flashing on a second patrol car that pulled in behind them. A couple of minutes later, the officer returned. An ambulance whizzed by also flashing lights and a siren. Moments later, another followed.

"What is your name?" he asked her.

"I'm Rachel Cox," she answered.

"Well, your plates check out to that name. I believe they found your purse back there in the park. It was down by the river. There's also a dead body and a serious injury." He said with a stern note in his deep voice. "Can you tell me anything about that?"

"No, not really," Rachel answered. "We weren't doing anything, and these people just attacked us. It looked like something was hanging from a tree, but we weren't sticking around to find out."

He gave Rachel a pointed look and glanced at her companions. He looked pointedly at Bryan. "Are you Bryan Crawley with the Roane Volunteer Fire Department?"

“Yes, I am, officer,” Bryan answered. He searched his memory but didn’t think he knew this particular officer. How did this guy know him? *Maybe one of the other officers identified us,* he thought.

“Let me see your I.D.,” the officer requested.

He glanced at Bryan’s license when it was produced for him and nodded. “I’m going to have to ask you to come down to the jail. The detective will want to ask you some questions. Officer Stanley is going to meet us there.” The officer turned his flashlight off and snapped his gun holster. “Go directly there and don’t deviate. I’ll be following you. Got it?”

“Yes, officer.” Rachel nodded. She waited a few moments and slowly pulled her car tiredly back onto East 70. Rachel found herself ready to lie down now that the adrenaline rush was over. *Somewhere nice and safe,* she thought. She hit the speed limit at 45 through Midtown and headed for Kingston and the county jail.

“Not what I had in mind for an end to my day,” Bryan muttered.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Kenneth assured him. “It isn’t over yet!”



11

DARK ATTRACTION

“**D**o you three know how lucky you are?” Grim-faced and sipping on a cup of coffee, the Roane County Sheriff sat on the opposite side of a large wooden desk.

Sheriff Wilson had received that late-night phone call he always dreaded. Still, he felt like he needed to handle this one himself. Though his chief investigator was perfectly capable, he didn’t want to explain to Roane County voters why he wasn’t on top of things.

The jail was a small brick and white building on the corner just behind the new county courthouse. Chain link fencing and razor wire surrounded a small grassy compound to the side of the building that housed the jail. Its front opened up practically right onto the sidewalk bordering Race Street. Rachel’s car sat parallel parked near the front door.

After being escorted to the sheriff’s office, the three friends were seated across from a very unhappy law enforcement official. When they only looked at one another instead of answering his question, he sighed. Sheriff Wilson set his coffee down and ran his hands through his hair. A stack of paper on his desk drew his attention. The paperwork on this was going to take hours. He’d rather avoid adding to the workload by arresting these kids. He was inclined to believe their story.

“Well, let me tell you how lucky you are,” Sheriff Wilson told them earnestly. He folded his hands on his desk and looked them each in the eye. “You are lucky that I don’t throw all three of you under this jail. For starters, you were trespassing on county property.” He held his hand up to forestall comment as Bryan sucked in his breath to defend their actions. “In this case, I’m not going to charge you with such a minor offense when we have more serious things to discuss. I need your cooperation,” he said.

Bryan spoke up. “We’re witnesses.”

Kenneth shook his head as he listened instead of talking. Rachel still looked concerned.

"Right," Sheriff Wilson agreed. "You are also lucky that Officer Stanley saw the three of you this evening. To some extent, that backs up your story of 'just happening' on the crime scene. You'd have had time for murder, but given the time frame, I don't think you were involved."

Rachel relaxed for the first time that evening. He believed them! She shuddered at the thought of those crazy people. Hopefully, they were quit of them! Just then, the door opened, and Officer Diane Stanley entered.

Diane was stoically trying not to be sick. When the call to help the deputies finally came earlier in the evening, she arrived at the park fairly quickly. What she saw at the water's edge got to her as it had evidently gotten to her fellow officers.

She saw the look of incredulous shock she knew was on her own face mirrored in theirs. To think that the three young people she'd seen earlier were involved in the occult activity and bloodshed they'd found didn't make sense. She made sure to tell the other officers as much. Diane was as interested as the rest in getting to the bottom of what *did* happen.

"Officer Stanley, thank you for joining us." Sheriff Wilson greeted her.

"My pleasure, sheriff. Hope I can be of assistance," she nodded.

"You were on the scene at the park and were involved in the arrests. You made a statement saying you saw these three in town just before then, is that correct?" he asked Diane.

"Yes, Sheriff Wilson. 'Bout the same time the original call came in to stand by while deputies investigated a disturbance, I saw these folks at the gas station downtown and spoke to 'em. 'Less they can be in two places at once, I don't see how they could be held responsible for what we found at the park."

"And yet, they were also seen leaving the scene," Sheriff Wilson noted.

"Yes, that is problematic. I would like to hear from these folks what happened between when I spoke to them at the Rocky Top and when Deputy McAllister pulled 'em over." She looked pointedly at Kenneth, who was still somewhat disheveled. He took that as an invitation. As little as he trusted any of the local officers, he'd known Diane to be fair-minded.

“Look, all I know...” Kenneth paused. “Is that we got caught up in some weird shit tonight that we didn’t have anything to do with.”

“Can you elaborate on that Mr. DeVault?” Sheriff Wilson pressed. “I have a dead body. I need more than that from you. What were you three doing this evening before Officer Stanley saw you, and tell me again while she’s present what happened after.”

“The three of us were at my house most of the afternoon with a bunch of other people having pizza and playing board games,” Kenneth told them. He looked at both the sheriff and Diane. They were listening intently, so he went on. “When the party broke up, we decided to go riding around, not bothering anybody. We were just talking, you know?”

“You have people who can support that statement?” Sheriff Wilson asked.

When Kenneth nodded agreement, the sheriff gestured for him to continue. “Sure, I understand. Go on,” Sheriff Wilson encouraged him. “And?”

“So we stopped for drinks at the Rocky Top, where we saw Officer Stanley. Later we cruised through Midtown, and since the gate was open at the park, we went in down the hill to the left past the bathrooms. We were sitting around talking, and we heard somebody screaming up over the hill. Instead of leaving, we went to see if somebody needed help.”

“What did you see?” Diane prompted. “We need to know what you witnessed, so we have evidence when the arrests go to court,” Diane told them. “I need to hear from you first hand.” Diane knew that Bryan’s first instinct would be to help someone in distress. She’d known him as an emergency responder and could see it. Her gut told her that they were telling the truth. Her glance at the sheriff told her he thought the same.

“We saw a bunch of crazy people dancing around a fire!” Rachel interrupted. She was still freaking out, and her explanation was short and high-pitched as she re-lived the experience. “Something, or somebody, was hanging from a tree. I got scared, and we tried to leave. But, to leave, we had to drive past them. When we tried to get out of there, they surrounded my car so that I couldn’t go anywhere!”

“So, what did you do then?” Diane asked her.

“Well, they were trying to grab us, so we had to fight. We thought they were going to kill us!” Rachel told them.

"And your car is a convertible, so that's not so far-fetched." Diane declared. She looked at Kenneth. "And you got scuffed up in the process, I see. After I told you no more fightin'." She grinned a little to take the sting out of her words. "Seriously though, from what I saw out there, yo' lucky to get away alive," she told them. She looked at Sheriff Wilson and raised an eyebrow.

"Still, I have to ask this question," Sheriff Wilson said pointedly. "According to Officer Stanley here, you're a martial arts expert... did you, or did you not, kill or otherwise injure anyone at the park this evening?"

"No, sir!" Kenneth answered. "Or at least not intentionally, I didn't! I hit a couple of them pretty hard, trying to get them away from the car so that we could leave. That's all."

"I see." Sheriff Wilson tapped the stack of papers under his hand. "I have someone in the hospital with two broken ribs and a cracked sternum, but it appears he'll live. If what you say is true, and I am inclined to believe you, it was self-defense." He considered a moment longer and then made up his mind.

"I am not going to place charges on you three. But, stay available in case there are more questions. You're also probably going to be subpoenaed when these jokers are prosecuted, so prepare yourselves for that."

"Thank you, sir!" Rachel was genuinely grateful. She wanted this whole thing to be over as soon as possible.

"Now, before you leave, I'm going to have Officer Stanley here take a written statement from each of you. She'll show you what you need to fill out."

Sheriff Wilson waved them away and watched them walk out, following Officer Stanley. He put his head in his hands and rubbed his face. It was going to be a long night with more paperwork than he cared to write. It was time to turn his attention to the perpetrators. He rose to join the investigator in interrogating the man they believed might be the murderous gang leader. Another stack of papers went with him.



12

EASTER BONNETS AND BLOODLUST

Carly Wells was stuck in a dream from which she couldn't wake. Every image was vivid and burned in her mind, seeming real as a memory. At first, it was an ordinary twelve-year-old girl's dream.

Carly rode her bicycle in the cul-de-sac part of the street while the neighbor kids played kickball. A near hit from the ball made her dodge to keep from being knocked off her bike. Carly rolled downhill with her feet off the pedals and the wind in her hair for fun. Storm clouds rolled slowly across the sky.

In her vision, Carly became an eagle. Warm, airy thermals lifted her spirit high up in the sky. The feeling of flight carried her majestically across the landscape. Everything was in bright colors. Despite her happy free feeling Carly looked down and noticed places of dark shadow below. She pondered the reason for those dark places.

Soon, Carly-the-eagle faltered, and she struggled in her dream. The clouds spawned a tornado. Winds that a moment before had been uplifting and joyful were now dark with foreboding and turmoil. The eagle searched for a place to land. Flying low, she spotted a black panther watching. Nearby, she saw a wolf-like dog, but its attention was intent on something distant on the ground.

Rather than flee, Carly circled the cat, which she knew somehow was her sister. Arching her back and back winging, she started to land. When her feet touched the ground, everything around her changed. The last thing she saw before it did was a pair of intense blue-white eyes in a grayish canine face staring at her.

"Who are you?" It asked. Carly tried to answer with her name but couldn't. Everything blurred as the scene shifted and whirled.

It was hot and stuffy inside the sack. Carly-Ingegerd was terrified. Who was doing this to her and why? Dinner clean-up after the last of the warriors had gone Viking was near finished. A servant was supposed to fetch water and failed to return. Ingegerd went looking for them. Rough hands grabbed the woman from behind, and this wrap was thrown over her head. Her breath came hard, and she fought for air through the cloth. Ingegerd's father Harald would be furious! Whoever this was had better let her go, or they would wish they had never been born! One did not do this to the daughter of the king! The Giant of Norway did not take insults to his family lightly!

Princess or not, she was bundled across the back of a horse like a sack of potatoes. By the time she was unceremoniously dropped on a hard surface in this stifling heat, she was thoroughly angry. By Odin, just let me get my hands on these people! They will find out what a Viking woman is made of! I swear, I'll kill them myself!

Everything was quiet for a time. Gagged and helpless, Ingegerd wanted to scream out. Muffled cries came to her ears. It sounded like her son. The bonds on her wrists were tight. No amount of struggle loosed them. The sound of a forge rose around her. Yes, she could hear metal striking metal! Ingegerd strained to hear more. Where was she?

After what seemed an eternity, the heavy leather wrap was pulled off her, though Ingegerd stayed mostly bound. She was dragged closer to the fire. The princess couldn't move, but at least she could see! But what she saw horrified her. Her babies lay dead around her! Her son and her daughter lay in a pool of blood. Her children's entrails were exposed, their mouths open with their last scream and their faces devoid of their bright precious lives. No! No! No! Gods, why!

Ingegerd watched helplessly as the monster she had once known as a kinsman brutally murdered two more women, young brides of cousins gone with the king. Tears streamed down her face. How could he do this! She wished she could shrink away as he turned his attention to her.

"Ingegerd, my red-haired beauty," Ulfr purred. "I shall have you at last!" He raped and beat her until she was barely conscious. Oh, the hate she felt! What cowardice to take her while she was bound! How dare he take her children from her!

Her heart cried out for revenge as the tears came, and she gave in to her grief. Her usually silky red hair was tangled with dirt and mingled with her tears. Ulfr raped her once again as she lay helpless to save herself or anyone else she cared about. In her soul, a black rage begged to break free.

At last, it was over. The monster was attacked and captured. But, Princess Ingegerd raged; nothing could restore to her what she had lost. Her rescuers released the bonds on her wrists, and the bodies were brought into the sunlight. Ingegerd sat and mourned over her dead children for hours, wondering why she lived while they did not.

Carly woke confused about where she was. Then her bedroom came into focus. The gray light filtering through her curtains told her it was early morning. The effects of the powerful dream lingered as she shivered with reaction under her blankets.

Many dreams had woken her lately. Some of them were incredibly vivid. Even more disturbing, a couple of minor things she'd dreamed came true. It gave her a significant case of *déjà-vu*.

Loud voices in the other part of the house were a sign that it was time to get up and start her day, but she delayed. Carly resolved to talk about the odd dream later with her sister. Mary Lou was experiencing similarly strange dreams she knew. They had discussed it before.

"Carly! Breakfast is ready!" A knock came on the frame of her open door. "Rise and shine! We've got to get to church early this morning, so you have to hurry up and eat!" her mom called out.

Less than enthused about moving from her comforting covers, Carly rose anyway. What was so special? She was too old for the Easter egg hunt. Her mother didn't see things that way and wouldn't let her sleep any longer, so she might as well get moving.

After a quick breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, and milk, they were off to the sunrise service in Powell. At least one bright spot in the whole thing, she would get to see her sister. She was coming with their grandparents. Carly couldn't understand why her older sister had been kicked out and sent to live with somebody else. Even if it was their grandparents, it didn't seem right.

The air was damp and almost downright chilly when they made their way to the outdoor pavilion. Reverend Richardson was already there at the shelter, waiting for his congregation's arrival. Cheerfully, he greeted each person by name when they arrived. Carly shivered as the breeze seemed to go straight up her skirt. She found it worse in the shade of the pavilion.

"Brrrrr. Mom, I'm cold!" Carly complained.

"Why didn't you grab your jacket out of the car?" Carly's dad asked her.

"Cuz, I didn't think it was going to be this cold. It seemed warmer at the house. Can I go get it?"

"Yeah, but hurry up," her dad said. "Make sure you're back before they start." He smiled an awkward smile at the couple who came to sit next to them.

"I will! Oh, hey, look! Grandma and Grandpa are here, and so is Mary Lou." Carly ran and skipped back down the gravel path toward the parking area.

"Hello! How are you doing? Is this seat taken?" A rather large woman with a huge Easter corsage tried to squeeze in on the bench next to Carly's parents. They were forced to scoot over to make room.

"Nah, come right on in. We'll make room." Carly's dad ensured enough room was left on the bench for his daughters and sighed inwardly. Holidays were about the only time of year he could be forced to attend church. Since he was here, he determined to make the best of it. With one eye on his girls coming up the path, he pasted a smile on his face and looked around.

The small crowd of worshippers was as bright as the April morning sunshine. Ladies and little girls were crisp in their new Sunday best with a riot of pastel colors, white gloves, and beribboned hats.

A bit more conservative, the men mostly wore dark suits. Some had flowers pinned to their lapel. Gradually the wooden benches filled up, and new arrivals were greeted by those already seated.

The Reverend started to speak when the steady flow of people had stopped, and the pavilion benches were full. His deep voice droned on. At times he uplifted his listeners, and several giggles came from various points in the crowd. It was a welcome difference for Carly after her disturbing dreams of the night before. Those dreams seemed somehow distant in the bright morning sunshine.

After services were over, the younger children enjoyed a traditional egg hunt while a potluck appeared on several folding tables. Some adults were standing around chattering with Bibles in hand, waiting for the food. Instead of joining them, the two sisters went for a walk in the Bells Campground graveyard. A handful of other people attending the sunrise service also walked about carrying flowers for various grave-sites.

Both girls felt a wrongness they couldn't identify. It seemed to have nothing to do with their surroundings. Indeed, where they walked was more peaceful than the unspoken inner turmoil facing them both. Rather than deal with everything else bothering her, Mary Lou told her little sister Carly about her friends' encounter with what they thought were Satanists.

"Are you serious?" Carly was wide-eyed. "They saw somebody kill someone?"

"Not exactly," Mary Lou told her. "It was more that they accidentally saw something after the people had already done it."

"And they got chased out of the park. You said the police stopped them. Did they get arrested?" Carly wanted to know.

"No, not according to Ken. They didn't," Mary Lou answered.

"Well, that's something at least." Carly considered. "So tell me, why were they at the park after dark in the first place? Did their mom know they were sneaking around where they don't belong?"

Mary Lou laughed. "Rachel and Bryan aren't kids to be ordered around Carly, and Ken pretty much does what he does. Besides, they weren't hurting anything. I don't see anything wrong with going where we want if we aren't bothering anybody."

"Yes, and isn't that about the same thing that got YOU in trouble?" Carly wasn't asking, even though she phrased her response as a question. She pointed out what she saw as the obvious.

"Yeah, so? I still don't think I did anything wrong! The school principal wasted his time making me sit in the office at lunch for six weeks my freshman year. I don't feel a bit ashamed of myself. It was my lunchtime, and everybody else was going off school property. Why shouldn't I go swimming in the lake across the street at the park?" Mary Lou responded.

Carly shook her head. "You just don't get it, do you? You're supposed to be the older, wiser one!"

"What?" Mary Lou looked at her younger sister.

Mary Lou Wells

“They were being nice letting everyone go off school grounds to *eat* dummy! They are responsible for all the students. When you did that, you messed up. Now, Roane County High will probably never let anyone go off campus to eat lunch ever again!”

“Well, they did change their policy after that,” Mary Lou conceded. “But it’s still stupid.”

“Huh, maybe so, but you’re only seeing things from your side, not theirs,” Carly admonished her sister.

Mary Lou shrugged. “Well, anyway, that isn’t the point, and you are changing the subject. Ken, Rachel, and Bryan were there regardless of whether or not they should have been, and they saw some crap. I hope it’s an isolated incident. Since the police arrested the murderers, maybe it will stop any more of it from happening.”

“Possibly, if they got the person who is really behind it, but what if they didn’t?” Carly mused. “I’ve heard on TV that Roane County has a lot of unsolved murder cases. Then again, someone doing stuff like this for the fun of it could have other effects.”

“What do you mean?” Mary Lou asked.

“Dad’s picked up a book here and there. The other day, I read about the collective unconscious, and something called the Akashic record. It’s like, hmm, how to describe it, consider it like a well. Instead of water, you put in everything people have ever known and learned, and each person can subconsciously dip up the information. They say you can especially do that when you’re asleep by astral travel.”

“We’ve already talked about the astral planes and otherworld, but tell me where you’re going with this, Sis?” Mary Lou said.

“Well, it occurs to me that if there’s a lot of bad stuff going on wouldn’t that affect the collective unconscious too? I mean, what about all these weird dreams we’ve both been having? Why would we both have pretty much the same dreams unless something else is happening?”

“That’s a good question.” As Mary Lou thought about it, goosebumps rose on her arms that had nothing to do with the cool air. “I take it you had another dream.”

“Last night,” Carly nodded. “I dreamed about this guy that killed some kids and attacked me. It was horribly vivid. It was like I was there. It seems like an odd coincidence since your friends ran into a bunch of cult killers, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Mary Lou stopped to think for a moment. “You know? I have an idea. Why don’t we start writing this stuff down

in a notebook? If we write down our dreams before we forget and put a date on them, it will be easier to compare.”

“Like a dream journal?” Carly nodded. “That’s a good idea, actually.”

Mary Lou looked up. Almost without realizing it, they had made a complete circuit of the grounds. They were nearly back where they started. A line of people eagerly holding plates ended at a table heaped with dishes and steaming pots. “Hey, it looks like the food’s ready. I’m starving.”

“Mmm, yum! Smell that! I smell chocolate!” Carly closed her eyes and sniffed. She worked her mouth to keep from drooling.

“You girls gonna join us? Better come get it before it’s all gone!” The sisters’ aunt called to them with a bright smile.

“Let’s eat!” Carly said, eyeing the line of hungry people. “Since I’ll be going to your house all week for Easter break, we can talk about stuff later.”

The two girls insinuated themselves in line with their family. Their aunt handed them each a plate, and they filled them with a variety of home-cooked salads and casseroles. Balancing their plate and cup carefully, they followed the adults to a nearby picnic table.

For several minutes everyone ate instead of talking. Finally, the girls’ aunt spoke up. “So! Mary Lou, have you got a date for your Senior Prom yet?” She smiled and waved a clear plastic fork around to emphasize her question.

Mary Lou barely managed to keep from choking on a reply. To steady herself, she took a sip of her drink. The soda’s carbonation burned all the way down to her stomach. It gave her an excuse to pause. “Nobody has asked me to the Prom,” she finally replied. To her relief, her voice sounded casual.

“Well, what’s the matter with them boys? Isn’t the Prom sometime around the end of this month?” Their aunt showed no sign of dropping the subject. She shoveled more bites in but kept looking at her niece.

“I don’t have a boyfriend, and besides, I don’t have anything to wear,” Mary Lou told her and looked around the table.

“We can get you a dress. That’s not a problem,” her grandmother spoke up. She was rising from her seat. “I don’t know about y’all, but I’m for dessert!” She walked off with her plate in hand.

“You don’t have a boyfriend? So what? Just ask somebody to take you!” her aunt declared.

Mary Lou Wells

“Who, me?” Mary Lou nearly squeaked. “It doesn’t work that way!”

“Well, why not? This is modern times, and women are emancipated. It’s perfectly acceptable for a woman to ask a man out these days.”

Mary Lou felt very on the spot. What could she say? She didn’t imagine she’d be brave enough to do what they were suggesting.

“I’ll think about it,” Mary Lou said and was glad the conversation turned to a different subject.

The trouble is, I really want to go to the dance. I love music and dancing. Her thoughts turned sad. She wasn’t about to let anyone here know how isolated she was at school even though things had improved with less bullying. Any show of weakness always ended up with her getting hurt by those around her, especially her family.

I’m sure Grandmother is right when she says not to wear my heart on my sleeve. If only I could understand what that means.

Did it mean that she wasn’t supposed to be hurt when people called her names and made rude gestures, or that she would be better off not wanting to be loved by her own family members who did nothing but criticize, beat or manipulate and rape her? Maybe she wasn’t supposed to have emotions at all.

I’m too damn sensitive, I guess, but God, I need help. I don’t know how to change things or who to talk to. It feels like I’m slowly dying inside.

She mused in silence while her grandmother sat back down. Mary Lou realized Carly was looking at her sideways out of the corner of her eye. Carly was sensitive too, and she was catching her sister’s mood change.

The younger girl was a little puzzled by the sudden withdrawal. Mary Lou smiled, but Carly wasn’t fooled. Her sister’s smile only touched her lips. When she was really happy, her whole face lit up.

Carly searched for something to distract her sister from her melancholy. Her eyes lit on the potato salad.

With an impish expression, Carly dipped her finger in the potato salad. Carly giggled at Mary Lou’s shocked reaction to having a glop right on the end of her nose.

“Carly! Behave yourself!” her dad said sternly.

Mary Lou sat back, eyes wide and hands up in confusion. “Wha..? What was that for?” she demanded. “Ewww! I hate

potato salad!” She wiped her face with her hand. Then she smeared it on Carly’s arm. Carly wiped it off laughing and tried to smear it back on her sister.

When Mary Lou jumped to avoid getting smeared again, disaster struck. Her hand hit Carly’s drink, which knocked it over into their dad’s plate. When he jumped, he hit the table. Two more cups spilled everywhere, making more diners jump up to avoid the liquid sloshing everywhere. Only Grandma avoided a mess. She’d seen it coming and calmly picked up both her plate and her drink. Chocolate cake in hand, she stood back. With a heroic effort, she managed not to laugh.

“Ohhh!” Their mom yelled as iced tea landed on her lap. She helplessly flapped her hands in distress, her face a picture of shock.

“Girls. Girls! Don’t play at the table!” their aunt said as she wiped her dripping hands.

“Carly, Mary Lou! Get away from the table now!” Their dad was furious. “That was uncalled for! Just look at what you’ve done!”

Their dad turned on them full of wrath. His hand was raised to backhand his oldest daughter. Mary Lou cringed, seeing what was coming.

Their grandmother, mindful of all the people around them watching events unfold, quickly stepped in. “It’s alright. They’re just kids,” her tone was soothing. “Kids don’t always think about things before they do them. We’ll just clean it up, and I’ll go ahead and take them home with me this afternoon. That way, you won’t have to bring Carly all the way out to Harriman if you don’t want to make the drive.”

Both girls were grateful for the rescue. “Grandma, can we get some dessert before we go?” Carly asked meekly. “I want some chocolate cake.”

“After you help clean up the table and the mess you caused you can,” their grandmother answered.

Grandma turned to their father and softened her voice so it wouldn’t carry. “Bill, I know you get aggravated with the kids, but I’ve told you before you have to watch what you do in public! We don’t want to look bad in front of people,” she admonished him while he nodded. “Now, help your wife. She needs you over there.”

Grandma went to help her granddaughters. Finally, they got everything cleaned up, and the girls finished eating. Several minutes were spent on goodbyes with the other churchgoers, and

then Carly left with her sister to go to their grandparents' lake house.



APRIL 8, 1985, MONDAY EVENING

Few remnants of yellow tape still hung on trees the day after Easter. These fluttered in the constant light breeze coming off of the lake. Investigators were finished with the crime scene and had it cleaned from the horrific murder scene two days before.

Roane County Park was open and again being visited by people eager to enjoy time in the spring sunshine. The lake access simply looked as if it had been visited by fishermen coming ashore to butcher their catch. Those who hadn't read the newspaper were none the wiser.

For other residents not directly impacted, it was just another odd story. People had been disappearing for years. As long as it wasn't anyone they knew, they barely noticed.

A handful of walkers used the winding trail along the lake edge of the huge park near the shelters, and a few families with children enjoyed the playgrounds or fed the ducks.

Few casual users of the park noticed the lone man wandering through the woods near the lake access. If they did, they pegged him as a drifter. The man's gray hair was cut in an 80s mullet. Although his appearance was disheveled and dirty, he wore army green clothing that had years ago belonged to a proud soldier. A large matching knapsack discouraged anyone from approaching him. A little old lady in a big felt hat was the single exception.

Moira Postremo sat in a lounge chair under a nearby tree with a lap full of knitting accompanied by what appeared to be a large white dog snoozing in a pile of last year's leaves. She waved and gazed intently at him over her wire-rimmed frames as he passed by. She saw everything yet said nothing. The man went on with only a nod.

Moira considered him several minutes after he passed. Her eyebrows rose over her glasses when she saw him stop to gasp for breath then loosen his collar. Moira watched him and casually began unraveling part of her knitting.



Elsewhere in the park, another lone man walked. Tyrone had waited for two days while the investigators combed the area. Now that they were gone, he was again drawn to the place almost, but not quite, unwilling. It was like a glowing beacon that made him feel a hunger he couldn't explain and didn't know how to question. Whenever the questions started coming to the surface, the whispers in the back of his mind took over.

As Tyrone approached the scene of the previous murder, he imagined a buzzing in his head. The whispers grew stronger, more agitated. He also saw the old woman in the chair who was nodding off in the sunshine, but his gaze slid past her. He dismissed her out of hand. The hidden knife he carried slipped into his hand in his pocket. Tyrone stopped. For a moment, he was confused about what he was doing. It lasted only an instant. Ulfr's dark soul came bubbling up through Tyrone's feeble attempts to gain control.

Tyrone felt as if he stood back and watched himself from a distance. Ulfr's spirit raged that he could not completely take over Tyrone's body. Ulfr craved the power to break free. He was alive, alive! he shouted in Tyrone's head. It made the teen wince.

Ulfr only had this human tool and the knife that imprisoned him. He resolved to use these to full effect. Here was power, blood magic, the kind Ulfr knew well how to master. If this piece of his soul weren't bound in the blade, he would be licking his lips.

Tyrone was made to kneel quietly, holding the battered blade, surreptitiously, looking out over the water. Ulfr drew in the scattered remnants of pain, fear, and death in the environment. While he was at it, he pulled to himself all the small dark creatures that had been floating around this place and ate them too.

Ulfr wanted to throw his head back and savor the hot feel of blood on his hands once again. He wanted to bathe in it, lick the tangy hot stuff. He would have to settle for the leavings the amateurs had forgotten to pick up. No matter, he cleaned up their mess for them. Ulfr felt almost cognizant and self-aware once again, even imprisoned as he was. Then Tyrone shifted. His eyes lit on a figure sitting half hidden by the bank along the shoreline.

The Tennessee Valley Authority had not finished filling the Watts Bar reservoir, so Patrick Harmon, a Vietnam veteran, had found room to sit on the ground with his back against a washed-

out bank. Patrick felt sure that if he just rested awhile, he'd catch his breath, and the pressure in his chest would ease up. That damn Agent Orange! Since the war, this problem with his breathing and odd aches and pains had plagued him. It had never been this bad before. Patrick figured that hidden here, he wouldn't "bother nobody," as he muttered to himself. It felt safe here. Patrick laid his head back against a tree root and took a rattling breath. It proved to be his last, and his perceived safety was an illusion.

A battered knife came out of seemingly nowhere and plunged deep through Patrick's throat and into his chest cavity. The brave veteran met an inglorious end choking on his own blood.

Ulfr screamed out in silent pleasure as he drank the dying man's essence. It was already black and tainted. It gave him more strength. "Yes! I have found the solution! I can finally break free of this prison!" Ulfr thought madly. "Blood price until it is done!"

With Ulfr completely distracted inside the knife, Tyrone woke from his sleep to realize he was covered in blood and had just killed a man. He let go of the knife and sat back on his heels in shock. Then he leaned over and vomited. When he had lost all contents of his stomach, Tyrone considered. Looking around, he didn't see anyone. If he got rid of the body quickly, no one would know or blame him. He would just walk away and pretend it never happened.

Tyrone's next move was to dispose of the corpse in the river. He half dragged, half rolled the old man into the water just a few feet away. The body floated partly submerged, and the blood disappeared in the lake. Tyrone pushed it out into deep water then let go. At the last moment, for reasons he didn't understand, Tyrone grabbed HIS knife from the body and put it back in his pocket. Without a backward glance, he strolled casually away.

Unseen in the woods of the park, the little old lady Tyrone had dismissed watched him go. With a flash of silver, her scissors cut a thread. Moira considered briefly before taking up another section and starting the weaving once again, knitting the different strands together with a slow smile. A swift current caught the now submerged body. TVA's water release upstream aimed to finally refill the lake



13

THE SHADOW ANGELS

A few days passed, and the weather warmed up to its promise of a pleasant spring. Birds actively built nests. Frogs sang along the banks of the water inlets on each side of the property. The girls were encouraged to spend time outside, and Mary Lou showed Carly where the crawdads came up to the surface to build their holes in the wet ground. They walked in the nearby forest and played ball in the huge yard.

In the golden sunshine, any notion of dark happenings in the outside world seemed far away to the kids. Even though Mary Lou was on her guard constantly and kept her sister away from their grandfather, it couldn't dampen the feeling that the beautiful spring made her more alive. Even though they stayed busy, they both found the time to start their journals. They wrote down what they could remember of their troubling dreams to that point and discussed them when the adults weren't around. Mary Lou also didn't forget her friends. She wanted Carly to meet them.

On Friday, she got the go-ahead from her grandmother to invite her friends over. Late in the afternoon, Bryan's little blue car's engine made a noise amplified by the cavernous interior of the overhung porch. The car, still sporting its red light bar, pulled in and stopped.

"Who is that?" The girls' grandfather got up and looked out. "Did somebody call the fire department?"

"That would be Bryan. He's a volunteer fireman," Mary Lou answered. She was almost too excited about having company to glare at him as she passed by on her way to the door on the screened porch overhanging the drive. "I told him to come on around to the back when he got here." She went out onto the deck and looked down over the second-story railing. "Oh, hey, Ken's with him. Hi, guys!" she shouted. "Give me a minute, and I'll be right down!"

She went back inside and passed her grandfather again, who was rattling the change in his pocket in agitation. His mouth was set in a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Well, go on and invite them in!" he urged. Mary Lou wondered briefly if this hadn't been a mistake. She could see the signs that he wasn't happy and felt a small stab of fear for later.

He was escorting the two boys around in no time, showing them the house. About the time the tour and the bragging had begun to slow Rachel's engine also sounded loud through the open doors and windows. Sierra followed closely behind. They were waved inside and given the grand tour as well. Mary Lou's embarrassment was ignored as she saw the bored looks on her friends' faces. Still, she smiled and bore it. Mary Lou almost missed the odd hard look Sierra gave her when it was over.

"Anything wrong?" Mary Lou asked her.

"No, no everything's fine. It's a lovely house. You guys must be rich," Sierra said.

"Nah, we aren't rich. It's just their retirement place. The money came from two other properties. They sold their other house and their lake cabin they had years ago after property values went up. We built and did everything practically ourselves, so they like to show it off when people come over. He's a carpenter and builds houses," Mary Lou explained.

"I see," Sierra said. She looked slightly angry, but Mary Lou shrugged it off without understanding.

Rachel and the others were already back downstairs. When the two girls finally managed to escape the adults, they found Carly already getting acquainted as they stood in a group talking and staring intently out the door. A huge barge was moving down the river.

"Be careful of the sliding door." The youngest member of the group was saying. "The glass is so clear you can run into it before you realize it's there."

"So you guys, this is my sister Caroline, but we all call her Carly!" Mary Lou called as she bounced down the stairs.

"There must be an interesting story behind that, one," Kenneth said. "Why do they call you that when Caroline is so nice?"

Carly grinned. "It's the name of the street where I live," she laughed. "Carly Lane is so close to Caroline that the other kids on my street started calling me that, and it stuck. It's funny, so I don't mind."

"Well, you're Caroline to me." Kenneth reached out and ruffled the girl's hair. "So, how old are you, kid?"

"I'm twelve, going on thirteen. Five years younger than Mary Lou." Carly beamed. She also felt a stab of surprise. People didn't usually notice her much due to her dynamic older sister. Being respected was a refreshing state of affairs. She decided she liked her sister's friends. She did love her full name even though she had been going by 'Carly' for so long she was used to it. Carly never said anything about her name preference.

Mary Lou giggled. "Speaking of the door, I heard her saying something about it. Did she tell you what she did?"

"Oh, no. You're not!" Carly objected. "Would you please stop bringing that up?"

Her older sister went on with a smile. "She ran right through the door the other day... knocked the whole thing right out of the frame."

Carly covered her face with a groan. "That was embarrassing. And it was your fault!"

The others laughed. Rachel smiled. "If you did it, how's it her fault?"

"She was hollering for me to hurry and come to see the huge waves from the barge! I didn't see the door, so I hit it at a full run."

"But, it wasn't the glass part at least. She hit the sliding screen part so she and the screen door went flying through the air," Mary Lou grinned.

"And she wouldn't stop laughing," Carly grumbled.

"That's because when I realized you weren't hurt, it was funny!" Mary Lou told her. "I was really glad you were ok. Really, I was!"

Carly cast a glare in her sister's direction. "But now there's just glass because the screen door warped when it fell."

"Bet you'll pay attention next time," Bryan said. "Won't you?"

"Yep!" Carly answered. She was still slightly embarrassed. "Can we change the subject now?"

"Sure," Bryan said. "It's a great day. Why don't we go outside? Somebody said something about hanging out on the lake and a picnic?"

"Lead the way... after you," Kenneth told him.

They all filed out behind Bryan past the hanging swing and onto the expanse of a manicured grassy field. Rachel stopped to pet the very fat black and tan beagle that laboriously traile

d behind the group from the porch's shade.

Mary Lou Wells

"We have sandwiches and chips upstairs whenever everybody's hungry," Mary Lou said. "We can go down to the swimming hole for a while first. C'mon, we'll follow the driveway down."

Carly piped up. "Too bad the horse's electric fence is there, or else we could just walk straight down there instead of going around on the driveway," she made a face. "It seems like a pain to have to go all that extra way."

"If we went through the field, we'd get bogged down regardless," Mary Lou answered. "It's very wet down to the cove on the left side when it has rained, and it's full of crawdad holes." Carly already knew, so Mary Lou explained for the others' benefit.

"This place is beautiful," Rachel said as they walked. "You're lucky to live where you can go swimming all the time."

"Yeah, I think so too," Mary Lou told her. "The view from the dock is awesome. It's over there." She pointed to an open space ahead of them where the trees were cleared back from the high bank. On their right, another inlet was surrounded by trees and featured another small dock. "Sometimes we fish over there, or my dad puts the other little boat in the water and ties it in the cove when he wants to go out fishing."

"You have more than one boat?" Sierra asked. Then she saw a large boat secured inside a sizeable U-shaped dock. "Wow, that's huge! Can we go riding in it?"

"Maybe we can. I'll have to ask," Mary Lou said.

"It's even got a ski attachment," Bryan observed. "Do you water ski?"

Mary Lou paused with a chagrined look on her face. "Well, I'm trying to learn," she admitted.

Carly started giggling. It was her turn to rib her sister. "She skis better under the water than on it!" She laughed. "I was on the dock last summer and saw everything! She was out there, and when the boat started going it pulled her under, and she wouldn't let go of the rope! It was funny as all get out!"

"No, it wasn't," Mary Lou said. "Everybody was laughing at me. I was just trying to figure out how to get up on the skis. I think I swallowed the whole darn lake!"

They all laughed together. Carly smiled. "All she had to do was let go, and she'd have been fine."

"Yes, well." Mary Lou huffed. She looked away and out over the azure-colored water. She didn't want them to see her discomfort. It was easier to peruse the view. The lake beautifully

reflected the sky, except where the trees overhung the banks, making it a murky green. A fish jumped at the edge of the shade, making ripples in the cove.

Kenneth spoke up. "You do know that the speed of the boat makes all the difference, right?"

"No, I didn't." She looked at him.

"You were likely pulled under because the driver of the boat started too slow," he told her. "The boat needs to start out steady and increase speed, but not so fast you get pulled off your feet."

"Oh! Ok, so..." Mary Lou started to comment.

"So except for the not letting go part, it wasn't your fault," Kenneth grinned. "Next time that happens, let go, so you don't end up eating lake mud."

"I'll take that under advisement." Mary Lou smiled despite herself. Sierra and Carly laughed. Sierra bent down to pet the dog, which kept bumping the back of Rachel's leg with his cold nose. They both petted him.

"So where are we going, if not here?" Bryan asked. He bounced on the balls of his feet again with barely contained energy.

"Oh, we're going down this way." Carly pointed to their left, where the driveway curved and continued along the bank of the lake. "We can wade out into the water, and it's really nice."

"Nice?" Sierra sounded dubious. "I'd rather swim in a pool than get in the mud in the river."

"Isn't that Sand Island just up the river?" Bryan asked. When Mary Lou silently nodded, he looked at Sierra. "It's probably not that muddy here. There's a lot of sand that washes down in this section of the lake."

"How do you know?" Sierra asked.

"I've been out with the Rescue Squad all up and down through here," Bryan told her. "Where the river widens out, the water doesn't cut as deep. It lets the sand settle out on the bottom."

Sierra looked blank. "But why would there be sand in it in the first place? Does someone dump it in there?"

Kenneth answered the question. "Because the soil and rocks in this area are sandstone. It's in the water. The water erodes them and carries the sand down the river."

"Oh well, that makes plenty of sense," Rachel declared. "Let's go see."

It proved to be the case when the teens arrived at the swimming area. The flattened bank and bottom were light-

colored and covered in solid sand. It looked like a small beach. A wooden picnic table stood behind another small dock under the shelter of several tall trees to the side of the opening. Under a leaning maple tree, a wooden bench seat stood on the opposite side of the sandbank from the picnic table.

"If you take off your shoes at the picnic table, watch for sticker balls," Mary Lou warned them. "They hurt to walk on." The dark brown spiny balls were thick underfoot where they had fallen the previous autumn. Bryan kicked one with his toe. "Those are from a Sweet Gum tree." Bryan looked around. "I think I'll sit on the bench where there aren't any of these."

"I'll join you," Rachel said. "I wonder if the water is cold?"

"It's pretty chilly," Mary Lou answered as she cheerfully kicked her shoes off and waded in over her ankles. "Come on in, the water's fine!" She wiggled her toes in the clean-looking sand and looked across the lake. Playfully, Mary Lou dangled her fingers in the water and splashed droplets toward the bench. They fell far short. She could feel the lake's peace seeping into her until something changed. The peaceful feeling stopped abruptly. Why was she suddenly moody? It felt like a cloud moving over the sun, but it shone brightly as ever. She looked around. No one else seemed to notice anything.

Mary Lou splashed her way over to the small foot dock and sat down with her feet dangling in the chill water. A speed boat went by out in the middle of the lake. She barely heard her friends chatting around her as the gently rolling waves from the boat's wake lulled her into a near trance.

On the bank talking to Carly and Sierra, Kenneth noticed Mary Lou had suddenly gone still and quiet. Why was she always doing that, he wondered? As he watched her out of the corner of his eye, he saw her stand up and stare at something. Bryan and Rachel? No, they were talking to each other and not Mary Lou. Was it something else? That's when the icy fingers carrying a chill warning started up his spine.

Kenneth followed the girl's line of sight at the same time the wind shifted with a smell that made everyone cover their nose and gag. Something floated in the water several yards down the shoreline. It beached and sloshed in a patch of cattails with each subsiding wave.

"Somebody call the cops," Kenneth said. Mary Lou looked at him with wide eyes. "Well, we can't exactly leave it there," he told her with frank practicality. "Somebody's got to know. I suppose you have a phone up there in that big house?"

Mary Lou nodded. "Um, guys?" she said with a shaky voice. "I hate to ruin everybody's afternoon, but there's a dead body over there."

"You've gotta be kidding me!" Carly exclaimed, responding to the obvious. "Ugh! No, I guess you aren't!" Rachel and Bryan jumped up and looked.

"Where!" Rachel demanded as she too choked on the smell. As soon as Rachel saw what everyone else was looking at, she squealed and raced up the bank. "Omigosh! Where did that come from?" Rachel shivered and went to join Sierra by the picnic table. Sierra turned pale and didn't say anything but stood where she couldn't see the body.

"Ewww! That's awful! What do we do?" Rachel wrung her hands.

"As I said, we call the cops and let them handle it," Kenneth told her.

"I'm on it," Mary Lou said. "Do you guys want to come with me back to the house?" She was ready to get as far away from there as possible. The smell was making her nauseous. How had she not smelled it when they first walked down the hill to the shore?

"Why don't you girls go on up while Ken and I stay here to keep an eye on the body 'till the sheriff gets here," Bryan waved them on.

"Uh, yeah! I sure don't want to stay here. Omigod! It stinks!"

"Me neither!" Sierra agreed. "That's gross!"

"Why do all of these bizarre events keep happening to us?" Rachel wondered aloud as they quickly walked back up the driveway to the house.

"I don't know. It's like we're a weirdness magnet or something," Sierra said with feeling. "I'm starting to wonder the same thing."

"Yeah, but we aren't doing anything to cause it!" Rachel objected.

"So what is it that you are not doing that's making everything happen then?" Carly said. "Maybe it's because you aren't doing anything that everything is happening."

"That doesn't make a lick of sense, though," Mary Lou said to them. "I don't see how not doing something could make this stuff happen. For that matter, no one would believe us if we told them everything weird that is happening, except maybe the sheriff."

Rachel turned a sour expression on Mary Lou but didn't comment. She wasn't real happy about her last experience at the

sheriff's office. She cringed to think what they were going to say when the deputies saw them again.

"Well, it's not like we're bad people or something," Sierra said. "Maybe we just keep ending up in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"We're really good little angels, not bad girls." Mary Lou laughed grimly and winked. She thought about the body floating in the water and the fight along with Sierra's close call. "I don't see how we can be blamed for the dark shadow that seems to want to follow us around."

"Angels, like the old TV show!" Rachel brightened up.

"That wasn't what I meant," Mary Lou said. "I was talking about the bunch of us being innocent bystanders that keep getting caught up in stuff, but that works, I guess." She thought a minute. "Angels, angels... shadow angels. Heh! We could start calling ourselves that." Mary Lou shook her head grimly. "But it would be nice if we could be 'light angels' or something instead, wouldn't it?"

"Nah, that wouldn't sound as good," Sierra said with a gleam in her eye. "I actually like it the first way you said it. It sounds so... together."

"Well, here we are," Mary Lou said even more grimly. "I better get in there and call the police. The way our luck is running lately, that dead guy might get up and try to eat Ken and Bryan."

"Don't say that!" Rachel said. "We've had enough trouble already!"

Carly elected to stay outside and wait with the other two girls. It wasn't long before Mary Lou returned. Carly raised her eyebrows in an unspoken question to her older sister. "They are on their way," Mary Lou said softly. "Emergency dispatch asked me to wait for them here at the house. Since our day's kinda' ruined anyway, do you two want to stay or go on home?"

Rachel and Sierra looked at each other, and both shook their heads in refusal. "We're staying," Rachel told Mary Lou and Carly. "I want to know what they find out."

"I'd like to know who it is," Sierra added. "I just don't want to smell that thing again!"



Everyone listened in morbid fascination as Bryan waxed eloquently on the character of floating bodies. He seemed not to notice that Rachel and Sierra looked sick from the descriptions.

Of all of them, Bryan was most matter-of-fact about the afternoon and their gruesome discovery.

"It can't have been there long," Bryan was saying. "I've seen this before when I went out with the Rescue Squad."

"Does it always stink that bad?" Carly wrinkled her nose. "I think I'm going to be smelling rot for the next month!" She sat next to Kenneth, who was calmly eating a sandwich. No one else seemed very interested in eating.

"Always, and sometimes worse!" Bryan answered. He looked around at the whole group. "You wouldn't believe some of what we've run into out there on the river. Usually, it's drowning accidents or suicides. Maybe if people realized just how ugly they are when they finally turn up downriver, they would reconsider jumping." Bryan shook his head. "Once they are in that state, though we can't help them. I wish we could turn back the clock on some of these."

"There was this one guy... we got a report that he'd jumped off the Highway 58 bridge. It didn't make sense. The guy had two kids, a wife, and a high-paying job, and he evidently just snapped. Or at least that's what we were told. It took our divers two days to find him. When they did, just about all the flesh had been stripped off by the fish in the river."

"Ugh!" Sierra groaned and looked even sicker. "That's nasty!"

"Yeah, it was! But I was never sure that was suicide."

"What do you mean?" Kenneth spoke up. "You think he was helped along?"

"Well, you know, you hear things. People can't keep their mouth shut," Bryan said.

"Why would you think somebody killed him?" Mary Lou asked quietly. "Was he into something he shouldn't have been?"

"That's the rumor," Bryan agreed. "You've heard, I'm sure, that Roane County is a big drug county in the state."

Mary Lou nodded. "Yeah, people talk about that at school. I don't see much of anything, so I don't know what to believe."

"It's been said for years that there's a bunch of Satanists in the county too." Bryan continued.

"I didn't believe that one at all!" Mary Lou shook her head. "That's like, really out there! But Ken told us what happened with you guys at the park. It's enough to weird me out!"

Bryan and Kenneth looked at each other pointedly. "I don't know what was going on there," Kenneth interrupted, "But it damn sure ain't normal! People don't usually string somebody up in a tree or go chasing people around for no reason."

Mary Lou Wells

"It don't usually go black around someone in the middle of a fight either," Bryan added.

It was Carly and Mary Lou's turn to exchange looks. Carly spoke. "We talked about that a little bit. What if it wasn't Satanists at all? If it's true, there are bad people selling drugs around here; what if it was somebody like that just trying to hide what they're doing? Maybe they were mad at somebody and got even."

"You could be right. If all this stuff is connected, regardless of what it is, this county has some real problems," Rachel observed. "I can tell you one thing. I don't want to run into any more of it!" She shuddered. "The Satanists are bad enough. I don't know how much worse it could be!"

"Don't say that!" Mary Lou said. "We probably don't want to know." She stared down at her hands and the sandwich she held. She had yet to take a bite of it. "But guys, we were talking on our way up to the house about how it's odd that weird stuff keeps happening to us. Have you noticed? Why not somebody else?"

"Yeah, go on?" Kenneth prompted.

"Well, like Sierra gets locked in the bathroom. You guys ran into the Satanic group. Now there is the dead body, you know? Why all the drama?" Mary Lou looked thoughtful. "There's more to this than meets the eye," she said and looked at her younger sister. "We've had those weird dreams. They mean something. I just don't know what yet."

Carly nodded agreement, then glanced pointedly at Sierra. "There's more you aren't telling, isn't there?"

Sierra blanched and looked uncomfortable. "If I told you, then you'd think I was crazy."

"So? Try us!" Rachel told her.

"Who else are you going to trust?" Mary Lou grabbed for her friend's hand. Sierra snatched it back. She didn't want to be touched and, in fact, felt a small flash of anger. Why were they putting her on the spot?

"I don't feel like talking about it," Sierra finally said into the awkward silence.

"All right then, well, 'Shadow Angel.'" Mary Lou grinned at her. "You don't need to talk if you don't want to."

Sierra's mood lifted slightly, but she still felt an unexplained discomfort directed at Mary Lou and the rest. Outwardly she smiled, but inside she was terrified her secret would get out.

A loud beep interrupted their peaceful gathering. Bryan jumped up and ran for his car.

"Go ahead, dispatch..." He listened to the radio transmission that sounded like scratchy static to the rest of the group. "10-4!" He looked up at everyone. "Well, folks, I got to go right now! Duty calls. They've called in a house fire over off River Road. I'll have to talk with you guys later!" With that, Bryan hopped in his car, started his lights, and drove off.

"See ya!" Rachel called after him. She looked a bit wistful as he drove off without a backward glance. "He's always doing that! You can't tie that boy down for even a minute!" Rachel laughed. "He seems to live just to help people."

"It's good that he's able to make a difference, though," Mary Lou said. "I think everybody should try to do that, you know, to help people."

"Sure, it's nice and all," Sierra added. "But what do people ever do for you, for us? You don't get anything out of it, so what good is it?"

"Well, I don't know. Maybe it just makes a person feel good to make a difference?" Mary Lou replied. "It makes the world a better place to live in."

"My take on it," Kenneth looked at all of them. "Is this, just go about being yourself, and the rest will take care of itself. Nobody is going to give anybody anything, you know? Definitely no one in *this* county! These people don't care about anything but themselves, so don't worry about them. We worry about us and let the rest of them hang." Kenneth waved his hand in dismissal.

Carly nodded. "I can see your point. Sometimes, though, I'd like to just smack people in the head to get them to wake up!"

"Ha, ha! I've tried that, and it doesn't help!" Kenneth laughed, and the rest of them laughed along with him. "Some people are just too stupid to get it!"

Smiling, Mary Lou looked fondly at her sister. "You always say that!"

"What?" Carly asked.

"If all else fails, just bang on it!" her sister said.

"That's because it usually works!" Carly giggled. "If it doesn't give the first time, just use a bigger hammer!"

Rachel had gotten quiet. She thought while her friends bantered. "I hate to consider it, but have you all thought of it like this? What if all this stuff happening isn't a coincidence?"

"What do you mean?" Sierra looked at Rachel with a puzzled but intense expression.

Mary Lou Wells

"I mean, what if it's all connected, aside from us just being in the wrong place all the time? We talked about it a little bit earlier, but we could take it a step further, don't you think? It's all so neatly easy to tie together. Maybe the Satanists are doing such weird bad stuff that it's affecting everything."

"Well, I'm not going to worry about them," Kenneth declared. "Whatever it is, we don't have anything to do with it, and that's enough for me."

"But, Ken! What if they come after us? Those people are cold-blooded killers! You saw what they were doing at the park."

"Yeah, so? Rachel, we got away, and the cops broke up what they were doing. I don't think they have the balls or even the will to come after us. Why would they want to do that? We're no one special to them, just people who happened by. By now, the whole county has probably heard about it."

"Huh!" Sierra said. "You're probably right."

Carly had different ideas. "Rachel has a point. Not about people coming after anybody, but about several things being connected. Who knows where any of us fit in? Carly stood up and looked out over the darkening field. "I think, and I don't know how to put this, but as I was saying earlier the odd dreams." Silence stretched as the girl struggled to articulate what she felt and saw in her mind's eye.

"I know what you mean," Mary Lou said softly as the others listened intently. "I've had dreams and daydreams, and it's all nasty stuff, like... like something is about to happen. Kind of like the day I felt like something was wrong with Sierra and just had to go find her."

Sierra sat up and took notice of that. "What?"

"I mean, I somehow knew you were in trouble. It happens sometimes. My aunt says I'm psychic. Carly is too, really. She sees things before they happen, like an oracle almost."

"And we can feel each other, too," Mary Lou added.

"How so?" Rachel asked.

"It's empathy," Carly answered. She was leaning against the pole supporting the porch overhang. "I can feel her nearby and tell when something's wrong. It's almost like mind-reading, but not quite. I can't hear words."

"Wow, that's cool!" Sierra remarked. Kenneth looked thoughtful.

"Yeah, that's neat," Rachel agreed. "I wish I could read people's minds! It would be so much easier to know what people are thinking."

“Nah... you wouldn’t want that either,” Kenneth assured her. “But what they are talking about is a good thing to develop. It’s similar to danger sense. If we all worked on that together, we’d see with more than just the eyes. It can be done.” He looked at Mary Lou. “We’ll work on that one later.” He grinned impishly. “I have an idea.”



14

SUSPICION

Ghe face-off between students had become intense. After several weeks of learning basic karate techniques; kicks, punches, blocks, holds, and throws, Mary Lou finally had a sword in her hands. Not a sword exactly, but a wooden practice bokken. It was close enough.

Anticipation lit her eyes as she waved it inexpertly in front of her. She felt a surge of confidence that did not appear mirrored in the face of the sparring partner she'd been paired off with. Undaunted, she looked forward to the new fun.

"I'm not fighting her." The statement was imperative as fellow student Jason faced Mary Lou from several arm lengths away. He stood tall and strong in the white ghi, but he looked at her eyes and expression. "No way, no how." He stepped back and lowered his wooden bokken. "She's going to hurt me."

"What!" Mary Lou said. "What do you mean?" She felt a stab of disappointment and looked at their class instructor uncertainly. What now? The disappointment was followed by growing anger and contempt.

Exasperated, Kenneth instructed Jason to step up and get into the physical stance and way of holding the 'sword' he'd been demonstrating. They'd been drilling basic strikes in the air throughout the class. But again, the male student refused. Kenneth stopped and considered thoughtfully. He decided that she was enthusiastic enough, so let's see what she can do.

"Fine." Kenneth waved Jason back until he stood against the wall out of the way. "You stand over there."

"You, get over here." Kenneth pointed Mary Lou to the center of the room, where he took up a defensive posture. "Everyone else, you all stand back."

Not sure what he was up to, Mary Lou complied. At least it looked like she was going to get to use the wooden sword after

Mary Lou Wells

all. She nearly jumped, startled when Kenneth came at her, striking strongly with the weapon.

Mary Lou hesitantly met his blow with a loud thwack! Kenneth grinned at her and kept it coming. Faster and faster the blows came with no pattern or drill. None were missed. Each was met with a solid answering blow.

Mary Lou was sweating and shocked at her ability to respond to the barrage so well by the time her instructor stepped back to disengage. She looked around and saw that the other students stood open-mouthed. They were as surprised as she was. What had just happened? She blinked several times, processing it.

“Whoa! How did you do that?” Sierra called from across the room, where she sat once again on the table, not participating.

“I... have... no... idea...” Mary Lou panted. She didn’t know what to say, so she concentrated on breathing through the threatening asthma attack.

“Shit!” Jason threw his bokken on the floor. The other students looked from one to the other.

“It’s simple,” Kenneth explained to everyone, smiling. “She has no preconceived notions how to fight with this weapon, so her reflexes and automatic responses took over from what she thinks she knows.” He looked her up and down pointedly. “You didn’t think you could do that, did you?” he asked Mary Lou.

“No,” Mary Lou shook her head.

“Now that you know you can do it and you’ve quit waving that thing around like a kid in a candy store, I can TRAIN you!” Kenneth laughed.

“I see...” Mary Lou said, slightly embarrassed. She supposed maybe she should have toned it down a bit. She was glad her cheeks were already red from exertion so that her blush went unnoticed.

“But don’t worry, you did good,” Kenneth told her, pretending he didn’t see her cheeks darken even more. “Now, everyone, line up! Get in position, and we’re going to start again, like this... count... one... down, and turn it... two...!”

Kenneth didn’t bother to tell her that he’d already known she would find it in herself to be able to use the sword she waved around so awkwardly. Some secrets didn’t need to be given up so casually. So, why had he backed her into that kind of corner? He mused on that one a bit.

He knew she didn’t remember what he remembered from their past lives together, the same flash of excitement in movement and achievement. Even though she didn’t remember,

she'd risen to the bait admirably, he thought. It wouldn't take much to get her up to speed. Perhaps he was simply craving being equally matched stroke-for-stroke for a change.

The rest of the class went smoothly. The drill seemed easy compared to the initial burst of swordplay. Mary Lou was able to settle into a focused rhythm to work on strokes and counterstrokes. She was disappointed when the class broke up for the evening. However, when it did, and everyone dispersed, she had something to do.

Ken, can I ask you a question?" Mary Lou had followed him outside, waiting to catch him alone. When he turned his attention to her, she nearly changed her mind. She could feel her guts clench with sudden nerves. She'd taken several days to work up the courage to do this. There wouldn't be a better time. Seeing no other options except to miss out, she went ahead with it.

"Sure, what do you want?" Kenneth asked.

How was she to go about this? It felt so odd being the one to ask, but she told herself all that could happen was he could say no.

"I would like to know if you would go to the senior prom with me... as friends, I mean." She tried not to stumble over her words. "I know we aren't boyfriend/girlfriend, but I don't have a date, and I really want to go." She wasn't sure why it was so important all of a sudden that he should accept, but his answer surprised her.

"I don't know," he said. "I would have to ask Mom, but I guess I could."

"Really?" She sounded almost incredulous. "Awesome, and thanks!"

"No promises." His eyebrows were near to his hairline as he watched her walk away toward her ride home. He shook his head. Now that was unexpected, he thought. "Huh!"

"Well, that wasn't so bad," she mumbled to herself. "I guess my aunt was right after all. It was rather painless." Grinning to herself, she got into the car to go home. At least she wouldn't have the embarrassment of going by herself.

"Hey, wait up!" Sierra called. "Mary Lou, hold on."

Mary Lou saw her and held up her hand. "Hold on Grandma, Sierra wants to say something." She watched her friend approach the car.

"So, what do you think? Party at my house next weekend?"

"That's prom night," Mary Lou told Sierra. "Ken and I are probably going to the prom down at the community college."

"You and Ken are going?" Sierra wasn't sure she'd heard that right.

"Yep, we sure are." Mary Lou nodded. She missed the slight narrowing of Sierra's eyes and plunged blithely along. "I've already got a dress." She had several to pick from in her closet. She'd have to decide which of her formal full-length dresses to wear. Maybe the pink one with flowers? That is, if his Mom would let him go, she reminded herself.

"Okay, well, you all have fun then. We can have the get-together at my place the next weekend after that."

"That sounds good," Mary Lou said brightly, but her attention had wandered. She had things on her mind. "I will see you tomorrow at school, OK?" With that, they pulled out to go home. Mary Lou's grandmother shot an uncertain smile and a small wave at Sierra as they left.

Sierra let out the breath she didn't realize she was holding. How DARE she? Mary Lou was going to the prom with him? She wondered how long they'd been planning this without telling her. She shot a steely-eyed glare at Kenneth as he also pulled away in his big car. Miffed that she hadn't gotten very far with him, Sierra left as well.



Kfaint glow lit the road's edge up the hill on Highway 58 before Kenneth managed to open up the car's engine. As he approached, he realized the dumpster at the side of the highway was on fire. Curious as to what could be burning, he slowed down to look. Kenneth caught the acrid smell of burning meat and rotten flesh as soon as he did. He nearly gagged. "Oh crap, here we go again," he said. Without looking, he had an idea what was in that dumpster.

For a moment, he considered driving on and not saying anything. Let the damn cops take care of it! But if he did that, he thought, there might not be anything left, and someone might want to know what had happened to their loved one. With a feeling of foreboding, he reluctantly turned around and went back into town. He'd just make a quick phone call and go on home.

“**G**his is getting to be a bad habit, son,” the sheriff told him. “How many times are you going to come for a visit?”

“This wasn’t my idea,” Kenneth told him. “I could have just driven on by and not said a word about it.”

“True,” Sheriff Wilson cleared his throat. “But it seems that wherever trouble is to be found, we find you right in the middle of it.”

“You all keep saying that, but trouble finds me without me going looking! I don’t have anything to do with it, especially this time. I just called to let you know there’s a dead body out in that highway 58 dumpster.”

“Yep, but the last two mysteriously dead bodies I had, you were there too; a series of coincidences?”

“Uh, yeah!” Kenneth resisted the urge to add ‘duh!’ and managed to keep that comment behind his teeth. His estimation of the Sheriff’s Dept. was dropping dramatically. Why weren’t they on top of this stuff instead of ragging on him?

“Well, I have to tell you that it don’t look good.” Sheriff Wilson told him. “Ordinarily, I’d be investigating you for involvement. Tell me why I shouldn’t be locking you up right now.”

“Hey, I told you in the first place I was just on my way home from the community center where I was teaching karate class tonight. I saw the fire and smelled the burning body. I figured somebody might want to know their family member is missing. That’s pretty simple.” Kenneth thought for a moment. “Besides, you don’t have anything to pin on me except a report. There’s no proof I’ve done anything wrong. You have nothing.”

“That is true, which is why you aren’t sitting there in handcuffs,” Sheriff Wilson acknowledged with a nod. “But you damned well better keep yourself out of trouble. Just give me a reason, and I’ll throw you so far under the jail you’ll never see the light of day again,” he declared.

Kenneth’s eyes narrowed. “Just because you have a badge doesn’t mean you can go around threatening people. I haven’t done anything, and if you and your deputies can’t get off your duff and solve these crimes, that’s not on me.”

“I am the sheriff of this county...”

“I don’t give a damn who you are. I know my civil rights.” Despite his effort to control his anger, his voice started to rise. “So if you don’t have anything better to do than waste my time....” Kenneth stood and held his hand up, struggling for

control with bared teeth. “Excuse me. I’m done here.” He glared at the sheriff. “Have a nice day.” With that, Kenneth turned on his heel and walked out.

Sheriff Wilson almost rose from his chair to stop the boy for the first moment or two. But, he realized Kenneth was right. He didn’t have enough on him to charge him with a crime. To stop him, he would have to arrest him. Being a disrespectful ass, of course, was no crime, he thought ruefully. If that were the case, half the county would be in jail. He almost smiled at the thought.

He noticed the desk clerk was trying not to stare open-mouthed when he looked around. Sheriff Wilson sat back down at his desk, considering. He pushed a button on his speakerphone.

“Deputy Mulligan and Officer Baer, come see me now,” the sheriff demanded.

Sheriff Wilson steepled his fingers in thought while he waited. He didn’t know what was going on, but he couldn’t escape the feeling that it was only going to get worse, and that the boy and his friends were in the middle of something. He just didn’t know what. Sheriff Wilson aimed to find out. He had eyes and ears all over the county, after all. It was one of the perks of his job. He also hadn’t gotten where he was, he thought, without having instincts. Right now, all of those instincts were crying foul.

With a low creak, the heavy wooden door across the room opened. Two men stepped through wearing the crisp uniforms of Roane County officers of the law. “You wanted to see us, sheriff?”

Sheriff Wilson looked up at the men walking toward him with approval. These were two of his most loyal and trusted men. Special assignments were almost always quietly passed through them.

The older of the two men was beginning to show some age. He showed gray at the temples of his short-cropped wavy hair and was lately inclined to a paunch. The younger of the pair was taller and physically fit. He sported black hair, dark eyes, and he had a mean look about him. He had a tendency to push the boundaries, take risks and give no mercy. But he also had good instincts, the sheriff thought. He’d make a damn fine investigator one day if he could control his temper. For now, he wasn’t worried about that. He needed Officer Baer’s tendency to get results. Baer was the one who had spoken.

"Yes. Go ahead and pull up chairs," Sheriff Wilson gestured to the two sturdy wooden chairs parked on the other side of his desk. "I need to talk to you."

The two men sat and pulled their chairs close. With them leaning forward to hear him speak quietly, the sheriff outlined to them what he wanted them to do.

"I have too many dead bodies," he began. "Three now dead, in fact. We don't need to have the Department embarrassed, and we don't need the public asking too many questions. You know as well as I do that if this keeps up, the public will be screaming for heads, and if we don't charge somebody, those heads could be ours. For now, I've managed to keep most of this stuff covered up and out of the paper, but there's no telling how long that will hold."

Deputy Mulligan nodded, and Officer Baer said nothing. *You mean your head will roll in the next election*, Baer thought but had more sense than to say out loud. He kept his poker face in place.

Sheriff Wilson nodded at them both. "In any case, each dead body has had a common denominator. I want you two to keep a special weather eye on that DeVault boy. He's trouble with a capital 'T'. I don't have anything to pin on him as it looks like a series of coincidences, but we all know that where there's smoke, there's fire. Keep an eye on not only him, but his friends too." Sheriff Wilson looked pointedly at them both. "But, keep it quiet. I need an open and shut case here."

"You can count on us, sheriff," Deputy Mulligan told him. "But..." he added. "What if they are just good kids being kids, and they aren't involved in anything criminal?"

Officer Baer snorted. "No such thing as innocent," he said with finality. "Don't worry, we'll ferret it out, whatever it is they are up to," he smiled broadly.

"Good!" Sheriff Wilson gave them a small smile in return. "Have Officer Stanley report anything suspicious that she sees. Apparently, Diane knows them."

With that, Sheriff Wilson dismissed the officers, convinced nothing would or could go wrong with his well-oiled machine. As he straightened the stacks of reports on his desk, he allowed himself a small nod of satisfaction. Whatever it was those kids were up to his men would find out, and then they could explain it to the judge. It would be out of his hands at that point. The door to the outside shut with finality.

"Time to call in a favor or two," Mulligan said quietly on the other side of the door. They stood on the sidewalk talking. "We'll keep a lookout for them, and we'll see what we see."

"We can do better than that," Baer said. "Why don't we just follow them and keep an eye out where they live?"

"I don't know," Mulligan told him. "That Rachel girl is pretty skittish. I saw her when she was here at the jail after the park murder, and she looked pretty white. I don't think her reaction had anything to do with talking to the sheriff. I think she's running scared and will spot it if we start following them around."

"The sheriff wants results," Officer Baer responded.

"Of course the sheriff wants results!" Deputy Mulligan snorted. "But I've been in this business for nearly twenty-five years. If you haven't noticed, we've got a real problem here. Dead people don't just pile up under mysterious circumstances with no cause. Perpetrators also usually aren't the most obvious of suspects," Deputy Mulligan pointed out.

The deputy shook his head and continued. "Those kids? No, there's no way. If the sheriff weren't so concerned with other things, he'd see it too. Get self-absorbed enough, and you miss the most obvious things regardless of how smart you are. In this case, I think the sheriff is outsmarting himself by sending us on a wild goose chase," Deputy Mulligan said.

"Well, if you don't think the kids are behind any of the disappearances and we aren't going after them, what do you suggest?" Officer Baer mumbled around a cigarette he hadn't lit yet.

"That we do exactly what the sheriff says and keep an eye on them," Deputy Mulligan answered. Then he paused thoughtfully. "We keep our eyes and ears open for other things," he added as he opened the door of his cruiser parked by the sidewalk. "Trouble always seems to come in threes, so maybe this will be all we'll see, but trouble also has a way of expanding to find new targets. My gut tells me there's more to come, and we just might find ourselves in the middle of whatever it is."

Deputy Mulligan got into the driver's seat of the police cruiser. Baer took another few seconds to light his smoke before joining him in the car. This was going to get interesting. He smiled a slow secret smile. Well, he had a few contacts even Mulligan didn't know about



15

PROM NIGHT

SEVERAL DAYS LATER...

“**J**ust my luck!” Professor Holderman mumbled aloud to no one in particular. “Now I’m babysitting.” He nearly laughed at his joke as the music covered anything further he might have said. The DJ was already cranking up.

Oh, it was pretty enough, John admitted to himself. He could appreciate that the prom committee had done a great job of making the impersonal but spacious Roane State cafeteria into virtual fantasy land. The huge bay windows and doors reflected the décor nicely, making it look even bigger.

The professor felt a little sore at missing an evening off when he had so much paperwork to do. But he’d been asked as college staff to keep an eye on things. To make the best of it, he’d brought a stack of papers with him. He figured the evening would be fairly boring, so he settled at a far table to relax and wait. Maybe he’d get up and get some punch a little later. For now, though, he could keep himself busy while the room filled up. He doubted anyone would notice he was there.

When the doors opened at 7:00 p.m., couples started arriving in singles and groups. Around 7:30, a group of single girls came in giggling. A dance floor had been set up with colored lights and a false wooden floor. Several couples were slow dancing when Mary Lou and Kenneth arrived. They entered and descended the long concrete staircase. It had been decorated with streamers and lined with white balloons along the handrail. Balloons and streamers crisscrossed the wide-open space. They created the illusion of a false ceiling below the two-story-high real ceiling that formed the base of the third floor of the main building at the college.

“Wow! This is pretty!” Mary Lou exclaimed. She strained to see who was there and thought she recognized a few people from

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her class. She had to admit that she was impressed. Some of these guys cleaned up real nice, and the girls were all resplendent in their colorful gowns and sequins. The music was playing, and she was already thinking about dancing.

Mary Lou finished picking her way carefully down the stairs in her high heels and held the hem of her pink formal dress out of the way so she would avoid stepping on the ruffle. It wouldn't do to make an entrance by tripping down the stairs.

When they reached the bottom, Mary Lou released Ken's arm. She looked around, unsure what to do first. Then she spotted someone she knew and was comfortable being around sitting at one of the tables in the middle of the room.

"Do you want to get some punch?" Kenneth asked. He gestured toward the table of refreshments set up near the cafeteria's windows.

"Sure! That sounds like a good idea," she told him. "And look, Mark's over there at that table. It doesn't look like anyone else has been sitting there, so why don't we go sit there with him and his date?"

"That works fine for me. Why don't you go ahead and sit down, and I'll get our drinks."

"Hey, thanks!" Mary Lou said.

One of the girls in her class that she actually got along with waved and smiled. Mary Lou waved back. "Hi Missy!" she said as she made her way to the table she'd picked out. She knew why no one had sat there. Mark was a great guy, but he was loud and a bit boisterous, so most people didn't seem to hang around very long. That suited her just fine. Even though the bullying had stopped since she'd become friends with Kenneth, she still didn't trust some of them.

"Hey, Mary Lou!" Mark greeted her enthusiastically. "Whazzup! Glad to see you made it! And hey, here... this is my date, Katie."

"Hi, nice to meet you!" A dark-haired girl in a light-colored dress sitting next to Mark stood up. Mary Lou and Katie shook hands, and they both sat down. "I don't think I've met you. Do you go to our school?" Mary Lou wrinkled her brow, thinking.

"No, I don't," Katie answered. "I'm from Lenoir City."

"Oh, okay. Lenoir City High School? I gotcha. That makes sense. Mark lives over that way," she nodded. She'd been to Mark's house once during the brief few weeks she'd attempted to date him. He'd gotten on her nerves so badly that it didn't last long, she thought with a slight internal grimace.

Mary Lou didn't know what else to say to make conversation. To cover her discomfort she looked for Kenneth.

"So where's your date?" Katie asked her, following the other girl's looks into the crowd.

"He's gone to get drinks," Mary Lou answered. "Ah, there he is." She finally spotted him weaving through the crowd as he attempted not to spill a couple of cups of punch on himself or anyone else.

In a few moments, Kenneth arrived at the table. "Sorry it took so long," he said as he handed Mary Lou her drink. "There was a bit of a line at the punch bowl." He turned to sit and got a good look at the girl across the table.

"Hello," she said with a small smile. "My name's Katie." She looked him up and down boldly and didn't bother to hide her interest. She rose and shook his hand.

"I'm Ken," he said with an answering smile.

"Hey Ken, let's go dance." Mary Lou looked at him so hopefully, he reluctantly agreed and got up. The DJ was toning it down into a slow dance. He could do that anyway. But, he couldn't help eyeing the other girl as she took Mark's hand, and they also went to the dance floor. Even though she'd asked to dance, Kenneth could tell Mary Lou was a little stiff and nervous as he held her through the dance. That didn't look promising for the rest of the evening, he inwardly groaned.

As soon as the dance was over, he extracted himself, telling Mary Lou that he was a bit hungry and was going to get some refreshments. She returned to the table without him and found Mark also arriving back at the table by himself.

"Katie went for some cake," Mark said with a broad smile.

"So, where did you meet her?" Mary Lou was curious.

"Oh, she rode my bus before I switched schools," he told her.

"Ah, I see. I was just curious," Mary Lou commented. After that, the silence stretched. She drank her punch and wondered where Kenneth had gone... to the bathroom maybe? She wanted to dance more but thought she would wait for her date. Just as she was about to go looking for him, Kenneth returned to the table. Katie was behind him. He had a question for Mary Lou.

TFrom his table nearby, Professor Holderman watched the drama unfold. He hadn't missed the tall blonde boy and the dark-haired girl outside around the corner. He did have a good vantage point, after all. They were being pretty brazen about it, but the other two hadn't noticed until they were back at the table,

and he watched the young man ask his date if he could leave with the other girl. Mechanically she shook her head in agreement, not understanding at first.

He almost felt sorry for the cute strawberry blonde in the pink dress as shocked comprehension dawned on her face and the other two went up the stairs together. He'd seen them arrive with the other two at the table.

"Well, well," he muttered, watching as the blonde boy left holding the dark-haired girl's hand. "You little... ass!" He shook his head. "Wonder how that will turn out for you?" The professor looked back at the table.

The boy didn't look very upset his date was leaving. He was more upset for the girl who looked after the two who had left. "Did he just leave with your date?" Mary Lou shook her head and looked at Mark wide-eyed. She was having trouble processing what had just happened. "Is he coming back?" But even as she asked the question, she knew the answer.

Mary Lou plopped back in her chair. He'd abandoned her to leave with someone else! Suddenly the prom didn't seem either fun or like a good idea anymore. She looked around to see who else had seen her dumped so quickly. No one seemed to notice. Besides Mark, the only person looking at her was that old guy sitting nearby, obviously grading papers. She dismissed him. Now what? She wondered. She would have been better off not coming to the dance in the first place.

"How am I going to get home?" Mary Lou said aloud. Anger began to simmer slowly, and embarrassment with it.

"Don't worry, I'll take you home," Mark offered.

Mary Lou looked at him sourly but still managed to smile in appreciation. "Thanks, Mark. I appreciate it." She supposed she needed to sound grateful. "In that case, for now, I'm going to go have some fun." She didn't feel it but was determined to make the best of the situation.

"Hey Mary Lou, where's Ken?" Ah, damn, someone noticed. "I'm not sure," she evaded. "He'll be back shortly," she answered her classmate. Why make it worse? And why did she suddenly have a lump in her throat?

Eventually, Mark joined her on the dance floor. She was no closer to appreciating the fact that at least she had the other girl's date but, out of pride, refused to say anything. Before everything wound down, Mark asked her if she was ready to go. With little hesitation, she agreed. The evening was ruined anyway, as far as

she was concerned, and to top it all off, she was stuck with someone she didn't even like and almost found repulsive.

On the way up the stairs, Mary Lou found a target for her anger. Each balloon taped in a line up the stairway railing got her nails and gave with a loud pop. It wasn't much, but the violence of it was soothing somehow. She simmered all the way out to the car and on the way home. Thankfully, Mark avoided trying to kiss her when he dropped her off.

Once inside her grandparent's house, rather than give any more answer to the questions waiting for her than that it all had gone just fine; she pleaded tiredness and readied herself for bed. With her door closed, she sat quietly in the middle of her bed in the dark. When the rest of the house was quiet, and she thought everyone else was asleep, the lump finally bubbled to the surface with years of loneliness and isolation behind it.

Too proud to let anyone hear, she sobbed her hurt into her blanket. "Nobody loves me. Nobody wants me," she whispered. "Not even my friends care... if I were dead, no one would even notice."

After she'd sobbed herself out in the early morning, she lay listening to the silence and finally fell into a fitful sleep. Emotional exhaustion kept her from disturbing dreams. They had been worse since the dead man had turned up in the river. But this night, there was no death running amok in her mind, only unconsciousness.



Professor John Holderman was spirit walking again. He'd been smelling trouble in the otherworld for some time, but tonight it was especially strong. He could not get the stricken face of the girl from the prom dance out of his mind. Her blue-green eyes, the color of sunlight shining through ocean waves, seemed to bore into him as she dismissed him out of hand.

Now, there is Power, John realized. Power unrecognized and raw, but he could read it all over her. That kind of potential always attracts trouble, he thought, almost lucid in his dream. He could nearly physically feel the gathering darkness as it too was able to See what John could See. Did the girl herself know who she was?

"John..." came the whisper. In some twist ofizarreness in his dream, it sounded like Moira's voice. He listened closely. "See and know, for the angels are the key to the light."

Suddenly, glowing in front of him came a sigil he recognized with what felt like a physical blow to his gut. Not since he'd found the ancient remains hidden and bound by the ancestors had it appeared. Burned into his mind, he would never forget the sigils of power the spirits had revealed to him there.

"No!" he shouted into the ether. "This innocent girl surely cannot handle this evil!" he objected.

"She is stronger than you think," came the answer. It sounded hollow in the fog of twilight. "She is bent but not broken. It is enough," Moira's voice trailed off.

John continued to stare into the fading eyes of the snarling panther. Her ancient sigil too slowly dispersed, the message complete. He felt like sobbing. So, it is to be himself to deal with the ancient nemesis, is it? Why HIM and his lifetime? His body on the bed shuddered with a visceral fear.

He wished not to revisit the evil darkness that dogged his nightmares for so many years. But there was no way he would allow a pure spirit such as he'd seen this evening face the black soul in the cave, especially alone. For he knew and understood the nature of the evil thing in the cave as he had not when he first discovered it as a boy, and, he thought, if it ever gets loose, people are going to die!

With dread, he looked further. Not knowing wouldn't change what was to come. Remembering the girl's date as he had walked away, John looked with spirit eyes and groaned as he SAW what the boy represented... The water dragon! Oh hell! He had seen two of the Spirit Keys this evening. The others had to be close. The spirits never lie. But what was he going to do about it? The spirits said these were the people who would help him defeat one of the most dangerous enemies known to his people through their long history. "But," he objected again, "they're just kids! How can they possibly?!"

"No! I cannot involve children in this fight. I will not!"

The sound of thundering hoof beats sounded and echoed around him. John looked up in the grayness. A white-winged horse carrying a warrior so bright he could not look at her suddenly towered over him.

"It is in the plan, O' Spirit Walker! You cannot deviate from what God has decided! This is Fate."

"Deviate? Decided? I only need a way to defeat the enemy. I choose my own destiny! Free choice and all that," John objected as his hands groped for the cross around his neck. "Besides,

there's no way a bunch of untutored high school kids is going to take down The Wolf!"

"And knowing your choices, do you not see that this is taken into account!" the voice laughs. "Everyone meets their eventual fate in the end. No one escapes me, whether soon or late. Do your job, Spirit Walker. Stay calm. You will need all of your wits to bring this dangerous enemy down!" The wind whistled above his head as a silvery broadsword of flashing light was swung at him to punctuate Her point. The Valkyrie lifted off with mighty wing beats and a breeze that cleared the fog to starlight.

"If you are so powerful, then why do you need me?" John asked the stillness. "Why can't you kill him?"

"Ensure that they have the tools they need... you can't do this without them," the Valkyrie said. Then she was gone.

"Why do you need me?" John whispered once more in confusion.

John Holderman opened his eyes to see the light of predawn peeking through his window. He looked out the window with haunted eyes, certain that he would see them all dead before this was through. With his training incomplete, he was no shaman.

He thought of the kids at the prom. It didn't look promising from where he sat. Yes, it would be better if he dealt with the situation alone... but how?



16

SKINWALKER

Ulfr's anticipation grew. He could scent the sex and blood magick on the breeze. If he had possessed an actual nose, he would have been able to smell it in a literal sense. Silently he waited, watching through the boy who carried him, for the ritual through the trees to begin.

If he could have, Ulfr would have laughed at what he read in Tyrone's thoughts. The hubris! The boy thought he was in control! The weak-minded fool believed all of the killings were his idea. It was time to ditch him for a new temporary host. Ulfr mentally grimaced.

Although a portion of his soul was freed from confinement and walking as a shade, the greater portions were still bound to his body parts buried in various places or locked inside this infernal dagger! It splintered his power, and Ulfr found his spirit was also fragmented. But, Ulfr realized that there was a way to put his situation right and come back stronger than ever. His plan was in motion. All he needed was for that stupid amateurish lout of a Skinwalker turned pseudo-Satanist to try to conjure a demon! Ulfr could feel that it was coming. Then, he could make his move. He was no longer content to be a mere king; no longer content to have mere immortality, he would be a *god*.

Oh, yes, he would still free Loki, but Ragnarok would go the way Ulfr wanted it to. Now to set his plans in motion, the first order of business would be to absorb enough power to free himself from his bindings. Then, he would deal with anyone who thought to oppose him. He would kill anyone of Power that he found and consume them!

A tremulous throaty scream rang out in the moonlit mist, full of visceral fear and pain. Ah, the important part that they were waiting for had begun. Ulfr would own these skraeling fools! Tyrone stepped forward, making little noise in the dew-soaked grass. It was time.

Blood dripped and pooled on the ground. Its scent was hot and tangy with a hint of metal. On the makeshift altar made from the half slab of a large tree supported on two cinder blocks, the woman's twitching body had not yet cooled, nor was her spirit gone. Her blood slowly oozed over the satanic tattoo on her upper right arm, a testament to her folly in hatred.

Too late, she found herself the target of the skinwalker's wrath. She burned hot and bright with energy, not yet dulled and destroyed by the drug addiction, which had begun to take hold of her, making her malleable and easy for Nash to control.

With his follower's death imminent, the Nash chanted feverishly. His assumed role as a satanic priest suited his purposes admirably. He was already powerful by nature. The stupid cops couldn't catch him. He nearly laughed but settled for a secret grimace.

Since he had a Skinwalker's power, it had been no trouble to outpace the police and cast misdirection. The cops would be chasing shadows for days. But this girl had talked.

In fury, he yanked her heart from her chest through her broken ribs. He had but one final use for her. He would open a Gate straight to Hell and order a demon to his bidding! Several others who had escaped arrest at the park were gathered about in anticipation. Eyes dull or over-bright, they encircled the smaller circle that held the priest and his victim, though they left an opening to allow passage for what their priest now called.

Suddenly, almost visibly bright, the dark corona created by the woman's slow death was interrupted by a figure stepping through and into the circle. The figure was naked, with dark glistening skin, and it carried a knife. In the weak light from the nearby bonfire, the eyes showed white in his face.

Stepping as he did out of the darkness, Tyrone appeared as a demon in truth. With Ulfr in control, he laughed and felt the hum of the circle as it channeled through his body to the knife. He had stripped for the shock value and was rewarded by the response.

The circle participants threw themselves to the ground in startled fright, thinking their priest had called a dark creature from beyond. It was one thing to believe and another entirely to be faced with the possibility of real danger to self. Nash, however, wasn't fooled. Whoever this intruder happened to be, this was not his summoning! Furious, Nash threw his dagger straight at the newcomer's throat. It was neatly caught.

Tyrone laughed again. Ulfr spoke through him. "That will not be necessary."

Tyrone's voice deepened and changed inflection. He spoke the older tongue of the skraelings Ulfr had hated so long ago. The old dialect sounded strange even to his ears. But, Ulfr knew what manner of creature they faced. This was a Skinwalker: Native American shapeshifter, evil walking about on two legs, outcast and demonized by his people.

Long ago, Ulfr had enjoyed killing this kind not because he was doing the world a favor, but because he liked killing. Skinwalkers had provided some challenge and made the hunt interesting. But, Ulfr thought, he would not underestimate his foes again. This one was gaining illicit power through blood magick, but he was still no match for a priest of Loki.

"Greetings, friend," Tyrone said with a sneering grin. "I come to offer you an alliance."

Nash was shocked out of his anger by hearing an obscure dialect of his Native tongue. "Who are you, and what are you talking about?" he demanded.

"I am an old friend of your people." Ulfr/Tyrone grinned, his teeth also white in the darkness. "Though not well-loved, I suppose."

"Go on..."

Tyrone moved a step closer and stopped. He was nearly dizzy with the energy by now, and Ulfr was close to taking over completely. He swayed slightly where he stood.

Sensing weakness in the intruder, Nash readied himself for a physical blow on this impudent stranger. How dare they interrupt HIS circle!

Tyrone held up a hand and laughed. "I know what you're thinking, Skinwalker. You intend to kill me or bring the hate-filled darkness from Hel's realm to destroy me. But better men than you have tried and failed. I have challenged the very gods, yet I survive. Your feeble attempts at power are primitive and lacking discipline!"

Tyrone glared at the Skinwalker. He had completely lost control, and suddenly inside his skull, he knew enough to experience fear. Ulfr was drinking the powerful kinetic energy created by the ritual death. It only made him stronger.

"Get out of here, or I will kill you where you stand," Nash answered, furious at the insult. In anger, he gathered his darkness attack and surrounded Tyrone.

The circle participants began to recover their composure. Those who weren't too affected by being drugged finally guessed what was happening. One, braver than the rest, stepped behind

Tyrone and raised a knife in readiness to bury the blade hilt deep in his back, only to have it turn in his hands and cut his own throat. Gurgling, the man fell in a heap, failing to understand what had just happened. Tyrone dissipated the dark cloud around him with a wave of his hand.

"Evil doesn't touch me. I am beyond such things," Ulfr said with a shrug.

Warily Nash considered the stranger's offer. "What do you propose in this alliance of which you speak?"

"That we simply join up. I will show you and your followers how to wield the very power of the gods, and you assist me in recovering some items of importance to me, some ancient artifacts as it were, that will make all of us powerful beyond measure."

"So far, I don't see a catch... if what you say is true. But can you deliver what you promise is the question," Nash narrowed his eyes. His natural abilities had no effect. He was puzzled but willing to play along until he figured out this guy's angle. "Who are you?"

"There will be time for introductions later. For now, there are a few things that need to be taken care of. I need my belongings brought to a safe location. For that, we need to make a few modifications to our lodge."

Slowly the Skinwalker nodded. He could see the advantage of having a secure location for his own group's activities. "Deal!" he said loudly. "At least for now," he mumbled under his breath. He would get rid of this impudent ass at the earliest opportunity Nash promised himself.

Tyrone heard his voice giving directions to the old abandoned church he'd found. It was as if he was speaking through a tunnel. His ears buzzed, and he could barely think. An outside force had taken hold and moved him like a puppet; only he felt more than half asleep. Why was he inviting these people to his only safe hideout?

Distantly he saw in his mind's eye what Ulfr had in mind, and it nearly scared him out of the few wits he had left. Why had he ever picked up that damn knife? It was far too late to get rid of it... or, was it?

Tyrone realized, looking at the woman's body on the makeshift altar, that he was looking at himself as soon as he outlived his usefulness. What was he going to do? Who would or could help him? He'd tried to throw away the knife already and

experienced such searing pain in his skull that he'd been forced to pick it back up, sobbing with relief.

Remembering that moment, he shrank from the idea of what might be next in-store. Yet, he couldn't deny the heady sensation of wielding enormous energy and bending it to his will, even though the will wasn't his. If only he could escape! Tyrone knew how to work magic, and wouldn't he have something to impress the girls!

Tyrone had a sudden independent, clear thought. Sierra! Maybe she could help him! She had come away from the cave where they found the knife herself wielding some kind of power! Else, why had she not also been possessed by this madness?

Tyrone remembered Sierra's face when Ulfr made him go after her. Why had he done that? Something to do with the cave. That had to be the key, and if Ulfr wanted it, then it would have to be of some use to Tyrone as well! He would find Sierra again! He had to! Then he would have her in the end, after all. He promised himself.

Ulfr remained silent, examining the thoughts of the fool carrying this limited piece of his vast soul. Let the boy think he was acting on his own. It suited Ulfr's purposes to do so. For the time being, he still needed Tyrone. He fed on the youth's life force as a tick sucked blood. It gave him enough strength to act somewhat independently of the sum of his parts which were regrettably elsewhere. However, they were only elsewhere for now. He was about to have a lot more life energy for his taking.

Ulfr had already recovered a bloodthirsty bit that crawled away and took the life of an old woman. Fortunately, that bit of his soul didn't go far. When it returned, it made him even stronger. Ulfr was then able to drive Tyrone to kill to sustain him.

Once he managed to reassemble his scattered body and recover his weapon, he knew that no other power in the heavens or earth would be able to stop him or his plans. He'd had a thousand years to think about it, and it was time to act. None of these skraeling idiots would see it coming!



Pdespite the warmth of the sun and the pleasant spring day, Tracey Wilson huddled inside an oversize jacket on a bench outside the Greyhound bus station. She nervously chewed on her fingernails as her leg bounced. The young woman's dyed blonde hair was tucked inside her hood well enough that she hoped not

to be recognized by her boyfriend's little spy, who constantly tailed her. Tracey glanced around and across the street, but she didn't see Nash's cousin Shash anywhere nearby.

"Maybe he got picked up by the cops in that drug bust last night," she consoled herself. "If I run, he'll chase me down when he gets out, and I'll be dead meat," she said as tears threatened. "Where could I go if I do get away? Dear God, help me! I'm probably next!"

Tracey's hand shook from withdrawal sickness as she slid her hand in her pocket to grip the wadded-up cash there. She mentally counted it again with her hand on the money. There was enough for a bus ticket and a little bit of food. It was also enough to buy more alcohol and drugs for that night's party, which Nash expected her home with in less than an hour.

Because of the tears that clouded her vision, Tracey missed the patrol car that slowed as it passed by on the street among the other downtown Rockwood traffic. It circled around and pulled into the bus station. Tracey jumped in fright when the cop pulled up in front of her, blocking her view of the road. The window slowly slid down as Tracey panicked.

"I 'aint got nuthin' and I 'aint done nuthin!" Tracey gasped loudly. She nearly hyperventilated, looking for an escape route.

"Didn't say you did. Saw you sittin' here by yo' self Tracey, and I thought I'd come check on you!" the female officer said, puzzled.

"Diane!" Tracey said, relieved. "Did my uncle, the sheriff send you?" she stopped, suddenly suspicious.

"No, girl, I was just passin' by. Now, what's got you so upset? You goin' somewhere?" Diane looked at the greyhound bus sign on the storefront and back at the woman on the bench. "I've known you since you were little, and I never saw you like this."

"Yes, maybe, I don't know, no, yeah probably." Tracey stammered. "If I tell you, they'll kill me, and you too."

"Tell me what?" Diane asked.

"Never mind," Tracey said and looked away, hoping Diane wouldn't see through her eyes that her soul was crying out for help. She failed.

"Okay, get in," Diane said. "This is not an arrest, but I can see that somethin's goin' on. I'm done with my work shift, why don't you come home with me. We can talk where it's quiet and nothin's official. After that, if you still want to get that bus ticket, I'll bring you back here."

Tracey hesitated. Nash was expecting her. Thoughts of her boyfriend, however loomed large and threatening. She found that she couldn't stomach the thought of going home. "I'll go with you. I need to get out of here," Tracey said.

Diane opened the back of the car for the upset young woman and closed her in. Tracey knew it was too late to back out. The door didn't open from the inside.

At Diane's house in Midtown between Rockwood and Kingston, Tracey gratefully accepted a hot shower and cup of cocoa. It didn't make the shaking of her body stop, but she felt able to relax a little.

"Thanks, Diane," Tracey said gratefully, sipping the warm chocolate.

Diane smiled slightly and waved her hand dismissively. "Yo' mama would never forgive me, God rest her soul, if I didn't help you, an' you in trouble. Now, tell me what's up, and we'll fix it together."

"I'm scared. I'm embarrassed. I don't know where to start," Tracey told Diane.

"Okay, well, let me make a few guesses, then. You got mixed up in something over your head, and you know that you knew better in the beginning, but here you are. You got the shakes, and that says drugs because I know you aren't chronically ill, but that isn't what's got you this spooked. For me to help you, you have to tell me the rest," Diane said firmly, but not unkindly.

Tracey's shoulders drooped, and she dropped her gaze. "There was this guy," she said simply. "Smart, handsome, in control, and he had money, plenty of money. He made me feel like I was the only girl there at that first party. I'd never drank alcohol or taken drugs before, but when he looked at me with those eyes... it was like all I wanted to do was please him." Tracey said. "I drank some beers with the rest, and when they passed around the drugs? I took them with everybody else without questioning even what it was I was taking." Tracey looked pleadingly at Diane, hoping for understanding.

"He was so full of praise, and he gave me all the attention. He even told me I'm beautiful."

Diane nodded in agreement. "You are beautiful, girl. Don't let anyone say otherwise." Concern knotted Diane's eyebrows. She'd heard this kind of story before.

Tracey pressed onward. "So it was like, I don't know, like our eyes met, and there was this overpowering urge, you know? We just fell on each other, and he took me over and over. He declared me his girlfriend in the morning and said I belong to him. He even had me tattooed the very next day. I didn't really feel much by then. Almost like I was outside of my body watching it do things. When I would try not to take anymore drugs I would get the sickness, and he'd give me more and then make love to me."

"Then he took me out in the woods. Oh my God. He said if I ever told anyone, he would kill me," Tracey practically sobbed. "There was this pregnant woman... they, the whole group, oh my God, they killed her and cut the baby out of her, Diane."

Tracey's story got Diane's attention. Diane's mind raced to keep up with the implications. Could this be the source of all the local deaths? But first, Diane wanted to know something else.

"Are you pregnant Tracey? Is this why you're so scared?" Diane asked.

Tracey let out a strangled cough. "Maybe, I don't know. My period's late," she told Diane. "I'm scared to tell him. If I do, I'll probably be next, and he'll kill the baby and eat it."

Diane felt sick. "Why would he do any of that?" she asked with a puzzled frown. "Who is this guy?"

"His name is Nash. He's Native American from somewhere in Arizona. They call him a skinwalker, and he thinks that killing somebody blood related to him gives him black magic witch powers."

"He's a cannibal," Diane said flatly.

"Yes. He's really dangerous Diane," Tracey said.

"Daaaamn! Yeah he's dangerous, but I don't believe in such things. I do, however, believe in dead bodies, and we will investigate that later. You're my priority right now, though. There's no way I'm letting you go back home with that goin' on. It's not safe for you," Diane declared.

Tracey shook her head. "I know I can't go back to him, but Diane, you have to listen to me. This stuff's real. I saw Nash shapeshift into a cougar. He gutted a dude with his claws." At Diane's skeptical expression, Tracey insisted. "I didn't believe it either until I saw it. He's got a bone flute that he says is the leg bone of his grandfather, the alpha skinwalker from his home pack. He killed him for revenge, and now Nash is the alpha. He's teaching people and initiating them here in Rockwood. People think it's Satanism, but it's much worse than anyone knows,"

Tracey said. "His cousin is the second in command and Nash's bully boy. Nobody talks, or they die."

"So why did you tell me?" Diane asked her.

"Because if I'm pregnant? I'm dead anyway," Tracey said.

"No, you aren't dead," Diane told her firmly and patted the other woman's leg. "First thing, first. We are going to get you a pregnancy test and find out. Second, whether you are or aren't, I know some people who can get you into rehab and also help you with the baby if you're pregnant. None of this is the baby's fault, but you do need to leave Roane County, and probably this State."

"Where will I go?" Tracey asked.

"For now? We goin' to Chase Drugs in Harriman. You need to know if you a mom."



17

A NEAR MISS

“**K**en, what are you doing? What is that?” Mary Lou asked Kenneth as he pulled a black cloth out of his pocket.

“You’ll see.” He grinned at her and flicked his wrist to unroll it.

It looked suspiciously like a blindfold. Her suspicions were confirmed when he put it up to her face and wrapped it around her head to tie it.

“You’re blindfolding me?” She was surprised into being still and allowed it.

They were standing in the middle of the flat space of her front yard holding wooden practice swords. She was panting a little and had already worked up a sweat. She was holding her own today. She was a bit proud of herself.

Mary Lou had finally gotten over her disappointment and anger with him enough to accept when he invited himself to her house to practice. It had been several days since the Prom, and after a few days of not seeking him out to talk at school, she had realized he wasn’t acting any different than he always did. She had gone from embarrassed avoidance to puzzlement and finally acceptance. At least he was still talking to her. Usually, people turned on her outright.

She found that one good way to work off stress was in physical exercise. At least while they were sparring, she could take it out on him a little bit. She was amused by her thoughts. Not like she was going to get anywhere standing here in the dark!

“OK, now what?” Mary Lou asked as Kenneth tested the blindfold to make sure she couldn’t see. Not satisfied with his first attempt, he untied it and redid it, taking care not to catch her hair in the knot.

“That should do it.” Kenneth walked around Mary Lou, looking from all angles. “Can you see?”

“Umm. No. Why are we doing this again?” she responded.

Mary Lou Wells

"Just trust me and don't argue. I told you a while back. I have an idea. Get your guard up," Kenneth told her firmly in a tone that brooked no argument. But that still didn't stop her.

"But... ow... hey!" Mary Lou complained. He'd tapped her with the flat of his wooden blade. It stung.

"I told you to get your guard up," he said. He waited for her to raise her sword. When she did, he smacked it aside. "Now! Like you mean it," he told her.

Finally, she decided he was serious and brought the sword up into a solid defensive posture. She struck out blindly but strongly toward his voice as she had been doing earlier when not blindfolded. He met her with a solid thwack of wood on wood.

"Better!" he encouraged her. "Now, just go through the drill," he said. "You know how. Let your muscles take over and trust yourself."

As the ease and familiarity of the pattern of attack and counter-attack took over, she found that she could picture him in her mind as he responded to her movements. She visualized him as if she could see him as they sparred earlier without the blindfold in place. After several minutes she sensed him change his response and move suddenly. He switched the angle of his sword, broke the pattern, and attacked from the side as he went on the offense.

Mary Lou "saw" it coming in her mind's eye and turned her sword in time to block his swing. A flurry of blows, all neatly blocked followed, as she found she seemed to know a split second before he was going to swing at her and could counter each attack. They came almost faster than she could think. Finally, she stepped back and lowered her weapon. She felt winded, exhilarated, and at the end of her strength. Her hands tingled from the effect of the blows.

"I'm done," she told Kenneth. "Whew!" She realized she was dripping wet with sweat as she removed the blindfold from her face. "Wow... that was really amazing," she managed to say while attempting to catch her breath.

"You did good," Kenneth told her. "I knew you would."

"Oh? How so?"

"Blind fighting is not that hard when you're tuned in to what's around you. And you are more tuned in than most. Your gift just needs fine-tuning so you can see with more than your eyes and so that you learn to trust your instincts," Kenneth said.

"Well, I've been having psychic flashes of precognition since I was twelve years old," Mary Lou said. "I don't tell most people

because I'm afraid they won't believe me or will think I'm crazy. My aunt's a believer, though, I think."

"Why, did something happen with your aunt?" Kenneth was curious.

"Yes, a couple of things, actually." Mary Lou started toward the house. "Let's go sit on the porch. There's a chair over there with my name on it." Mary Lou peered at the late evening sun. It was starting to cool off, but she was hot. "Hey, how about a drink? I'll tell you about it while I get us something cold."

"Let's see, we have water, milk, juice, or soda. I'm for some ice water myself, how about you? The sodas are cold."

"That sounds good, actually," Kenneth agreed. "I'll have a Coke."

Mary Lou gathered her thoughts as she fixed the drinks. "Ok. Let's see. The first time anything psychic happened was when we were coming back from camp." She told him as they headed for seats on the porch. The screen closed behind them, and Mary Lou plopped herself down.

"So I'm half asleep riding in the car, right? This guy comes on the radio, and he's talking about cars. I don't even remember exactly what he said, but I got a picture in my head of a yellow car squished around a telephone pole or a tree."

Well, one of the girls from our Masonic Rainbow assembly was old enough to be driving, and she had a small yellow car. She was about to pull out when we left. I just got an awful feeling because I saw her in that car, with it wrecked. I asked my aunt if the other girl had left and if she knew how long it would take her to get home. She asked me why and I just gave her a funny look. All I told her was that I was worried about the other girl and hoped that she stayed safe."

"To make a long story short, we got home, and about as soon as we did, we got a phone call. The girl had wrecked on the way home and totaled her car by running into a telephone pole." Mary Lou told Kenneth. "Boy, did I get some odd shocked looks from my aunt. All I could say while cold chills went down my spine was I'd seen it and knew when it happened."

"What about other stuff?" Kenneth asked gently. "Did it happen again?"

"After that, it started happening all the time," Mary Lou said. "We've been driving through Oak Ridge, and before we could go around a curve to see what's on the other side, I would get a sudden urge to tell my aunt to slow down, and I'd yell at her to watch out. She did, and if not, we would have hit a huge deer

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standing in the middle of the road. That happened like four or five times.”

“So a lot of small things that add up,” he said.

“Yeah, mostly a bunch that don’t mean a hill of beans, so to speak.” Mary Lou laughed at herself. “It would be nice if when I do have some of these flashes of insight that I would understand what they mean before they happen rather than after.” She stopped and sipped her drink, thinking. “You know. The same thing happened that day with Sierra in the bathroom at school. I knew she was in trouble. I could feel her presence and knew she wasn’t where she was supposed to be.”

“That’s how you found her before anyone else did,” Kenneth said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. I went right to where she was,” Mary Lou said.

“What do you think about that whole thing?” Kenneth asked. “Do you think she tried to kill herself? I know we talked about it a little bit before now, but I want to hear your real thoughts on it.”

“No. I am pretty much sure Sierra didn’t attempt suicide. The cuts were to her hands, not her wrists, and she was lying in the broken glass like someone had thrown her down.” Mary Lou looked at him seriously. “I can’t explain it, but I don’t think she’s lying. I think she thinks we’ll assume she’s lost her mind if she tells us the real truth of it.”

“Huh!” Kenneth replied. “That’s what I get out of it too. So at least we’re on the same page on this one. I know she’s not telling us the whole truth.”

“How do you know? Has she said more to you?” Mary Lou asked.

“Nah, just a feeling, I guess.” Kenneth just smiled and managed to look mysterious. “But then, when does Sierra tell anyone everything?”

“Good point,” Mary Lou nodded in agreement. “That applies to other people I know. Oh, speaking of Sierra. I think she moved the party to next weekend so we can make it a graduation party. I know you have another year and aren’t graduating, but you are coming, right?”

“Sure, I’m planning on it,” he said. “You know I’m moving again.”

“Moving?” Mary Lou asked without the shock in her voice that she felt. “Where?”

"Down south of here. Oh, don't look so surprised," Kenneth laughed. "I'm going to be going and finishing up at Midway next year."

She barely managed not to glare at him. "So you're staying in the county," she stated and felt oddly relieved. She only spared a moment of surprise for her feelings. After all, she was tired of people disappearing from her life after a short acquaintance. A product of too much moving around in her lifetime, she thought. "Is that why I didn't see you at school today?"

"Nah, I got suspended."

"What on earth for?" Mary Lou asked. Her eyebrows were raised. "Right at the end of the year? That's dumb on their part since school is about out anyway."

"Yeah, well, me and the principal didn't see eye to eye when some dumbass threatened me in English class," Kenneth responded.

Mary Lou snorted. "Oh, that was brilliant, not! Who was it?"

"It doesn't matter. They won't do it again since wearing a desk makes a pretty good point. It won't affect school any, though. They just suggested I consider the new school a bit sooner than otherwise. I'll wait to start my last year over there," Kenneth gestured absently with his soda as he spoke.

"I see." Mary Lou contemplated her glass. All she had left was ice.

"So, what about you? What are you doing after graduation?" Kenneth asked.

"I'm planning to go to RSCC," she said.

"The community college?" Kenneth replied.

"Yes. I have applied for the art scholarship," she told him.

"Good luck with that," he said.

"I'm supposed to go this week and find out if I'm getting it. I probably don't have a chance."

"Don't sell yourself short," Kenneth told her. "I've seen what you can do." He pointed inside where her artwork sat stored in a portfolio.

"Well, it's not that," she said. "Most of the applicants have taken art classes and gained experience that I don't have. The art club at the high school is in its first year and doesn't count. Guidance officials told me I'm up against people from the big schools with art programs."

"You will be fine, I'm sure," he told her.

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Mary Lou stretched like a cat and got up from her seat. She was tired but didn't want to stiffen up. "I'm hungry now that I've cooled off. Would you like something to eat?"

"I think I'll get something on the way home," Kenneth said. "I need to be heading back."

"Alright then. Don't forget your stuff. Would you like some help getting it?" Mary Lou asked.

"I got it. Thanks!" Kenneth hopped smoothly off the porch into the grass, avoiding the azalea bushes between the patio and the yard. "I'll see you next weekend if I don't see you before then."

"Ok. See ya' later, Ken." She watched him collect the scattered weapons from the yard and sat contemplating her empty glass long after he left. The house behind her was also unoccupied.

To her relief, tonight was meeting night for the rest of the family. The fact that they had gone to a masonic function left her both safe and to her own devices, and she didn't have her grandmother watching in disapproval when Kenneth was there. It wouldn't do to have herself being seen as 'less than a girl,' she thought wryly and nearly laughed aloud.

"Girls don't do this stuff, huh?" she muttered. "Just because you never did!" Mary Lou snorted. "And yeah, I had a guy over with you not here, so sue me! Like I'll even tell you." No one was there to answer, so no reply from the absent Grandmother was forthcoming.

It was nearly dark by the time Mary Lou finally went inside. The crickets began to sing, and the dove, which liked to roost across the street in the tall Cedar tree, was cooing. An evening breeze made itself felt through her open window as she prepared for bed.

"Mmm, today must have been laundry day," she said aloud. The bedsheets smelled faintly of flowers. She sniffed with enjoyment when she crawled between her blankets. The scent accompanied her thoughts into sleep and deep into dreaming.

Carly and Mary Lou left the house and decided to walk down a dirt path. Everything was bright on the clear summer day. They followed the way through a field and then into pine woods. As they entered the forest, they saw a large rock on the side of the path. It was just big enough for both girls to sit on, and they climbed to the top of it. There was a nice view, and Mary Lou remarked that it reminded her of happy times. They

climbed down and continued walking down the path. They went deeper into the woods and came to a stream they splashed their way across.

Further beyond, the woods opened up again to a large clearing, there were many sweet-smelling flowers, and a beautiful pale-colored butterfly fluttered past. Carly chased it and finally caught it. Mary Lou stood beside her to look at it. Suddenly, the butterfly changed from a white color to the blackest of blacks and started growing larger. Carly opened her hands and dropped it, startled. They stood frightened as it grew exponentially bigger. It grew so large it towered over them as a looming threat of death.

Startled out of her sleep, Mary Lou woke to struggle in her blankets. She could still see the huge black butterfly with its wings outstretched over them in her mind.

It took several seconds for Mary Lou to realize she was simply in her bed, and that was the reality rather than the pictures which had formed in her dreams. She rose, threw on a robe, and stumbled to the kitchen for a drink of water. Her mouth felt like cotton. Bags sat on the kitchen table. Those had not been there when she went to bed. It meant her grandparents were home and likely in bed.

She tightened her lips and pulled her robe tighter around her body. All was quiet. She tiptoed silently back to her room to go back to sleep, feeling as if some impending doom was about to strike. Given everything else that had happened, could things get any worse? Except for the body found in the lake, her grandparents were none the wiser. They had begun giving her odd looks, however. As if she needed more trouble without explaining stuff even she was having a hard time understanding, she thought. She lay awake for a time and again drifted off.

The butterfly then spread its wings and flew down the path in the same direction the girls were walking. The girls started walking again when it was out of sight until the forest closed in. They saw a cup lying beside the pathway as they started up a hill. Carly picked it up, and when Mary Lou asked to see it, she handed it over. It was bright silver and shaped like a chalice with one word written on it, "ACCEPTANCE." The girls looked ahead where not far in front of them, they saw thorn bushes completely blocking the path. They paused, disappointed. The

other side was dark, and they could not see through the veil of branches. They formed a thorny hedgerow.

Mary Lou wanted to find a way through. She told Carly to look to one side of the natural growing fence, and Mary Lou looked to the other side. They did not immediately find a way in.

Mary Lou, breakfast! Mary Lou!" A loud knock jerked her up out of sleep again. "You can't sleep all day. You still have a few days of school left!" Her grandmother was leaning in the door. Her short curly gray hair lacked its usual neat appearance. So her grandmother hadn't been up long.

Mary Lou opened her eyes and saw that light was filtering in. "It's morning already?" she whined.

"What time did you go to bed?" her grandmother asked.

"Same time as usual," Mary Lou grumbled. "I was just in the middle of a disturbing dream."

"Well, I can't do anything about that. Get up and eat. You've got to get out in time to see if the ferry is running this morning. It was out yesterday evening," her grandmother admonished.

"I might as well go ahead and plan to drive the long way around then," Mary Lou yawned. "That way, I can save myself some time."

On her way to school, Mary Lou had a hard time focusing. Reality kept seeming to want to bend, and the other world superimposed itself on her waking awareness. She found herself driving the familiar route by rote in a near trance while more of the night's dream played out in her mind.

Carly found a tiny opening to the left of the path, and although it looked too small, the two girls decided to squeeze through anyway. The time it took to go through seems to last hours in total darkness, as if they were being birthed, yet they kept going. They finally emerged with relief. They looked back and were surprised they had made it through such a small opening. Oddly, light filtered through the hedge from the other side.

The new view was visually stunning. A waterfall dropped into a clear stream that was gently disturbed by ripples. Mary Lou bent down to drink the cool water. Carly's breath caught,

and Mary Lou looked up. A unicorn approached in a friendly manner and spoke to them.

"Trouble is brewing, and we as well as all the innocents are in danger. There is a sword which must be retrieved from its resting place which will help fight what is coming," he said. "There is a path to enlightenment if you come this way."

Before the unicorn could speak further, a dark figure rose and cast a spell that turned the unicorn black. The girls wanted to help him, but he remained black though the unicorn freed himself of the magic holding him prisoner. He left the girls for a short while and returned with a blue hippogriff that looked like pieces and parts of a lion, an eagle, and a horse. They bid the girls climb on their backs, and the girls were taken to a cave behind the waterfall. They were instructed to go inside. Once there, Mary Lou found a sword lying where it was placed to wait on its new wielder. The two girls picked it up together, and Mary Lou took the bare sword as they returned to their mounts. They went riding through the forest, where others joined them.

Eventually, they came to a hill as the forest thinned to a meadow. They stopped, facing a dark figure and his followers. The two girls led off, and a great battle began.

Che sound of metal clanking and the car going over a gentle bump brought Mary Lou back to reality with a jolt. She was still driving down the deserted back road and not paying attention to what was happening around her. For a split second, she wondered how she'd gotten from home to here.

"What the fu...! Oh, my God!" Mary Lou's eyes widened as she casually checked her rearview mirror. Startled and brought out of her reverie, she quickly looked down both lengths of the railroad tracks behind her that she had just crossed three seconds before.

She realized a freight train rolled behind her car, and she could not see the train's engine due to distance. It had traveled behind her on both sides of her car around the curves without her noticing. It could have only been seconds before that she had crossed the tracks. As she looked, Mary Lou realized that the signal where the railroad tracks crossed the road was not clanging, nor was the light flashing. She glared at the dead signal post.

"How in the heck did I just get across there without being hit by the train! Did I phase through the thing? And why aren't the

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lights working or the train whistling or something!" she said aloud in the quiet interior of the car.

As the realization hit how near death she had come, she began to shake with reaction. She hadn't seen the train until she had crossed the tracks. Also, she had made it to the tracks behind the K-25 plant with no realization of how she'd passed the time.

Mary Lou pulled over at the side of the road until she could quit shaking. "Note to self: Never trust railroad signals ever again! I had best pay attention to where I'm going too!" she told herself aloud.

Long after the train was gone, Mary Lou pulled back onto the road and continued on her way. School was not going to be polite enough to wait on her.



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CONFESSiON

JUNE 1985

School wound up, and graduation ceremonies ended without incident despite the intense tension they all felt. Despite her disadvantages, Mary Lou had won the art scholarship, and Sierra was planning to enter the college's business program. They weren't ready to think about more school, however. After the stress of the past months and the prospect of freedom ahead for the summer, the teens were ready to relax and celebrate.

"Oh good, Carly made it!" Sierra exclaimed as, for once, Mary Lou arrived first. "I was hoping she'd come with you," Sierra called to them from the backyard as they exited the car.

"She's out for the summer and spending time with me for a few days," Mary Lou said. "Besides, tomorrow she's going to go with me to help me pick out a kitten. My Uncle's cat had kittens with a stray female. They found the kitty run over on the highway, so they pulled a batch of kittens out from under the house. They are feeding the babies with a bottle anyway, so I'm going to take one of them."

"That's cool," Sierra said. "I like dogs better than cats, though." Sierra turned to go in and stopped to pet the head of a large slender grayish dog before opening the screen door. "Come on inside. We've got plenty of food if you're hungry. Mom rented some movies that we can watch." The animal looked at Mary Lou and Carly suspiciously as they passed and turned to slink away and settle under a large evergreen.

"I'm starving. I should have eaten lunch, but it got later than I realized." Mary Lou turned to her sister. "What about you? Are you hungry?"

"Before I left the house, I had a candy bar and soda, but I could eat," Carly told her.

"Yummy, food of champions!" Mary Lou laughed sarcastically. "Why don't we check out the buffet?"

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They were filling their plates when the screen door banged open. Bryan's distinct laugh greeted their ears. "Yeah, I made it! I told you I'd come, and I'm here. Rachel's right behind me, but I think she made a stop at the market," he told Sierra. Bryan looked around and spotted Mary Lou and Carly attacking the offerings on the table. "I see you decided to start eating without me! Did you leave me anything?"

"Just a bite or two. Here, have a plate!" Mary Lou offered.

"Heh, don't mind if I do." Bryan took the plate and began filling it.

"I'm here! Hey, something smells good," Kenneth's lighter voice came through the door, followed by the rest of him.

"In here, Ken!" Bryan called. "You're missing the party!"

"Nah, it can get started now that I'm here." Kenneth gave Bryan a high five as he passed. "Who are we missing?"

"Rachel hasn't gotten here yet."

"Well, looks like she better hurry before the food's all gone."

Sierra swept back into the room. "Hey, you guys don't have to stand around holding your plates. Go on in the living room and have a seat."

"You sure your mom won't mind?" Mary Lou asked.

"It'll be fine," Sierra told her.

Green and brown were the dominant colors in the room. It was simply furnished with a large television forming the focal point. Bookshelves lined one wall, and a few boxes holding records sat beside a record player. A large vinyl couch and padded chairs finished out the room. A set of stairs beside the kitchen door led to a second floor, and another set of doors on the far side of the room led to a small bath and a bedroom.

Rachel finally dragged herself in behind the rest and came in with a plate in her hand.

"Is that your room?" Carly asked Sierra as she settled on the couch beside her.

"No, my room is upstairs. That's mom's room through there. I have more space up there anyway, and I've got a bit of a view."

"That's cool. My room's on top too," Carly told her. "We live in a split level."

"Knoxville, right?" Sierra asked.

"Yeah, north Knoxville," Carly said. "We can see the TV towers over on top of Sharp's Ridge from our house."

"Then you're out near East Town mall," Bryan observed.

"Not far, but not that close either," Mary Lou said. "She's close enough we can stop and pick her up on the way if we want

to go out to the mall for a movie. She's pretty much on the way from here."

"Have you ever been to the New Age store there?" Rachel asked. "Bryan and I went up there the other week, and they have some really cool stuff."

"Like what?" Carly asked curiously.

"Jewelry, crystals, books, music, and stuff. They had a huge amethyst that stood about waist high. It was gorgeous," Rachel said. "I would have loved to have it, but it was expensive."

"Oh, they have geodes there? Hmm. Maybe we should go check it out." Mary Lou's interest was piqued. "Dad took us up to Kentucky to his family's old place and showed us how to find geodes and dig them out."

"We came home with buckets full of the things," Carly said. "It's easier to go buy them," she laughed.

"I thought going and digging in the dirt for them was fun." Her sister grinned. "There's a bunch of caves in that area too. I would have loved to go caving as well, but Dad said we didn't have time for him to show me where they were."

Sierra grew still, and the color drained from her face at the mention of caves. She resisted a shudder, almost.

"Cold?" Kenneth asked her with a questioning gaze. He frowned at her answer.

"No. I'm fine," Sierra said with a half-smile.

"Hmmm..." He decided to let it go even though he knew something was up. He knew his friends well enough by now to recognize when anything was amiss.

No one else noticed anything. The conversation continued without Sierra's input. Once everyone was finished eating and settled back in the living room, Sierra put a smile on and settled in to play hostess. She walked over to the television and rummaged in a box set to the side.

"We have some movies we can watch if anyone is interested." Sierra held up a couple of brightly colored movie cases.

"How about a horror movie?" Bryan suggested.

"Whatcha' got?" Rachel asked.

"In horror movies? We have Amityville Horror, Friday the 13th, or Psycho II." Sierra answered somewhat reluctantly.

"Ewww, no thanks. I don't like horror movies. Besides, I think I've had enough of that lately already for real." Mary Lou shuddered to remember the bloated mess they'd found in the water.

Mary Lou Wells

"Yes, but we all know the movies aren't real." Bryan chuckled. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he said.

"Huh, sure, I know it's all pretend. But I have too much imagination, and I get nightmares watching the bad ones. I just don't find being scared entertaining," Mary Lou told him.

"Well, I can go ahead and put it on, and anybody that don't want to watch don't have to," Sierra said.

"In that case, I can go for Amityville," Kenneth piped up.

"Alright. I will watch it with you guys," Mary Lou gave in. "I don't have to look."

"How can you watch it if you aren't going to look?" Bryan asked.

"Never mind, just go ahead," Mary Lou said and waved her hand at the TV. "I saw parts of it before anyway at a slumber party."

Mary Lou lasted through the opening credits and first scene but quickly had her fill. Uncomfortable, she returned to the kitchen and claimed a small plate of cake. She considered further retreat outside, then found a seat at the table. She thought better of eating in front of the big dog she'd seen at a glance on the way in. Sierra interrupted Mary Lou's reverie.

"You've got icing on your cheek." Sierra grinned at her.

"Oh, yeah, where?" Mary Lou asked.

"Just there." Sierra pointed out as she passed and headed toward the stairs.

"Oh, thanks."

"I take it you don't wanna finish watching the movie with us," Sierra said. "That's ok. I don't really like it either." She felt her own smile. It was becoming pained as she forced it.

Mary Lou saw something in Sierra's eyes. Somehow, she looked haunted but with a hard look that glittered when her friend looked at her. She didn't understand the undercurrent.

"Are you okay?" Mary Lou wanted to know.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm on my way upstairs for a minute. I have some other movies up there that aren't quite as bad."

"Good idea," Mary Lou said. "I can never get past the blood in the sink scene. Something else sounds excellent to me."

"Do you want to come up with me to my room?"

"Sure. I'd like to see your room," Mary Lou told Sierra. "Oh wait! Let me finish my cake and get the crumbs off in the trash, and I'll join you in a minute."

"Okay, but it won't take long," Sierra said and turned to go upstairs.

When Sierra reached her room, she sat down on her bed instead of looking for the movies she had used as an excuse to get away. It was peaceful up here, and she didn't have to hear the screams from the movie. "Mary Lou is right," Sierra whispered aloud. "We didn't need this tonight, or at least I didn't need it."

Sierra didn't like to admit it, but she still suffered nightmares from the attack of whatever that dark thing was at school, and Tyrone. She kept seeing his face superimposed on her nightmares. She fervently wished she'd never entered that thrice-damned cave! Thinking about it and then later, the dead guy in the water made her skin crawl. She wasn't about to admit how freaked out she still felt, especially to Mary Lou or Kenneth. She wanted to look good in front of the guys, and Mary Lou always seemed to have it going on.

Sierra felt a small stab of jealousy when she thought about how some of the guys at school looked at her friend. She knew Mary Lou was oblivious to the attention she drew. Not everyone thought she was gay. How could she compete with somebody cute and rich like her? She knew it was an uncharitable thought, but she couldn't help it. She really hung around with Mary Lou and Rachel because she hoped one of their guy friends might like her.

She glared at herself with disgust in the mirror. She reached out her hand to throw something, anything at her reflection. She came up with a handful of the beads she'd been sorting earlier. Most of the beads were in a small plastic sandwich bag. In a fit of emotional pique, she drew back and threw the beads at her reflection in the mirror. *Piss on everybody! It just isn't fair!* She wanted to shout. *When do I ever get what I want!*

The beads pinged as they hit the mirror in the exact center. They bounced off and fell to the floor with a dull rattle of plastic. Sierra blanched as she watched a crack develop in the glass. Crap! Her mom would kill her for damaging expensive furniture! Something much more insidious spread out from the crack. Her imagination traveled back to the smothering darkness of the cave. Sierra struggled not to hyperventilate as the room seemed to darken and close in around her. It felt like a serpent coiled around her chest, squeezing, as her eyes locked on the growing horror in front of her.

"No! No! Not again!" She put her hands over her ears to drown out the noise before she realized it was her own voice that deafened her. "It's not real. It's not real, it's not real!" Sierra insisted. As that voice came again, she let go in full panic.

Sierra's screams penetrated down the stairs. Everyone jumped, startled.

"That's not the movie!" Kenneth said. He was returning from the bathroom. He paused a moment. "What the fu...!"

"Sierra!" Mary Lou yelled. "Ken, upstairs!" Mary Lou was already moving, but Kenneth still beat her to the top of the stairs as he took them two at a time. Carly was close behind as the rest of the gathering followed to fill the doorway.

It took moments for Kenneth to assess what was happening. Carly absorbed the scene a split second later.

"Oh, my God!" Carly exclaimed.

Kenneth grabbed Carly's hand and pulled her behind him. "Everybody, get down! No, wait, Mary Lou, get over here now!"

Sierra cowered in the corner of her room. She sobbed; her white face turned toward a large dressing mirror on the other side of her bed. A large crack expanded and what looked like a dark fog blanketed the glass. A huge robed figure appeared to be coming together in the mirror as the face of a more normally-appearing human pleaded for help with his eyes.

"Tyrone!" Sierra yelled. "Go away!"

The glass completely disappeared to be displaced by a void, and two voices issued forth. One of them was the African-American boy that looked out at them.

"Help me! Sierra, how did you get away?" The tall figure behind him stretched forth what appeared to be a black tentacle of darkness and strangled off the young man's words.

"You can't play games with me." The other voice was rich, deep, and sinister. It seemed to drip blood and venom onto the ears. "There you are, little girl," it laughed. "You didn't escape after all. You are welcome to join me, daughter." The contempt and scorn were plain to be heard.

The dark figure moved and grew larger in the split second before Kenneth grabbed both Carly and Mary Lou's hands. It seemed to see the rest of them for the first time.

"Ingegerd! Bitch!" it shouted at the young girl who held Kenneth's hand. It roared at them and forgot all about Sierra and the misuse of the hated beads that had broken open a portal for its attack.

Carly blanched, and her heart began to race. In faint recognition, a fury such as she'd never felt before rose in her.

"Concentrate! Blast it!" Kenneth cursed. "No time, just do what I say!" he demanded. Instinctively they understood and responded. They drew closer and joined their will to his.

"Leave!" Kenneth demanded of the apparition. "I SAID LEAVE!" he repeated with force in his voice born of practiced chi energy. Kenneth managed to mostly shield the girls as they turned their backs to shattering glass.

The resulting silence was punctuated only by Sierra's soft sobbing, where she sat crumpled in the corner.

All except for Sierra stood looking at each other in shock. Rachel's eyes were huge and frightened. Bryan was calm but thoughtful as he surveyed the mess of shattered shards all over the floor.

"Well, that was a ten on my weird shit-o-meter," Kenneth said as Bryan nodded in agreement. "Sierra has some explaining to do this time."

He reached out a hand to help Sierra up as Mary Lou rushed to assist. "This time, I'm not taking any excuses for an answer. Whatever you are involved in, it's bigger than you and probably bigger than all of us. But if you don't talk to us, there's little we can do to help you. So start talking!" Kenneth demanded, almost yelling at her.

Sierra sobbed harder as they waited for her to calm. "I'm scared," she managed to say in between sobs.

"With good reason, it appears," Mary Lou said. "Why don't we go downstairs? I'll get her a drink and give her time to calm down. We can talk then."

"That's a good idea," Bryan said. "Can you make it?"

Sierra nodded. She was beginning to calm down now that her friends were helping her. What had just happened? Evidently, Kenneth was able to make something of it because he'd made it stop.

They walked out of the bedroom and left everything lying where it was. Everyone filed downstairs and through the kitchen. Rachel thoughtfully and quietly turned off the movie and returned.

"Well?" Rachel demanded. "I'm waiting for an explanation."

"You aren't going to like it if what I think this is happens to be real," Bryan said.

"Oh, it's real enough," Kenneth responded. "You can't deny what's in front of your face, and it's hard to ignore a room full of broken glass."

Carly thought hard. "That was a demon spirit of some kind, wasn't it? I swear I've seen or heard that thing before. I just can't place it." Carly looked puzzled.

"Maybe," Kenneth said. "It's hard to tell at this point. We need to know more before we can determine what or who it is."

"A demon?" Rachel said in dismay. "That's all we need now, isn't it? More dark stuff to deal with. Oh boy, here we go!"

"There's a reason for everything," Kenneth responded as calmly as he was able. "We'll figure this out." He wished he felt as confident as he sounded. "Let's all go sit down," he suggested.

As they all trailed into the living room, Bryan turned around and looked out the door. "Oh, hey. You want in?" Bryan said to the large gray dog that was scratching frantically at the outer door. "You need a doggie door," he told it sympathetically as it padded past him, acting as if it belonged.

It stopped in the kitchen and sniffed. "No, be a good dog and don't get into the food," Bryan told it and petted it on the head. But the large animal wasn't interested in the food or petting. He went to the open door of the living room and sat down for several moments when he saw Sierra. Sierra looked up and realized he was there with some surprise but was still too distraught to say anything. When Kenneth saw it, his eyebrows nearly hit his hairline.

It whined a bit, yawning, and sniffed again. With that, he turned and went up the stairs. Moments later, they heard him thumping lightly back down the stairs. He went to Sierra without hesitation and dropped the pack of blue beads directly into her lap.

Sierra jumped and nearly started sobbing again. With disgust, she took them and nearly tossed them into the wastebasket beside the couch where she sat.

"Wait!" Kenneth held up his hand. "Don't throw that away."

"Why not?" Sierra asked. "Do you want these? You can have them. I don't want anything to do with them," she said fervently and handed them to him.

"Multiple reasons," he answered. "Not the least of which is, you all *do* realize that is *not* a dog?"

Bryan took a good look at what he'd let into the house. It was tall and so slender as to be gangly. Its large upright ears framed a foxy-looking head and face. "Oh, crap. Boy, do I feel foolish. You're right. That is not a dog."

"Yeah, so?" Sierra said defensively around her sniffles. She was used to defending her 'pet' to her mother, and she didn't need anyone else giving her a hard time over him.

"So, you don't think it's odd that a wild coyote would waltz into your house and just happen to help himself to something,

and then bring it to you directly after you were just under spiritual attack?"

Sierra gave him a blank look. She was trying hard not to sob uncontrollably. "I know..."

"He's not a dog, but mom doesn't realize it."

"Yes, well, I know these aren't just beads. I'm not stupid, and I'm not your mom!" Kenneth was nearly yelling at her in aggravation. He could feel the beads buzzing with power in his hand.

"I'm not stupid either!" Sierra objected, yelling back at him. She looked around at the others, who kept silent and listened to their verbal byplay. She would get no help from them, she realized. She was trapped into coming clean at last after hoping for months that it had all been just a bad dream.

"You don't get it, do you?" Kenneth gave her a scathing look that showed teeth. "You've lied to us long enough. Three questions. What really happened? Where did you get the beads? Where did the coyote come from?" His tone brooked no argument, and his chocolate brown eyes glared at Sierra. He was angry. This situation was not a joke, and Sierra had obviously been hiding very important details from them all.

"I... uh... found those. The coyote just showed up one day and stayed," Sierra sobbed.

"Okay, and?" Kenneth didn't relent. "Where did you find the beads?"

"A...a...a cave," Sierra sobbed harder.

Kenneth kept looking at her expectantly. He held his left hand out and dumped the beads into his hand from out of the bag. "Give me the whole story," he said more gently. Yelling at Sierra wasn't getting him anywhere, he realized. He raised his eyebrows again in response to the coyote nuzzling his hand with his nose. "Sierra, we need to know everything, and obviously this isn't the first time this has happened, given that this is the second time you've been hit with a broken mirror." He looked pointedly at the network of thin cuts on Sierra's hands.

Sierra shook herself to try to clear her head and took the drink that Mary Lou placed in her hand. She opened her mouth, and nothing wanted to come out. She worked her mouth like a fish out of water.

"This could take a while," Bryan observed. "But Ken's right. This is some serious shit, and we need to know what we're dealing with here. I have a feeling, somehow in my gut, that all

this stuff is connected. I'd like to know why and what it has to do with us."

"Me too!" Rachel piped up.

Bryan looked darkly at the beautiful beads his friend held. He, too, could feel the power emanating from them as, like Kenneth, Bryan was also a sensitive, though he knew that he was not anywhere near as strong in that department as his friend. "What are you getting off those, Ken?"

With his eyes still on Sierra, Kenneth answered. "They are charged for some purpose," he said. "If I had to guess, these were binding something of power. If I had to guess some more..." He thought hard and looked piercingly at Sierra. "I think she has something to do with releasing what you saw in the mirror just now."

"Why do you think that?" Mary Lou asked him.

"Because of the way that thing was going after Sierra. It was acting like she has something it wants."

"I don't want them!" Sierra said fervently.

"Well, guess what?" Kenneth said intently to Sierra. "It's too late! You're stuck with them until we figure this out, or you tell us what happened so we can figure out what to do with them where nobody else will get hurt!"

"I don't care!" Sierra nearly started sobbing again. "I just want those things away from me!"

"You selfish...! Okay, let's back up." Kenneth took a deep breath. "Just tell us where and how you found these and what happened. Don't make me ask again."

Sierra took a long drink and relented after a deep, shuddering breath. "Alright, you guys. I don't understand any of it, though." Her eyes were vacant, staring out at something the rest couldn't see. She began speaking haltingly and then more strongly as she warmed to the tale. She didn't leave anything out from the time she entered the cave with Tyrone to her hasty panicked exit with the beads in hand. Sierra's face was pasty white when she was done. It was obvious to all of her friends that she was terrified. However, from what she'd just told them, none of them looked, or felt, a whole lot better.

"I was hoping it was all a dream or it would just go away." Sierra concluded.

"Sonufabitch!" Bryan swore. His face was nearly as white as Sierra's. "That thing is obviously NOT a dream, and it's something more than an astral critter trying to break through

from the other side," he trailed off. "So just what IS it, and now what do we do?"

Kenneth looked resigned and unhappy. "We don't do anything," he said. "If we go looking for trouble, we'll be sure to find it, and I don't think we can handle this one. We're in over our heads."

"I can't believe you just said that," Bryan replied with some irony. "You, not want to head straight into trouble?"

"Do I look stupid to you?" Kenneth gritted his teeth. "Breaking its connection to come here into this house is one thing. Going after IT is an entirely different ballgame!"

"Who suggested going after it?" Bryan asked.

"How else would we deal with it?" Kenneth said pointedly. "I don't know what it is exactly, and every possibility I can think of from Sierra's description is worse than the last and makes that thing we ran into at the park look like a cakewalk!"

"Are you sure it's not the same guy?" Rachel asked him.

"Of course not! But I'd call it highly unlikely," Kenneth said.

"Why is that?" Mary Lou asked softly. Carly silently leaned against her sister's shoulder. She was listening and processing everything without much to add.

Bryan looked at the girls and said what both boys were thinking. "Because of its location, what it said, and how it acted. It's pretty simple when you compare the two encounters. What Sierra ran into was a lot darker, though the guy at the park was bad enough."

Rachel was nearly as pale as Sierra and looked as if she wanted to cry. She spoke up hesitantly. "I don't want anything to do with any of it either," she declared. "But I have a question for you."

"What's that?"

"How are we any safer not doing anything since this stuff keeps coming for us?" Rachel asked.

"We aren't," Kenneth answered. "But I'm fresh out of ideas at the moment."

"Rachel has a point," Mary Lou said. "This demon thing has come for Sierra twice now, and not doing anything hasn't gained her anything. I, for one, am not willing to sit back and let it have its way and not say or do anything about it."

"What do you propose?" Carly finally spoke up.

"I don't know," Mary Lou said. "But surely we can do something. There's one of it and six of us after all." She grinned a bit, trying to pull everyone's spirits up. "The Shadow Angels

will stick together after all!” She held her hand up, and Sierra shakily gave her a high five. Somehow, Mary Lou’s calm infected the rest of the group.

“The Shadow Angels?” Kenneth said as he looked at Mary Lou.

She laughed a little. “Yes, inside joke, and it kinda stuck, I guess,” Mary Lou said. “We were talking about it that day we found the body in the river. You know how things always seem to happen to us, like a dark shadow that seems to want to follow the good girls around.”

“Oh, right, you said something about that already. Though I don’t know if you are angels or witches!” Kenneth allowed himself to grin.

“Witches. That’s not very nice!” Mary Lou said.

“Witches, witches, hmm,” Rachel mused but didn’t continue. She just looked thoughtful.

“It’s not necessarily a bad thing.” Kenneth grinned bigger.

Mary Lou wasn’t sure if he was teasing her or not, so she let it drop. Silence stretched. For a minute, the only sound in the room as everyone thought their own awkward thoughts was the sound of the coyote lying on the floor panting.

Everyone looked at the ‘dog’ on the floor. Sensing everyone looking at him, the coyote sat up and lolled his tongue. It gave him a silly expression. Kenneth and the coyote looked intently at each other before it got up and padded across the room to where Kenneth stood and nosed his hand. The coyote sniffed the beads and nudged Kenneth’s hand when the beads were lowered. A bright spark like a pop of static electricity hit the coyote’s nose, making him sneeze repeatedly and swipe his nose with his paw. It made Kenneth jump.

Thoughtfully, Kenneth looked back and forth from the coyote to the beads and around at everyone else. He felt that the rest of them were waiting on him to make a decision, to lead. Someone was going to have to say or do something. He had to admit to himself he was at a loss, though that rarely happened. He closed his hand over the beads with a sinking feeling. This was going to get very bad before it was over with he knew.

The perceived vibration in the hand holding the beads was almost painful. He knew from his own experience and reading of ancient texts, a hobby of his he didn’t talk about much, that the kind of power he held in his hand never, ever came without some kind of price attached. Would the price be too high for all of them? He wished he could answer that.

"Alright then, Shadow Angels or not, I suppose we will have to do something. Does anyone have any ideas?" They all looked blankly at one another. "Well, don't everybody speak at once!" Kenneth said with some frustration.

Rachel had sat and listened to the conversation with growing fear and frustration. But she was smart enough to realize that what they were facing was not going to stop until it had what it was after. Was it the beads? They could just get rid of those, right? But something bothered her about Sierra's story. Maybe the others could help her figure it out. If not, maybe that lady she'd met at the craft fair might be able to help them?

"I have an idea," Rachel said. "Ok, at first glance, it might seem that Sierra is right; getting rid of the beads would fix our problem. But if there's something special about them, just what if, instead of drawing trouble, the beads are actually protecting Sierra?"

"You don't know that," Sierra said, but she was listening.

"No, of course not. I don't know anything, but when you hold the beads, do you get attacked, or is it when you *DON'T* have them?"

Sierra thought carefully. "Except for in the cave, when I don't have them. Wait, no, when I picked them up, I was able to get out of there." Some shred of hope hit her, and her eyes brightened.

Rachel continued. "And the coyote is the other thing," she said. "He's not threatening anyone. Look at him. He's a wild animal, yet he's acting perfectly tame."

"Go on," Kenneth told her intently.

"He is the one going after the beads. I'd say that means they aren't bad necessarily."

"I'll buy that. So, what's your idea?" Kenneth responded.

"Well, it was when you said witches." Rachel blushed. "I met this fantastic lady at the last craft fair, a weaver. She said she's a witch, a pagan priestess. I got a box of books from her. There might be something in that stuff that could help identify the beads. I haven't really read much out of that box yet, but I can look."

"You met a witch and didn't tell us?" Sierra said.

"Well, I didn't think of it until just now. We've been a bit distracted after all." Rachel waved her hand to dismiss the question.

Carly sat up suddenly. "Well, if there isn't anything in the box that can help us figure out what they are, maybe somebody might

know. Maybe even the lady you met might be able to help us if she's willing."

"I don't know," Rachel said. "I almost don't want to bother her. Moira spends a lot of her time working, but I'm thinking the same thing."

"Moira? Huh, what an ironic name," Kenneth muttered. No one seemed to catch on when he sat up and took notice.

"We have a situation that warrants it," Bryan commented. "But we can try everything else first. Maybe the college library would have some information on stones and objects with some kind of mysticism attached."

"Like archaeological texts, legends, and similar works," Kenneth stated.

"Exactly," Bryan said.

"Then, maybe one of the professors might know something if we showed them?" Mary Lou suggested.

"I doubt it, but it sounds like we have a plan," Kenneth said. "At least we won't be sitting around doing nothing, which, of course, is the other option. Just saying, you know."

"I've got that box in my living room over at the house. I think I might have seen a book on stones and crystals in there," Rachel said. "Sierra, why don't you come with me for a bit? Let's get you out of here. Your mom's not going to be home for a while. We'll get the mess in your room cleaned up later."

"That's probably a good idea," Bryan agreed. "I'll go with you, and when we get back, I'll help you get the glass up."

They rose, and the coyote followed the three of them out the door. The others heard the car doors shut, and Rachel's heavy engine start from inside. Mary Lou and Carly both noted that Kenneth still stood holding the beads. He looked distracted.

"What is it, Ken? Other than the obvious, of course," Mary Lou asked him. "Are you OK?"

Kenneth looked intently at Mary Lou. "Yeah, I'm fine, but come feel this," he said.

"What?" She looked puzzled but walked across the room to where he stood.

Instead of replying, he held his hand out, took her hand, and dropped the beads in her palm. "Now, relax. Open your mind and tell me what you feel."

She jumped, startled. "They vibrate!" she exclaimed. "They are making my whole hand tingle." She wanted to wipe her palm on something but resisted the urge. It wouldn't do any good.

"Ick, it sets my teeth on edge too and gives me the chills!" Mary Lou shivered slightly.

"But not in a bad way," Kenneth said. "It's just strong energy you're feeling. There's no threat here." He chewed his lip before saying anything else. "Huh, interesting," he added.

"I think I'll put these back in the bag now," Mary Lou said. She picked up the plastic bag and placed the beads in it.

"So, Ken. Here's the big three-dollar question." Carly got up and went to her sister. "Can I feel?" She took the beads herself, waited a minute, and her eyes widened.

"What's the question?" Kenneth responded.

"How do you do that, and how do you know all this stuff?" Carly asked.

"Do what, exactly?" Kenneth smiled slightly.

Carly waved her hand in the air. "All of this. You knew what to do when that thing was trying to come through the mirror, and you seem to know more than you are saying about a lot of stuff."

"I've been around," he answered. "Besides, I read, and I feel and see things, sometimes before they happen," he paused. "This time, I don't see much except fog surrounding the future. I'm sensing more trouble coming, and that's it."

"You too?" Carly almost whispered. She looked at her sister's friend intently. "I get those feelings and pictures as well. This time, there's something I think we have to do. We aren't going to be given a choice."

"Well, in that case." Kenneth let his thought drop.

"No, seriously," Carly told him earnestly. "I have been having dreams, and something about that thing in the mirror is familiar. I can't put my finger on it, but I know it's important."

"You said something about this before. Have you had any broken mirrors?" Kenneth asked her.

"No, but then again, it just saw me for the first time. What I've been seeing is like something half-remembered or like moving pictures someone wants me to see, and it's always the same," Carly said.

"And, you're how old?" Kenneth raised one eyebrow, half kidding, and winked at her.

"I'm twelve, almost thirteen," Carly answered seriously.

"I'm teasing you," Kenneth said. "You're stronger than you look or anyone gives you credit for. But, how often is this happening?"

"Almost every night," Carly replied. "I'm seeing more and more. I'm seeing things before they happen, and they almost always seem to come true."

"Oracle." Kenneth told her as his eyes unfocused slightly. "You are an oracle, just like your sister said," he said more strongly. "And more than that, I have a feeling you are the key to all of this." Kenneth waved his hand around in the air.

Carly just stared at him and didn't answer. She sat back on the couch. "I am not sure what to say to that," she finally stated.

Mary Lou thought hard. Softly, where the others could barely hear, she spoke the decision she'd made as Rachel, Bryan, and Sierra left. "We need more. We need more of everything. We need to know more, we need some kind of training in how to deal with this, and we need a plan. I want to go to the college library, and I want to talk to the witch if I can."

For the next several minutes, they worried at the problem with no further progress. Rachel's return with the other two yielded two books. One book was titled "Diary of a Witch" with a plain red hardback cover, and there was another on stones and crystals. Neither book seemed to yield any clues.

"This isn't helping," Mary Lou complained. In spite of herself, however, her nose was buried in the book on witchcraft. "Huh, this is interesting." She trailed off, having gotten distracted from the conversation.

"When you start reading a book, that's it for you for the rest of the day!" Sierra observed. Mary Lou didn't answer.

Sierra just shook her head. She was feeling somewhat calmer. She still didn't want to face going upstairs yet, however. Her fear still sat at the back of her mind, and she felt as if the very Devil himself was after her.

"Huh?" Mary Lou's head jerked up, and she realized everyone was looking at her. "Oh, sorry, but look at this picture! There's a photo of this lady here, and it says she's raising the wind. Is that even possible?"

"Anything is possible, I suppose, if you know what you're doing," Rachel said. She looked at the picture Mary Lou was pointing at on the book's page. Her interest was piqued too. "Maybe we can 'blow' that creepy guy away!"

"I think the good-ole-boys could take care of that one," Kenneth said grimly. "A shotgun or two could take care of the problem right nice, except we don't know what or who this is yet."

"I don't know, Ken. I am not sure that kind of violence will solve the problem in this particular case," Bryan said doubtfully. "It might be like trying to shoot a ghost. It could go right through him. Not all of what I saw a little bit ago appeared solid. Although to be sure, that idea sounds pretty damn good to me about now." His mind wandered longingly to the gun he kept hidden in his car. He resisted the urge to bounce on his toes.

"Bryan is right," Carly said. "I could see through it, and it didn't move right. And something else is bothering me."

"What's that?" Bryan asked.

"Sierra's description the first time she saw it. It sounds like it was stuck there for some reason. Maybe it got loose, but why couldn't it come after her when she left the cave or just get her then? Rachel's right, the beads might be something, but that seems too simple. There has to be more of an answer."

"Sierra, was there anything else that you can remember seeing in the cave besides that ghost, demon, or whatever it is?" Carly asked Sierra.

"No." Sierra shook her head. "No. Wait!" Her eyes widened as she thought. "There was something else. I barely saw them as I left! Bones! It IS a ghost!"

"No, sweetie," Kenneth said gently. "It doesn't look like or behave like a ghost. A ghost is attached to a location. It wouldn't have come after you the way it has if it was a ghost."

"Then what?" Sierra squinted, thinking.

"Oh hell!" A thought occurred to Bryan. He wanted to keep cursing. He'd thought that certain things were just in the game systems they played. However, he was smart enough to recognize that fiction can be based on fact disguised so that certain parts are palatable. He remembered the behavior of the guy they'd seen briefly that Sierra called Tyrone vs. the dark floating form. Put with the new information, his heart dropped. Could it be? They were dealing with a visible entity, bones, and who all knew what else might be in that cave. Was there something else besides the beads that would anchor or release some horrible monster?

"What now, Bryan?" Kenneth asked pointedly. "You've got some thought. Let's hear it."

"Just a theory and no way to prove anything," Bryan said earnestly. "But I hate to say this. We need to go to that cave and look around."

"No! I am not going back there ever again! There's nothing there I want to see and nothing in it for me to go back in there!" Sierra turned white again at the thought.

"We may not end up with a choice," Kenneth agreed with his friend. "But at this point, we'll save that for later."

"You can go! I won't!" she repeated vehemently.

"Sierra no one is going to make you do anything you don't want to do!" Mary Lou assured her. "In this case, if they are right, we'll all stick together, and you will be fine."

Sierra glared at Mary Lou, and then she appeared to relax. "OK, we are Shadow Angels after all," Sierra grinned a little.

"That's better," Rachel piped up, and Carly nodded. "We're all in this together, right?"

"Right!" Sierra responded. Her reply felt flat as it came from her lips.

"Deal?" Rachel put her hand out. The rest placed their hands on hers.

"Deal!" they all said.

Secretly, Sierra's thoughts were less than charitable, and she felt anger rise. No way was she going to do what they were asking. She couldn't! She felt like the proverbial snake in the grass snapping at the heels of something she couldn't control. Now that imagery gave her something to latch onto that was strong enough to push back the threatening darkness, a rattlesnake, spitting venom in the eye of her enemy! Suddenly she didn't feel quite so grim



19

SEEKING ANSWERS

Professor Holderman felt completely thunderstruck. At the moment, he could do little but stare at the three young ladies in his office with his mouth open. His heart sank to his shoes as they explained what they wanted and showed him what was in their possession.

Oh dear God! No! This was the last thing he'd expected, and it had started out as such a normal day! The one who seemed to be the spokesperson for the other two was the same girl he'd seen at the high school's prom night. Several weeks ago, she had been the girl in his dream and was now the bearer of bad news. She'd introduced herself as Mary Lou.

"So basically, we were hoping you could tell us what these are. Sierra here stumbled across these in a local cave in Rockwood and picked them up. We've gone through books on stones, crystals, and even some archaeological texts and can't find anything. We asked at the Library, and they said you were the one to talk to. The Librarian said that since we'd found polished beads in a cave, they might be Native American in origin."

Professor Holderman considered as Mary Lou held out a strand of beautiful blue star sapphire beads of the same special kind that he'd found in his own youth. He wasn't surprised to feel his temples start to throb. He rubbed them to buy himself some time to think and decide how to respond. *What have you done!* He wanted to shout at the smirking girl silently sitting on the other side of his desk as her friend did all the talking. But he realized it would do no good. She had no idea the true cost of her mistake.

Professor Holderman wanted to just throw them all out of his office and tell them to stay out of it and forget about it. But his remembered dream kept him from acting on that impulse. Maybe there was some middle ground.

"I would like to help you ladies. But I don't have the information you seek," he answered with a partial truth. "I can say without any doubt that those are indeed Native American in origin, and since you found them in a cave, I would venture that you have found an artifact. Artifacts belong where they are buried. They should never be carried away from where they were put to start with. Some things are burial items that you shouldn't disturb." He stared pointedly at Sierra, who looked away awkwardly.

Mary Lou sighed. "I can't argue that point," she muttered. "Especially after..." she trailed off. Would the professor believe her if she told him what else they'd seen? She strongly doubted it, but they really needed help! She stood undecided with her lips pursed, thinking what to say next.

"After?" Professor Holderman inquired tensely. "Is there something else?"

Rachel broke in and plunged ahead. "Do you know anything about ghosts?"

"Ghosts," he said. "Like things that go bump in the night?" The professor covered his visceral reaction to the question in this context by raising an eyebrow and attempting to appear matter-of-fact.

Mary Lou didn't quite glare at Rachel. "No, as in things that attack you for no reason," she said. "I can tell you know something more than you're saying, and we have a real problem. We need real answers. If you don't have them, please point us to someone who might."

The Professor sighed. "I don't doubt it," he said. "Alright, one of you shut the door there behind you."

The wooden door sounded loud in the confines of the office as it closed. Rachel winced as she had been the one to push it closed with more force than was necessary. "Sorry," she said.

"It's still on the hinges, so I'm sure it's fine," the professor said. "Alright. Yes, I do know something, and what you are holding in your hand means we are all potentially in deep trouble," he began. The girls nodded and didn't look surprised. "I don't have all of the information you need. You're going to need to search in the right place for answers to the usage of the beads, which you obviously have figured out are more than what they seem. I can't help you with that part. All I know is that they have protective and binding properties."

"So, have you seen anything like these before?" Sierra asked the professor.

"Yes, I have. Like you, I saw them in a cave. Unlike you, I didn't pick them up."

"So you've been in that cave? Did you see something there?" Sierra perked up.

Professor Holderman glared at Sierra. "It was a long time ago and a different cave," he said. "While I don't know much about the beads except what I've told you, I do know about these caves. I stumbled on one as a boy, and I knew enough not to go messing with what I found there," he said. "The fact that you did leaves you, and by extension me, with as you said, 'a problem.'"

"Why you?" Mary Lou asked.

Professor Holderman reached out to a picture frame on his desk and turned a photo around to face the girls. They recognized the figure and mode of dress of the fellow in the photograph as Native American. "My ancestors were tasked with guarding this area and specific locations to prevent certain items, shall we say, from falling into the wrong hands. Sacred ground is held in reverence. These areas are held in fear of what they contain."

Mary Lou looked intently at Professor Holderman. "You are Native American," she observed. She recognized the bone structure similar to that of her own father, plus the dark skin. "I have it in my family," she said.

"Modern society calls us Cherokee," the professor agreed. "We became the Tsalagi which is the proper term for my people. There are legends which precede our tribal identity, where a great battle was fought, and many of my ancestors died in the killing of one great warrior. He was cut to pieces. The elder at the time deemed even his mortal remains dangerous enough not to bury in one place. This has been a fireside tale to scare children for generations. But my grandfather knew that it was more than just a story. The old tales are kept alive to teach and guide the younger generations."

"Where there's smoke, there's fire?" Mary Lou responded. The other two girls were leaning forward, paying rapt attention.

Professor Holderman nodded. "That is so. My grandfather investigated, and even though the locations were hidden well and not recorded previously, he located the sites. To prevent the total loss of the information, he did two things." The professor sat back in his chair. "He taught it to me after I found one of them on my own, and he wrote it down. Normally, these things are passed only through oral tradition, but he was guided to finally put it on paper. These locations were previously not meant to be

found.” Professor Holderman looked around at the three girls. “You, my dears, have in your possession one of those items that were never supposed to leave where it was placed on pain of dire consequences.”

“We’ve run into some of those dire consequences,” Mary Lou said. She looked at Sierra, who sported a look between fear and rebellion. “So, what do we do now?” Mary Lou asked. “Just put them back?”

“You can have them,” Sierra said. “I don’t want them.”

“It’s too late for that. And you may be better off keeping them at this point.” Professor Holderman sighed. He ran his hands through his hair again, which was looking mussed in response to his agitation. “I think you better tell me the rest, ladies. I can’t help you if I don’t know what consequences you’ve experienced.”

Mary Lou, Sierra, and Rachel unfolded their story and told the professor what had happened at school and in Sierra’s room when they were all present. In spite of himself, the professor shivered. The ‘Wolf’, hated and feared, immortal, powerful and presenting a truly dangerous evil, was loose! “God help us all!” he muttered as his hand habitually went to the cross under his shirt.

“If you ladies have religion, my one piece of advice is to start praying now.”

Rachel and Sierra blanched. This time Sierra remained steadier than her cousin. Mary Lou wasn’t buying it. She thought back to the shattering glass. “It can’t be impossible to beat this thing,” she insisted. “I mean, we chased it away, right?”

Professor Holderman stared at her. She looked him squarely in the eye. *Interesting*, he got distracted. Her eyes had gone silver-blue in color. He looked further, opening up his senses to take her measure. This was someone who knew pain already, and there was fear there, but she wasn’t going to shrink from what she felt was right. Could he get them to back away? Did he really want to go this alone? *That is selfish thinking!* He told himself sternly. *Untried children don’t need to get mixed up in this!* He felt every gray hair on his head. But, as he met Mary Lou’s steady gaze, somehow he felt a shred of hope. *Maybe there IS a way.* He mused. It took most of The People before. He would have to take up his Medicine again and accept his other calling. These girls? Well, he would see. The Spirits said there were six of the group, and they were supposed to be enough if he gave them the tools they needed to work with. *Fine.* He sighed, giving in at last. *Let’s see what they can do.*

"You didn't really chase him away. You simply broke his physical and spiritual connection to where you were at the time," he answered Mary Lou's question. "That is not going to be good enough long-term, though that certainly gave him something to think about, I'm sure."

"I see," Mary Lou said.

"As to your other question, what you do now is arm yourselves," he told them as he looked intently at all of them. "You have awakened a sleeping threat that has power deadly enough to destroy all of us."

"Jesus!" Rachel half-whispered. "Sierra, why on earth did you have to go in that place?"

Sierra sat with her jaw jutting out and chewed her lip. She shook her head and looked sullen, but the fear in her eyes belied her calm exterior. At least she wasn't going it alone anymore, and maybe the professor would be able to tell them how to kill the dark thing that kept coming after her. For the first time in weeks, she actually felt a little hope.

"So, can we shoot it?" Rachel asked. She thought back to Kenneth's suggestion. Would it work?

"Not by conventional means," Professor Holderman replied.

"But you said to arm ourselves," Sierra broke in. "If not a gun, then what?"

"Simply put," he answered, "you must arm yourselves with knowledge. It's the only thing that's going to help you now."

"But that's why we came here in the first place," Mary Lou said. "We know we need to know more, but we were hoping you could tell us if these beads have some kind of power to beat this thing."

Professor Holderman shook his head. "You don't understand," he told her. "You have the power to beat it, not the beads."

"Me?" Mary Lou squeaked and stopped and cleared her throat. "I thought you said..."

"All of you. Yes, I know what I said. You didn't chase it/him away, but you do, collectively speaking, have the ability to defeat him. But don't get cocky. If you do, this creature will eat you for lunch. Then it will be free to wreak whatever havoc it wishes."

"Meaning it will go after other people next," Mary Lou observed.

"In a word, yes," the professor said.

"Then we don't have a choice. Ok, what do we do? What do we need to know?" Mary Lou asked in a determined voice. "If we have to go after it, I'm not going in blind."

"You won't find what you need in the college's library," the professor told them. "I don't currently have in my possession what you need either. You're going to need a book, yes, but not one that's in print by any normal publishing house."

"Then where?" the girl asked.

"Fortunately, I know someone who has a copy. There's a woman who comes here for guest speaking in my World Religions class. She's a bit eccentric, but I am sure she will be willing to see you. She's a weaver by trade and also collects rare books. She knew my grandfather and got the only handwritten copy of the book of Native American legends that he'd compiled just before he died. It's even autographed," Professor Holderman smiled fondly, remembering his feisty granddad.

Rachel perked up. Surely there couldn't be that many weavers around. "Hey!" Rachel said enthusiastically with her customary Tennessee drawl. "Would that be somebody named Moira?" she asked. "I met a weaver at one of the craft fairs, and she had a bunch of witchcraft books she was getting rid of. Come to think of it; she said the Anthropology teacher here is her neighbor."

"Small world," Professor Holderman muttered and felt his perception of the world tilt just slightly with a quick bout of dizziness that he didn't show. Chills crept up his spine for a reason he couldn't understand, yet these feelings always precluded something major. "Yes, that's her. She somehow always manages to get around, and everyone seems to either know or have met Moira." His eyebrows weren't quite hitting his hairline but were close. "Since you have already met her, that will make it easier to get an introduction."

"The local pagans are more than a bit protective of their privacy due to fear. It's hard to get any of them out of the broom closet, though Moira has been trying to change both that and the public's perception of witches and pagans for years." He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a business card.

Mary Lou reached for the card eagerly, but Professor Holderman didn't give it to her. Instead, he turned it over and picked his pen up. If you give me your number, I will have her call you."

Mary Lou looked puzzled. "Rachel has a card, but I don't," she said. "I was wanting to talk to her regardless, but my number is 882-...."

"I am sorry." Professor Holderman said apologetically as he scribbled down what the girl told him. "I can't give out her number. I would have to ask her first anyway because she doesn't give out her number to anyone. As I said, they are all pretty paranoid. And, in this area? They have good reason to be. There are a lot of small-minded people about who would only cause trouble. So, they have a policy that nobody outs anyone. If they tell you themselves, that's another matter entirely." He grinned. "She obviously liked you and trusted you." Then he got very serious. "Go talk to her then, and listen carefully to what she says. Moira is a very wise woman. The 'Craft of the Wise' suits her!"

I will ask her to call you, and then I will be glad to discuss the situation more when you've got the details of what we're facing. For the time being, as much as I've enjoyed your company, I have class in ten minutes, so I am going to have to let you go."

Professor Holderman rose, walked to the door, and held it open for his visitors to file out. They looked as shell-shocked as he felt, he noted. He had a bad feeling that things were about to go downhill very fast. Yet, he hoped the Spirits had told him truly. *These girls better pull something out of their sleeve*, he thought.



"**S**o, that's it?" Sierra said as they walked out the double doors to the outside. She looked up and saw clouds banked and lowering along the crest of the Cumberland Escarpment. It was going to rain. It would fit her mood Sierra thought sourly. "We came all this way for nothing? We were going to go talk to the witch anyway!"

"It wasn't for nothing!" Rachel said. She was getting tired of Sierra whining. "We've got someone who might be able to help us now. That's more than we did have."

"True," Sierra said, not quite contrite.

"I think it will be cool," Mary Lou remarked. "I mean, how often do you meet a real witch?"

"I've never met anyone like that before," Rachel nodded. "She was nice. It kinda makes you wonder why some people get so freaked out." They passed the library building and went down

Mary Lou Wells

the stairs as they continued chatting in hushed tones. All three of them felt the pressure of what was transpiring around them. None of them were in the mood to talk about it any further.

Mary Lou turned to the other two when they got to the parking lot. "Hey, I'm going to stop down there at the corner flea market. I've been curious to see what kind of stuff they've got. You guys want to come with me since we're already close by?"

"Sure, why not?" Sierra said. "I don't have anywhere else I want to be." The girls hopped in their cars, and after exiting the parking lot, they could see the cars lining the road at the intersection of Patton Lane and Highway 70. After finding parking, the three friends walked up the short embankment and discovered a riot of color, activity, and various wares offered by hopeful merchants at rickety tables.

Rachel and Sierra wandered off together toward the clothing items while Mary Lou got distracted by a line of tables with various knives. A couple of boxes caught her eye as she strolled slowly past. She stopped to look.

"Are you looking for something for a boyfriend, perhaps? We've got some pocket knives if you want something smaller than this," the man behind the table smiled helpfully.

"No, I'm looking for myself. How much are the butterfly knives?" she asked the man behind the table.

"They are normally fifteen, but I'll sell you both for twenty dollars," he answered. "Do you know how to use those?" The salesman asked dubiously.

Mary Lou struggled not to glare at him. "Yes, I know how to use a knife," she told him.

"Oh, ok," he said. "Not many ladies are interested, you know. I don't get many over here doing anything but walking by to look."

She picked up both boxes. One was a black knife with NINJA stamped on it, and the other was silver with dragons engraved on the handles.

"I'll take these two," Mary Lou told him. Most of her allowance money quickly disappeared into the man's pocket, and she couldn't resist showing off, so she picked up the silver one and gave it a crisp flip to open and close it. Mary Lou winked at him as she walked off amused at his dumbfounded look. The boys in her Graphic Arts class at school had taught her how to use a butterfly knife. She stopped and turned around, wondering where her friends had gone. She spotted them three tables away just as Sierra turned to look for her in return.

"Hey, Mary Lou! Come look at this!" Sierra called. Rachel was standing next to Sierra, bent over some boxes on the table examining something intently.

"These are pretty," Rachel said and reached into a box.

"Oh, cool! Throwing stars!" Mary Lou said. Rachel was right. They were pretty. The table contained several sizes and types but the ones which had caught Sierra and Rachel's interest were the smaller star shaped ones with stamped designs.

"Yeah, and these have holes in them so you can make a necklace out of them," Rachel replied. "They aren't very expensive and we could each get a different design and all have matching throwing star necklaces." Rachel grinned. "I like this one with the dragon on it."

Mary Lou bent over the boxes and looked closely. Rachel's suggestion sounded good to her. "Oh, there's one with a lion on it! And there's one with a crane and some other weird design with a bunch of blocks and a dragon," she observed aloud. "Which one are you getting Sierra?"

"I like the crane," Sierra said. She picked it up. "I am going to get this one," Sierra declared.

"Ok, I'll take the one with the lion on it. It fits since I'm a Leo anyway," Mary Lou grinned. She enthusiastically parted with the rest of her money. "Well, I'm all out," Mary Lou said. "I better not look anymore because I don't have any money left," She giggled.

"Looking is free," Rachel observed. "Oh nifty, hey, I like this too." She reached for something else on the table in a box.

Mary Lou was drawn to what Rachel had picked up despite her promise not to look anymore. "What is that?" As she looked closely, she saw a miniature replica of a samurai sword, painted red with a design that looked like stylized goldfish. "Oh, it looks like a letter opener," Mary Lou said as Rachel pulled the wooden handles apart.

"It's cute," Rachel said. "I'm going to get this and the necklace."

After that, the three friends walked back down the embankment. Mary Lou headed toward her car but wasn't in the mood to part yet. "Where did you all park?" she asked. Cars lined the road, but she didn't see Rachel's distinctive Firebird.

"Over there across the road," Sierra pointed toward the lake.

"Aha! I see your car now," Mary Lou told Rachel. "Over there near the cop."

Mary Lou Wells

"Cop car? Oh dang, it! I forgot to get my tags renewed, and they expired. I'm probably getting a ticket," Rachel said. "I better get on over there and see if I can talk my way out of it."

"Tell you what. I'll go with you," Mary Lou said. They crossed the highway and wandered over toward the black car.

Sierra was the first to notice that the officer wasn't paying any attention to Rachel's car at all. Instead, they were looking intently down at the edge of the lake just a few feet away. Chills crawled up her spine.

Rachel hailed the officer who looked up at them. Rachel immediately recognized her. "Officer Stanley! How are you?" Rachel's indrawn breath was punctuated by her sudden stop. She tried to maintain a calm exterior when she saw what she had never wanted to see again.

It was another dead body. This one had been female. The only way one could tell was the long hair floating sadly-tangled with mud and leaves around her head. The rest was degraded past recognition.

Sierra drew back. She didn't want to go anywhere near, and she resisted the urge to gag. "I'll wait for you guys over here," Sierra told them.

"Here we go again!" Rachel whispered urgently to Mary Lou. "I think we better leave."

Officer Stanley's eyes narrowed. She had not missed whose car sat parked near the gruesome discovery. Though, to be fair, this subject had clearly not been dumped here today. The string of coincidences was getting to be too much for even Diane to be able to continue to pass them off. Officer Baer had to be correct. Something was going on with these kids, and maybe it was time to find out what. She made a mental note to talk to him later in private. For now, however, she had a serious situation to deal with. She held up a hand to forestall the kids from getting in the car to drive off.

"Dispatch!" Diane hit the button on the radio on her hip. She waited for it to crackle at her in acknowledgment. "I am ten-twenty-three with a ten-fifty-two." She listened to the radio crackle some more. "I have a floater down here past the Marina at the intersection of Patton Lane and Highway 70," she said. "Better notify the sheriff."

"So!" Diane looked at the two girls standing reluctantly close by. "Just what are you ladies up to today?"

Mary Lou's curiosity got the better of her, and she couldn't resist looking at the awful sight at the edge of the water. She

wrinkled her nose at the smell. Flies were buzzing, and she wondered if she was going to be sick.

Rachel didn't feel much better. "We were up at the college, then we stopped over there at the flea market," Rachel told her.

"Do you two know anything about this?" Officer Stanley gave them both a searching look as she gestured at the body in the water.

"No," Rachel said. "We haven't been here long, and I didn't notice anything when I parked the car."

The officer's eyebrows rose. "Hundreds of people going by, and nobody notices a thing," she muttered. "Okay. The sheriff might want to talk to you later, so make sure you stay close," she said.

"Why?" Rachel asked. She felt the beginnings of anger. "We don't have anything to do with that. Why do we get blamed for everything that happens around here?" She puffed her cheeks out and glared.

"I didn't hear anyone blaming you, did you? Unless, of course, you have something you want to tell me?" Officer Stanley trailed off, still watching Rachel's reactions closely.

Diane's instincts once again told her this was an innocent coincidence, but why did this group keep popping up every time someone turned up dead lately? She had no reason to charge them with anything. With Tracey Wilson giving Diane enough information to quietly make inquiries, she had a pretty good idea where the investigation was heading.

It would take much more than this to bring the law to bear on these kids. Diane knew they'd better step carefully, though.

Officer Diane Stanley gave a soft sigh. "Ok, well, since there doesn't seem to be anything further, I am going to have to ask you to move your car." Sirens approached in the background. The officer expected a quick response since the Ambulance Service was barely a couple of miles down the road from their location. "I need to get emergency vehicles in here, and your car is blocking access."

Rachel and Mary Lou turned to go. Diane forestalled them again. "Girls, be careful, ok? There's a killer on the loose, and I'd hate to see you as our next victims."

Mary Lou nodded at her and looked from the officer to the body. Officer Stanley was right. They would have to be very careful because they very well could find themselves floating in the lake. She turned to go and stopped. She looked at the officer directly. "We will be cautious." Mary Lou promised. She looked

away and then down at the body. The sad but resigned look in her eyes said volumes.

In spite of herself, Officer Stanley felt goosebumps. She jerked in reaction and watched the three girls get in the black Firebird and drive away. Her instincts again niggled at the back of her mind. *That girl is involved*, she thought to herself.

"So, what do you know that you aren't saying?" Officer Stanley muttered aloud at the retreating car. "I don't think you did this, but you know something, and I aim to find out what it is."

20

ASTRAL TRAVEL

“**O**k, so Bryan, are you telling me that you know how to astral travel?” Mary Lou had her feet dangling in the water. It took her a while to get over the sight of death in the family’s swimming and play area. She shuddered, thinking about the newest discovery. She’d decided, however, not to let that keep her from the water that she loved. Water always held a fascination for her. She watched the play of the light on the ripples as she kicked her feet gently while she sat on the small dock. “I’ve been doing a lot of reading at the library, and Dad has a few books that talk about it. I mean, I have vivid dreams, and I see things. But if I can leave my body and go elsewhere, I don’t know how to control it.”

“It’s not that complicated,” Bryan said. “There’s a right way and a wrong way to go about it.”

“I figured that much out on my own,” Mary Lou told him.

“Well, let’s see, how to explain it.” Bryan pursed his lips, thinking. “You have to start by clearing your mind and relaxing first of all.”

“And then what?” Mary Lou was paying rapt attention.

“You meditate,” Bryan answered.

“Meditate?” Mary Lou thought about what he was saying.

“And then you go, elsewhere,” Bryan told her. “That’s also how you talk mind to mind,” he said. “Or communicate images, moving pictures and even see remotely.”

“I see,” she said.

“Well, it’s actually partially dependent on your own natural gifts,” he told her. “But like anything else, if you use them and train them, they’ll get stronger.”

“Can anyone do it?” Mary Lou asked.

“Yes, but some people manage to block their God-given talents through fear or refuse to see that they have them,” Bryan

grinned. "Me? I choose to be who I am and use what I have. There's no shame in that."

Mary Lou thought about what he was saying. "I think I understand what you mean." She thought back to her father's mantra, only what you can see, feel, taste and touch. She felt again his disapproval. He had always accused her of living in a fantasy world. "It could also be whether someone was denied their use or even convinced by somebody else their abilities are bad or their dreams are wrong somehow."

"Right. Now you're catching on." Bryan got up and approached Mary Lou. "Here, it will be easier if I just show you."

"How so?"

"Just trust me," Bryan said. "You can stay there, but turn around."

Mary Lou's eyes narrowed slightly. Whenever anyone said anything like that to her, there was usually cause to regret it. In this case, however, she'd see what he had in mind. She turned to face him and sat with her legs folded.

Bryan sat down in front of her and took both of her hands in his. "Close your eyes," he said. "I'll help you."

"You can do that?" Mary Lou was startled. She looked directly into his eyes. He looked serious. "Okay."

"Yes, but you are going to have to trust me for this to work," he said.

Bryan had been around long enough that he knew Mary Lou had a problem. She was too angry and defensive most of the time to let anyone close enough to see what was going on. He could see with other means, however. He couldn't do anything to help her, but he could do this. He was used to saving lives and rescuing people daily. It's who and what he was. Maybe he could make a difference here.

Like Kenneth, Bryan saw that Mary Lou had exceptional untrained abilities. She needed to learn to use them fully as quickly as possible if he had any guesses. His hunches were usually correct.

"So, what do you want me to do?" she asked him.

"Just relax. Close your eyes. Open your mind," Bryan said. He held her hands firmly but was careful not to push into her space.

All Mary Lou could feel was her hands in his for several minutes, and her heart sounded loud in her ears. She forced herself to relax her muscles. Being nervous that he was close wouldn't help. When she finally managed to relax, her awareness

expanded. She listened to the wind-driven waves lap in a not quite steady rhythm against the small foot dock where they sat. Then she found herself distracted by the leaves rustling overhead in the trees. Somewhere across the lake, a dog barked. Eventually, her perceptions began to change. Bryan felt when she finally responded and gave a gentle mental shove.

Initially, Mary Lou felt a sense of disorientation and almost dizziness. Bryan's hands in hers steadied her. Mentally she looked up, and to her mind's eye, she saw what appeared to her to be a barrier of tangled vines. She examined it. It looked solid. Then to her left, she saw Bryan. Instead of the gray shirt and jeans he actually wore, she saw a navy blue turtleneck and slacks. He walked ahead of her. When they came to the barrier, he seemed to find a gap in the branches, and she went through behind him. With sudden startlement, she recognized the wall in the dream she'd had several weeks before.

Bryan grinned at her and walked off when they were through to the other side. He'd stay close by, but it was hers to explore on her own.

Mary Lou walked forward through the mist in the middle of a forest. Shortly, she came to a small oriental-style house with a Japanese water garden. It felt safe. It felt like a sanctuary.

She looked around and strolled through the gardens. When she came to the border of the gardens, she realized a large black panther was sitting in the middle of the pathway. Oddly, she felt no fear. It chirruped at her much as a normal house cat would. It sounded oddly like the purr-meow of her black kitten. "Vanity Dragon?" she inquired. "Are you here, too?" The panther rose and came to her by way of answer, intertwining himself around her legs. He settled in to walk beside her. "But you're huge!" she said to his upraised golden eyes. Hmm. She thought. Maybe that means I can do the same thing?

She tried to imagine what size she'd like to be, but looking at the beauty of the black pelt on the panther, she wished she could look like that. Another sudden bout of disorientation, and she found herself walking beside the other panther in a panther's form. She allowed herself to feel what it was like to be something other than herself. This form felt powerful, almost like it reflected her very being. It felt very seductive. Could she just stay here? She looked at the other panther and saw he disapproved of where her thoughts had turned. "Guess not,

huh? If I stayed, what would happen to my body? I would probably die that way.”

Rustling in the bushes caught her attention. She had the sudden urge to pounce when a red fox appeared. She restrained herself. Instead, she watched as he chased a mote across the pathway. He stopped and grinned at her playfully. She suddenly realized it was Bryan’s eyes that stared back at her. It made her want to giggle. Bryan’s eyes looked silly on a fox. Maybe she looked silly too.

She thought about the panther in the Jungle Book. She’d loved that story as a child. She had thought it would be fabulous to have a panther for a friend. Nobody would bother you. She laughed. So here I am! With that thought, she changed again. She found the disoriented feeling was going away. This time she was herself as she imagined she would look if she lived in the jungle. She wore a leopard skin dress belted at the waist with a knife and leather boots. However, she found she also had a long, flexible whip in her hand, to her surprise. She didn’t imagine that, did she? However, it didn’t feel wrong, so she coiled the whip onto her belt. They walked companionably, and Mary Lou found herself back at the barrier. This time Bryan went on through without her. She looked at it closely and walked forward.

Mary Lou found herself still sitting on the dock with the sun at her back considerably lower than it had been. Bryan was smiling at her. “See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” He laughed.

“No, that wasn’t hard, but what about the animals?” she wanted to know. She could still almost feel what it had been like to stroll bonelessly on four padded feet.

“Oh, that’s easy. You could have figured that one out for yourself,” Bryan said. “When you go astral, everything but the inner you is stripped away. Obviously, the black panther is your spirit animal. It’s how you see yourself, and it’s the archetype that has the most to teach you right now. You’ll find you have others later on. That form is not likely your truest soul-form, though.”

“And the fox?” Mary Lou asked.

Bryan just grinned again and got up to stretch. He winked at her slyly. Despite herself, she laughed. She rose and jumped into the water with a splash. It was barely knee-deep. She headed toward the bank. It was turning out to be a good day.

“Stop!” Bryan yelled at her. “Don’t move!”

“What’s wrong?” she sobered.

“Snake!” he answered urgently.

“Where? I don’t see anything?” Mary Lou’s eyes grew large.

“Hold on. I’ll be right back.” Bryan walked up the embankment to his car that they’d driven down to the swimming area. He opened his car door and rustled around. When he returned, he carried a square-looking gun.

“Do you see it yet?” he called to her. “It’s a Copperhead and a really big one.”

“No, I can’t see it,” Mary Lou said with dismay as she scanned the bank. “Where is it? Oh, there it is! Wow, that’s a huge snake,” she agreed. Now that it uncoiled and moved, she could see where its golden pattern blended in with the leaves on the lake bank. It was right where she would have stepped as she came out of the water.

“What kind of gun is that?” Mary Lou asked Bryan. Before he could answer, he pointed the gun at the ground. Experience had taught Mary Lou to hold her ears when a gun went off nearby. She put both hands over her ears and wrinkled her nose, expecting a loud noise.

Instead, what came out was rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat! It wasn’t as loud as she expected. The copperhead snake disintegrated. She spared a moment of sadness for it. She didn’t want it to die. It just needed to be somewhere else where no one could get bitten. Bryan had taken care of that part, however.

“It’s an Uzi!” came the answer. “Fully automatic! You want to try shooting it?”

“Sure,” Mary Lou said.

“Ok, take it in your hand, like this. Now point it there and pull the trigger.”

When she did, the gun took on a life of its own. The gun seemed to rise in her hands. She’d shot several rounds in split seconds, and it felt like she’d had no control. “I think I prefer Dad’s .22 rifle,” she said. “I could hurt somebody with this.”

“That’s the idea,” Bryan said grimly.

“Are you carrying a gun because of what’s been going on?” she asked and handed the gun back, careful not to point it at him.

Bryan nodded. “I’m not taking any chances,” he said. “No telling who or what is out there, and I am all over this county at all hours. This is a bit of added protection. Besides, it just came in handy.” He looked down at the ground. “Have you ever eaten snake meat?”

"No, and I don't have any desire to either," she replied. She looked dubiously at what remained of the poor snake. "But I don't think there's enough left of this one to make a meal out of, so I think I'm safe," she giggled.

"Snake is pretty good. Don't knock it 'till you try it!" Bryan reached down and picked up the remains. It was badly shredded. "Want some?" Bryan laughed and chased her with it as she ran laughing. The game ended when she tripped and fell into the water, clothes and all. He threw the remains in the bushes and offered Mary Lou a hand up.

"Aaagh! It looks like I have to go to the house and change clothes. I don't even have a towel," Mary Lou said wryly as she dripped her way up the bank. "I'd better walk, so I don't get your car wet."

"You can sit in my car. It won't hurt the vinyl seats any," he told her.

"You're sure?" Mary Lou asked.

"Yeah, go ahead." Bryan smiled. "It's my fault anyway."

"Okay," she agreed. She squeezed her clothing so she wouldn't leave a pool behind in Bryan's car. "It's probably about time to go anyway." She looked at the angle of the sun over the mountains.

"Why? Do you have to be somewhere?" Bryan asked as they both got in to drive back to the house.

"Yeah. I forgot to tell you. I'm going to talk to the priestess that Rachel met. We're supposed to get there about 7:00 tonight. She finally called me back and sent somebody to meet me in town the other day. I guess she wanted to make sure I was legit and not someone out to cause trouble before I got an invite to her house."

"Cool!" Bryan said. "Let me know how it goes. Is anyone going with you?"

"Yeah, Ken and Carly are going with me. I've already cleared it with Moira," Mary Lou told him. "She sounded really nice on the phone, and I talked to her high priest as well. He's the one who actually invited me. They are having a coven meeting later tonight, so I get to meet everybody. Kenneth isn't sure he wants to stay for that, so we may leave fairly early."

"Makes sense," Bryan said.

"What makes sense?" Mary Lou asked.

"Tonight's the full moon. They'd be meeting tonight, and it has nothing to do with you guys coming to meet anyone," Bryan answered.

"These people said something about that. They're doing some kind of ritual, but they wouldn't tell me much except that it's a full moon." Mary Lou thought a minute. "Should I be worried? I have been doing some reading in the library, but there isn't much there to give information about what all they do."

"You can back out, you know," Bryan said to her. "If you think there's some reason to be worried, maybe you should be worried."

"No, I don't feel that at all," she said. "I got a really good feeling from the people I've already met. They were really sweet and seemed excited to talk to me. You know it's just the stories, it's hard to get past all the accusations, and stuff people say witches do."

"Well, from what I've seen," Bryan began. "And I've been on a few 'scenes' when I was out and about. Most people don't realize there's a huge difference between the Satanists and other groups. They get them all confused."

"Have you heard anything about Moira or her group?" Mary Lou asked.

"Nah, not a peep," Bryan said. "But if they are as paranoid as all that about people finding out who or where they are, I am not surprised."

"I better go on in and get a shower and get ready," Mary Lou said. They had been sitting in front of the house for a few minutes. "At least this should be a fascinating evening!" She got out and shut the car door.

Bryan waved to her as he pulled out. He took the corner around the house up the driveway faster than necessary. Mary Lou shook her head. She had to admit, though. He was good behind the wheel. He had to be to drive emergency responder vehicles.



21

THE HIGH PRIESTESS

Che transition was abrupt. The vista opened up onto rolling hills and scattered farmhouses just outside of town. The highway straightened out south of Rockwood to parallel the Cumberland Escarpment that sat sentinel over the valley. Richly painting the horizon in pink and orange, the lowering sun slowly dropped behind the mountains to the west. It cast a golden light across the trees and fields. Mary Lou admired it as she drove.

“What do the directions say again? I wonder if we’ve gone too far. It has been three miles already, and I still don’t see the mailbox,” Mary Lou said.

“Here, let me look,” Carly replied. “How far are we?” She glanced at the car’s odometer and then back out the window. “We aren’t there yet. Keep going,” she told her sister. “Wait, I think I see it. Yes, there’s the cul-de-sac and the mailbox!”

Mary Lou slowed the car. Branching trees sat close together at the entrance, but the big green mailbox was clearly marked with white painted numbers. The three teens turned to the right and went up the driveway. Gravel crunched beneath the car’s tires, and Mary Lou had to slow for water-filled potholes. To the left, a white rail fence lined the drive. Mary Lou craned her head around to see if horses were in the pasture.

“If the witch didn’t want anybody to find her, this would be the place,” Kenneth observed. “It’s as far out in the boonies as my house! Hey, keep your eyes on where you’re going!” Kenneth rolled his eyes.

“Rachel told me she has horses. I was trying to see,” Mary Lou said.

“See that curve coming up if you don’t mind,” he retorted.

“I’ve got it,” Mary Lou said. “I can drive.”

“Give it up, Ken. She’s hopeless when there are horses around.” Carly smiled.

“I am not,” Mary Lou objected.

"Are too," Carly insisted.

"Not!" Mary Lou argued.

"Too!" Carly didn't back down.

"Yes, you are," Kenneth ended the argument.

Carly laughed at her sister's expression. "Outnumbered again!"

It gently wound for half a mile, and the driveway finally delivered them to a cluster of small buildings. Straight ahead was a white frame farmhouse and to the right was another fenced field. A barn sat close beside the house against the pasture fence they passed from the road. Three shiny newer model cars were parked near the house in a turnaround area. Tire marks showed in the grass to either side of the driveway.

Off to the side, a large red cat lounged on top of an old green car jacked up on cinder blocks minus a tire. It got up and meowed in a friendly greeting as they exited their vehicle. Kenneth ran his hand over its back and was rewarded with a loud purr. A muffled sounding bark greeted them from inside the front door.

When Carly stepped forward and knocked on the door, it was answered right away.

"Hi, are you Mary Lou?" A woman she didn't know answered the door.

"I am Mary Lou, this is Carly, and playing with the kitty over there is Kenneth," Mary Lou answered from behind her younger sister.

"Come on in!" The woman at the door was slender, petite, and appeared middle-aged with raven black long hair. "We were waiting for you." She closed the door behind Kenneth as he brought up the rear. The woman was holding the collar of a very large brindle dog who was wiggling all over himself to greet them.

"Are you Moira?" Mary Lou asked doubtfully. This woman didn't fit Rachel's description.

Startled laughter greeted her question. "No." She smiled. "I'm SilverFox, the priestess of the sister coven. I run a separate group, but I do most of the teaching of new students since Moira is semi-retired," she told them. "Come on in, and I'll introduce you to the rest, or at least those who are here early. More folks should be showing up later." She released the friendly dog, who trailed at their heels.

They followed SilverFox through a short foyer, and she led them to a large room where chairs were circled together. A fan

was running at one end of the room. Mary Lou wrinkled her nose. There was a strong smell of cigarette smoke. She realized that must be the purpose of the fan since the air did seem breathable.

The central feature in the room was a large fireplace topped with a mantle on which various items were artfully placed. Ahead of them was a bar with a partial wall, and beyond that, they could see a kitchen where a couple of people appeared to be cutting vegetables and trying not to get in one another's way.

"Let's see, over there in the corner, the guy with the beard, that's Will. And then there's Cassandra, Ruby, and Cash. Also visiting from another group up toward Crossville, beside the window, that's Gray Cat, their priestess. Moira and Raven are in the kitchen there and will be out in a minute."

They all mumbled greetings. "Nice to meet you."

"Come on in and rest yourselves," Will spoke up with a surprisingly deep voice. "There ain't no sense in standing around." His easy smile put them at ease, and they found chairs.

"So," Will continued. "I hear you kids found something up on the mountain and got yourselves in a bit of a spot."

"Yeah," Mary Lou said.

"And you came to us. If we can help you, we will do so," Will said. "I talked to the professor earlier, and he indicated it's pretty serious. Never a good idea to mess with burial goods," he told them pointedly.

"It was one of our friends," Carly retorted. "We're trying to help figure out what to do about it."

"I have the beads with me," Mary Lou said. "Would you like to see? Maybe you'll know something about them?"

"Sure, I'll take a look," the pagan priest said.

Will's breath whistled through his teeth when the teen handed him the bag containing the beads. A tingling wash of energy hit him before he took them from Mary Lou.

"Those are pretty potent," Kenneth grinned.

"I'll say they are!" Came the answer. He examined them closely and then reached for a pair of glasses on the table. He put them on and held the stone beads close to his face.

"I can't tell you their purpose, but I do recognize the stone," he said and peered at them over the top of the glasses.

"Really?" Mary Lou said eagerly. "What are they?"

"There are only two places in the world where this particular mineral is found," he said. "The first place is Stonehenge in Great

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Britain. The stones there are made of this same blue mineral which comes from the mountains along the coast.”

Kenneth found himself sitting forward on the edge of his seat. Stonehenge! Who’d have thought it? “You said two places. Where’s the other place?”

“Right here, of course!” He laughed. “It’s a geological fact that once a long time ago, the coast of Great Britain connected with what is now the easternmost portion of this valley. The landmass and the ocean between came about when the continents split apart. A portion of what was once Canada slid south and became what is now the eastern seaboard of the United States.”

“Wow,” Mary Lou and Carly said simultaneously. The teens looked at each other. They’d read about and seen pictures of Stonehenge, and now they had the same kind of rock in their possession.

“Ok, but what about the rest of it?” Kenneth wanted to know. “These are obviously not normal rocks, but what purpose do they serve?”

“As I said, I don’t know,” Will answered. He handed the beads back to Mary Lou. “On the other hand, I can also tell you that wherever this mineral is found in the earth, that is where the ley lines are strongest and is why it should be protected and the mining of this stone should be forbidden. It’s the very energy veins of Mother Earth.”

“Ley lines?” Carly asked.

“Yes, you can think of them as the energy grid or magnetism of our planet. People who are very sensitive can feel and even tap into that energy with their minds and spirit. It’s why a lot of mystics are attracted to the East Tennessee and North Carolina area. The ley lines are strong, and there is a lot of ambient energy that helps soothe the soul. It helps us connect with the gods. It’s more than just the pretty view.”

“I only believe in one God,” Kenneth smiled.

“That’s ok,” Will laughed. “We won’t hold it against you if you don’t hold it against us.” He winked at SilverFox, who laughed with him. “It all comes out the same color in the wash.” He smiled a good-natured smile. “Good folks are good folks in my book!”

Kenneth was here with the girls for a purpose. He didn’t forget that purpose by getting distracted by the ensuing conversation on philosophy and religion. He had to admit that they had some worthy ideas and that his opinion of the Wiccan

group rose several notches. They were all surprisingly educated and articulate. Though he could easily understand the magickal side of what they were talking about as an extension of the natural order and what was reflected in his own talents, he was quite comfortable with his Christianity. He decided more of his questions would wait for the person they had come to see.

The Lady in question arrived as if on cue with Kenneth's thought. She looked incongruous, wiping her hands on an apron because she looked to Kenneth as if she would be more suited to a royal throne. The first thing he noticed was her piercing silver eyes set in a strong face with her hair pulled back. He couldn't begin to guess her age. She looked old and young at the same time. He felt humbled and somehow smaller in her presence. This had to be Moira. *The name fits.* He thought. He stood up when she offered her hand. Then he drew back, stung as a loud pop of static electricity zapped him.

"Sorry," Moira grinned. "It's this carpet, you know?"

"That's okay," Kenneth told her. That had *stung*. He resisted showing it. "You must be..."

"I'm Moira Postremo." She smiled gently. "You can call me Lady Moira. You must be Ken, and that's Mary Lou and Carly. You are all welcome to stay if you wish. I would have greeted you sooner, but I was fixing dinner. There's plenty for everyone. Just help yourselves." Moira removed her apron and hung it on a hook.

Kenneth watched her move, almost like a dancer, to a seat by the fireplace. However old she was, she was obviously in good shape. Her commanding presence drew all eyes to her as she spoke.



Moira was cautious to guard what she said and how she said it to cover her true identity from the others. She knew how intelligent and perceptive this boy was. Without Kenneth's input, the situation was doomed to failure.

She chafed under the confines of the rules, though technically, she was using one of her own names. She had detested the rules many times through the millennia. But it was necessary. You do not interfere with mortals, and despite her name, she understood that even Fate herself had limits.

If she'd been allowed, she would have squished that upstart Ulfr where he stood at her loom all those centuries ago. But, despite what she'd said to him, it was all part of the Plan. Even

as one of the Powers, she did not argue with the One Source. She had a job to do. She put her best serious but friendly expression on her face and addressed the group.

"I spoke with Professor Holderman, and in anticipation of your visit, I pulled out the books he suggested you read." She held up an old plain leather-bound volume. "Native American legends from this area, and since you said you are interested in studying, there is another one on beginning Wicca," she said and looked at Mary Lou.

She continued, "The way we do things, as I explained on the phone, is you read and carefully think over your decision, then you have to ask for teaching. It's a 'free will' kind of question. You have to decide on your own, and you have to decide with knowledge that you want to learn what we have to teach you."

Kenneth rose and carefully took the leather-bound volume from her. It looked fragile. Its appearance belied the solid nature of the pages, as he discovered when he opened it. Would he have to read the whole thing to find what they were looking for, or would anything of use even be there? The book on witchcraft he handed to Mary Lou to examine. She accepted it and laid it in her lap.

"Any suggestion on where to start looking?" he asked.

"Try the table of contents," Moira laughed.

"Ah, yeah, good idea," Kenneth said. Why was he so flustered? He took the book back to his chair and began flipping pages. He was busy running his finger down the first page when a loud noise filtered in from outside the house.

"Excuse me," Moira said. "That would be the boys wanting their dinner." She threw open a window in the room and gave three short piercing whistles. The noise stopped. They could hear a horse nicker.

"You do have horses!" Mary Lou said eagerly. "Can I come with you to see them?"

"Sure, but you have to stay well back, young lady." She said sternly. "They are stallions and have to be shown proper respect. Bloodwine and Icewing can be rough."

Kenneth, who was only half listening as the people in the room rose to go outside or claim a plate of dinner, suddenly zeroed in on something Moira had just said. He raised his head as if he scented prey and sniffed, thinking hard. Then it hit him. More coincidence? Nah, he was letting his imagination run wild. The priestess probably just liked thinking of herself in a context of power and authority. But he had to admit. It was interesting.

After Rachel had revealed the Lady's name, he'd done some reading on his own. Bloodwine and Icewing were the names of the steeds of the head Valkyrie. He had only dug in Scandanavian lore briefly to find the legends regarding the Fates and the other gods. Of course, he'd had to read a certain foreign language to do it. Most people didn't know he was multi-lingual and had an extremely high IQ. He grinned to himself. Some secrets were just amusing to keep.

Kenneth saw that Carly and himself were the only two left in the room. She was quietly walking around the room, looking at things absently. She stopped and stared in fascination at something sitting in the center of the mantle over the fireplace. It was red and shiny. She barely contained her urge to touch it. That's gorgeous! She thought to herself. Reluctantly, she pulled herself away. That stone beckoned her somehow. She repeatedly found herself drawn to the mantle as Kenneth read.

"Are you finding anything?" Carly asked Kenneth.

Kenneth held up a hand to forestall further conversation. "Yeah," he said, but he didn't elaborate. Instead, he allowed his brain to process what he'd just found. "Oh, f... me!" he cursed.

"What?" Carly turned with a puzzled look.

"Never mind, but I need another book." He quickly calculated the odds, given what they'd already seen and experienced coupled with the story here, that he would be onto something. It was *very* high indeed. "I need to talk to the priestess," he said. "Why don't you get some food? Everyone else is outside eating, I think."

"What about you?" Carly asked.

"I'm not hungry right now. You go ahead. I need something else. Let's see how extensive this woman's library is."

"Okay," Carly agreed and wandered off to the kitchen.

A first glance at Moira's bookshelf-lined walls didn't reveal what he wanted. Drat! He'd have to go ask. He walked outside and passed some of the coven members sitting at picnic tables where it was cool to enjoy their meal. He nodded to them politely.

Kenneth found Moira in the barn with Mary Lou talking horses. "Is all you ever think about, horses?" he asked, but he winked to take the sting out of his question. Kenneth stopped well back from the stalls. Before Mary Lou could answer, he posed his real question to their hostess.

"Would you happen to have a book on Viking history?" he asked Moira.

“Sure,” Moira said. Kenneth’s eyebrows raised in response. “That one is in storage, though.” Moira smiled. “The small building behind this one is a library of sorts. I collect out of print books, you see. What you want is through the front double doors, all the way straight ahead and to the back. There’s a section on Scandinavia. You’ll find what you are looking for in there.”

In response, Kenneth went where Moira indicated and rummaged around until he found a book with a title that looked promising. Rather than carry it back to the house, he pulled up an old rickety chair and stayed where he was to read. If Kenneth had to guess, what they needed was about a thousand years old, and it would have to do with Viking depredation. He thought for a moment. *Well, we'll work backward through time and see.*

Kenneth had gone through a couple of books before he came onto something. As he read, he realized where the possibilities matched up.

Final invasion, Great Britain, the descriptions matched. He remembered briefly touching on this stuff in World History in school, but here it seemed more real somehow. Harald Hardrada in the year 1066 and something to do with a series of murders by the king’s cousin in the royal family with the subsequent banishment of the perpetrator. He carefully read the description of the Viking and how he was considered a violent and dangerous criminal even to his own people and a priest of some kind.

Kenneth decided to take this book back inside with him to compare the two tales. Could this be the same warrior that the Native Americans buried here so long ago? He felt an icy chill creep up his spine. Just what were they dealing with here? At least now he knew what those beads were for. He could kick Sierra’s ass for taking them from where she found them. Rachel and Mary Lou were right, though, it was too late to undo what was done, and now all they could do was deal with the future consequences.

Another thing began to bother him as he walked back to the house. His gut told him Moira was more than what she seemed if he could just figure out her angle.

As Kenneth came through the door, he saw Carly standing with her head bent while Moira fastened something around Carly’s neck. No one else was in the room. He’d seen some additional people outside, and he’d heard a couple of vehicles drive in while he was reading. He was surprised that they were the only ones in the house. When he glanced at what Carly had on, the icy chill he felt became a blizzard. What the?

"Thank you! Wow, that's really sweet," Carly said. "It's so beautiful!"

"It's yours," Moira answered with a slight twinkle in her eye. "It has protective properties. It's also an old heirloom piece. Rumor says it once belonged to Princess Aesa, a gift from her mother."

"Princess Ingegerd," Kenneth gritted out from between clenched teeth. Too many coincidences, and he was quickly putting them all together into something not so coincidental nor innocent. "Carly, what are you doing accepting a gift like that from a stranger? That is probably worth a fortune! Nothing like that is free," Kenneth said. "Carly, what did you promise this woman? Didn't the lesson of the beads teach you anything?"

"What could be wrong with it?" Carly was genuinely puzzled. "She said I could have it and that I am worthy of it. And I really like it."

"Carly need have no fear from the jewel," Moira told him. "Sometimes an item simply, chooses, shall we say, who is to be its bearer. I think it suits her just fine."

"Yeah, and sometimes they get just the right help finding their way where they are wanted most," Kenneth sniped. "Who *ARE* you?" It slipped out before he realized he'd said it. He suddenly felt the weight of his choices. Her return stare made him feel laid bare. He found he could no longer look into those silver eyes. He looked at Carly instead, then walked to his chair where he'd left the other book, trying to regain his composure.

"It appears your search was fruitful?" Moira stated. It wasn't a question.

"Yeah, let's talk about that," Kenneth wasn't feeling as charitable towards the witch, if that's what she was, as he had earlier. He didn't like being toyed with or lied to. He knew something was going on here that he couldn't identify yet.

"What did you find?" Carly asked.

"Alright, let's hear it then," Moira sat in her chair.

Kenneth realized she wasn't a bit perturbed or moved by his glare. "I think you could have spared me the search," he said.

"You asked for books, and that is what I gave you," she answered reasonably. "If you found what you were looking for, then your time and effort were well spent."

He realized she did have a point. He hadn't asked after all. He hadn't known what questions needed asking until after he'd done the research. Fine, he'd drop it for now. But, he determined he'd watch Moira like a hawk watches its prey from afar.

"In the year 1066, Harald Hardrada invaded England. He brought an army and his family with him when he came because he didn't intend to go home. Neither did his cousin, the priest guy. Harald left his oldest son to be king in Norway. Only things didn't work out so well," Kenneth began. "The cousin killed the grandkids and left Harald's daughter Ingegerd pregnant from rape. The king got knocked off in battle, but not before banishing his madman of a cousin from Viking lands, on pain of death."

"Good so far," Moira said. "That is what happened."

"I believe that since he couldn't go home, this same Viking priest ended up here. The descriptions from the Viking chronicles match the description in the old Native American legends of a great warrior they defeated. They were superstitious, so they cut him up and buried his body in several different locations around the Valley. The beads were used to bind the body in each location so he couldn't get up and walk away," Kenneth concluded. "That necklace, the one you just gave my friend here? That belonged to Ingegerd. It was supposedly given to her by the midwife when her daughter was born as a consolation gift."

"Very nice," Moira practically purred in satisfaction. She nodded approvingly. "How sure are you of all of this?" she asked. Her eyes seemed to bore holes in his skull.

Kenneth fought to maintain his mental composure. Damn! She was strong. He gritted his teeth. "Get out of my head!" He fought her for several minutes before he felt her withdraw on her own. He didn't quite start gasping.

Suddenly Moira changed. She became taller, younger somehow, and he couldn't quite look at her. "You know me, little priest. You knew me from the moment you walked in my door," she said silkily.

Carly looked from one to the other. She didn't understand what was happening, but she knew enough to pay attention. The other two ignored her.

"I am not a priest. I'm a Christian," Kenneth said. "And I don't claim to be something I'm not. Can you say the same?"

"And knowing you me, you still doubt I might be able to see the hand of God upon you?" she laughed. "Just as I See many other things. Your two friends here have their destinies as servants of God and leaders of humanity as well."

"I make my own way," he declared. "I've never held with predestination. I make my own fate."

"My dear, everyone has their fate, and no one escapes it in the end!"

"I have free will!" he nearly yelled at Moira and dared his sudden fear to look at her. "And isn't that your weakness? You have to rely on the choices the rest of us make to bring it all around to where you want it? Why don't you go take this guy down yourself? I think the answer to that is because you can't! So which of us has free will, and which of us is just screwed!"

"And yet whose free will leads him constantly into trouble? You do much talking and not enough listening to that part of the Source of All that you follow." Moira rose from her chair. "You still have much to learn, child. You will see. That is, once you stop yelling and start listening to what Spirit tells you, it will all make sense. God's love is not part-time, and it does not discriminate. Do your job and do it with honor Shadow Angel. You'll be fine."

"My job?" he answered. "Mine? Or the one you want me to do? You say the choice is mine, all of ours, yet what choice did you leave her when you pinned that thing around her neck?" he snapped angrily. "And if you think I haven't been listening or paying attention, you're wrong. I know exactly who you are. Choosers of the slain? I'm not dead. I got no plans to get myself that way either. Maybe my choices lead me to trouble on occasion, but they also lead my happy ass right out of it too. This is not my fight. And I didn't agree to take it. So it isn't my job," Kenneth finished.

"And yet you will do it all the same," she answered simply.

"Kill the undead evil badass that's lived over a thousand years? Screw that!" he answered. "You can manipulate them all you want, but not me."

"Then leave them to their fate if you choose. It is your free will after all," she said smiling. Kenneth's teeth clenched with the muscles in his jaw working beneath the skin.

"You're being a total asshole," Carly snapped at him. "She's done nothing but be nice to us, and you talk to her like that?"

Kenneth looked at her in response. He wasn't furious. He looked at her, and for a moment, he looked as though tears could not have been far off. It silenced her as well as confused her. He turned away before she could say anything else. He returned his gaze to Moira. There was outrage still there in his expression. She read it easily.

"I'll be fine. You said so yourself," he said softly. "What about them?" he asked.

"That depends on many things," she answered.

"That's not an answer," he said, not hiding his concerns.

"If you worry for them, help them," she said calmly. He stared at her quietly but said nothing. She turned and walked smoothly from the room.

"Why do you have to be such an ass all the time?" Carly snapped at him, coming over and punching his arm. He turned and glanced at her for a second. Her anger vanished almost immediately. She didn't know what was going on. That much was clear. He forced his expression to become emotionless.

"Just being me," he answered quietly. "I am an asshole," he added. Still, her expression told him she knew he was hiding something. She was becoming too damn perceptive in some ways and not nearly enough for his liking in others. She might have said something else, but he walked from the room before she got the chance. He needed air. He needed to think.

"We're all fucked." Carly thought she heard him say under his breath on the way out.

Moira smiled. The boy had mettle, and she knew he would be alright. She stopped just out of his sight and touched her loom. She plucked and rewove a handful of threads. She smiled again. The gods had chosen their champions well.

Later, after everyone had eaten and the coven meeting was over, Mary Lou was surprised that each coven member made their way around to her and shared a warm hug. She found that by the time she, Carly, and Kenneth returned to her car to go home, she was standing taller and felt real confidence for the first time in a long time. Not even Kenneth's grim account regarding what he'd found dimmed her spirits.



"Positive. Two stripes." Tracey and Diane sat side-by-side on Diane's couch, staring at the home pregnancy test.

"Now, what do I do?" Tracey's worst fear seemed to stare back at her from the test strip. "If he ever finds out, I'm doomed."

"What do you want to do?" Diane asked her.

"I want to keep the baby," Tracey whispered, staring unfocused at her hands. "I saw the baby when they took it from that woman against her will. It was a girl, alive and screaming, when they killed her. I want to keep this baby for myself and for her. Maybe, God will find a way to forgive me for not stopping them. I just don't know how to do this."

"Honey, it's not your fault because if you'd tried, they'd have killed you too. I also don't believe for a minute that he will find out unless one of us tells him. I'm not talkin', so it'll be okay,"

Diane reassured the younger woman. "Just, next time, come talk to me sooner."

"I don't have any idea how to be a mom, Diane. I don't have a job. I don't have a place to live now. I don't even have my own car since Nash wrecked mine. What am I going to do with a baby?"

Diane turned to her friend. "Look at me and listen closely. You not the first, and you ain't gonna be the last with an unexpected surprise. Tomorrow's a new day. I want you to rest here, get some sleep, and in the morning, I'll take you to the resource center in Knoxville for medical care, job, and housing resources."

Tracey nodded her understanding when Diane continued. "The way I see it, you have a choice. You can roll over and die, or you can save yourself and your child from your psychopathic boyfriend. I don't intend to see you at your funeral!"

"Okay. That makes me feel somewhat better. It feels like a plan," Tracy said with the beginning of real determination in her voice.

"Besides, with the information you gave me and what I found out about that abandoned church in Rockwood, when I get done, he won't ever be able to come after you," Diane said.



22

COP ON THE ROCKS

“**S**o why don’t we all come up with cool nicknames in the group?” Sierra was speaking to Mary Lou and Rachel. The three of them sat at a picnic table on the Highway 58 side of the Kingston City Park. It was early, and they knew they’d be unlikely to be chased from their roadside perch beside the lake by the City Police.

It was pleasant, and the calm view of the sun on the ripples or the town lights shining on the water frequently drew them to this spot. The Kingston Steam Plant smokestacks flashed a regular intermittent signal against the sky if you sat there after dark. The lights were mesmerizing if you stared long enough.

“I mean, you said that those people you met all had different names.” Sierra pulled out a small knife she’d picked up at the corner flea market and started to carve on the wooden table. Mary Lou smacked her hand for her trouble. “Stop that, Sierra. That’s City property,” Mary Lou chided. The coyote didn’t move from where he rested his head on Sierra’s knee.

“Everybody else has been doing it. So what’s the problem?” Sierra wasn’t listening to her as usual.

“Look, people doing that is making the table ugly, and if they remove these tables, where will we sit?” Mary Lou shook her head in disbelief.

“I don’t care,” Sierra said petulantly. The knife made a scraping sound on the table as she dug it in deeper to spite Mary Lou.

Mary Lou gritted her teeth. Short of taking the knife, she wasn’t going to stop her, so she let it drop and tried not to wince when the knife slipped. “Don’t blame me if you hurt yourself.”

“I won’t cut myself,” Sierra retorted.

“Famous last words,” Mary Lou pointed out.

Rachel reached over and snatched the knife from Sierra. “Give me that!” she said. “You are going to cut yourself, and

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besides, the cops keep driving by. They'll see you." She slipped it under the loose-leaf notebook she was writing in. Like Mary Lou and Carly, Rachel was keeping a journal.

"Hey! Give that back!" Sierra pouted and stroked the long nose on her lap.

"Nope. Not right now. Maybe later," Rachel retorted.

Mary Lou was thinking about Sierra's suggestion. "I think names are a great idea," she said. "While we're at it, maybe we should do, like jackets or something? That would be cool. We could put 'Shadow Angels' on the back and our nickname on the front."

"What kind of names though?" Rachel was interested.

"I don't know," Mary Lou said. "But I think we can run with the idea and come up with something good." She looked out across the water with her mind going over the things they'd all been through together. It seemed a fitting idea.

"It would probably get too confusing. We can give it some thought," Rachel said. "I'll consider it. Tell you what, I'm still a bit thirsty. Down at the store in the checkout lane, they have some baby name books," Rachel said. "I'll grab some drinks, and if you want to, you can pick up a book."

"Sounds good to me," Sierra said.

Mary Lou nodded. She was ready to go as well. "Which of us is driving?"

"I will!" Sierra said enthusiastically as she rattled a set of keys before leading them to an older model red hatchback. Her grin lit her eyes.

"You look like the cat that ate the canary! Where did you get a car?" Mary Lou laughed. "Hey, you can go anywhere you want now."

"Yeah, I know! My mom got it for me and surprised me with it. She said I'd have to have my own since I'm going off to college."

"Do you have a license to drive this thing?" Mary Lou teased as she got in. Rachel giggled at Sierra's expression.

"Just for that, I don't think I'll tell you!" Sierra retorted. "Be afraid. Be very afraid."

"It can't be any scarier than Bryan's driving." Mary Lou laughed. "If I can survive that without a heart attack, I think I'll be fine with about anybody."

"So is this why you got a hatchback?" Rachel asked as Sierra opened the back for the coyote to jump in.

"I told mom it was because I could carry more stuff around for school and have room to take the trash to the dump. I didn't want her to know my pet is going places with me, and he needs the room," Sierra laughed. "He's really cool. Most people think he's my dog and don't know any different. I put a collar on him and everything," she giggled. "I had him down at the park with me the other day, and some guy was trying to get him to fetch his Frisbee."

"How did that go over?" Rachel asked, smiling.

"Coyote just sat and looked at him like he was crazy," Sierra answered. "It was pretty funny."

"I suppose there are odder things," Mary Lou said. "On a scale of crazy things that have been going on lately, a coyote riding around with you in your new car is low on the list, and besides, we had a cat named Princess that used to ride around with us going back and forth when we were building the house. We got a lot of funny looks on that one."

Sierra wrinkled her nose. She looked in her rear view mirror and did a double-take. "Have you guys noticed that there's a lot of cops around lately?" Sierra asked. Her brow was furrowed. She hadn't missed the patrol car that had eased in behind them.

"Yeah, I have," Rachel agreed. "They seem to be following me around, or at least they seem to be wherever I am when I go out."

"Okay, now that's just weird. Are you guys serious?" Mary Lou exclaimed. "That sounds a bit paranoid to me. Why would they follow us around when we haven't done anything?"

"I don't know," Sierra said.

"Just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean I don't have anything to be paranoid about!" Rachel declared. "I swear these guys keep following me around."

"Well, we're here at the store now, so maybe he'll go on," Mary Lou said. "We'll watch when we leave and see what happens. It's probably coincidence. Is the 'dog' going to be ok while we're gone?" Mary Lou asked dubiously.

"Sure, just leave the windows down. He'll wait for us," Sierra told them.

When the girls left the store with drinks and a book, the officer's patrol car was nowhere to be seen. Officer Baer had spotted other prey. Not only did he have the sheriff's orders to think about, but he also had a personal ax to grind. He'd been keeping a special eye out for the DeVault boy. A feral grin lit his

face when he spotted that car. He'd have a little fun since Deputy Mulligan wasn't riding with him today. He didn't believe the kid was as dangerous as he'd been told, although his nephew's tale of the short fight at the high school and the bruises on his ribs had given him pause.



Knbeknownst to the girls, Kenneth had come to town to run his own errands. Since he had gotten what he came for, he was absorbed in his usual favorite arcade pinball game at the Rocky Top when the officer walked in. Kenneth didn't notice at first because of the noise but turned around when the officer approached him. Kenneth was never so absorbed that he didn't know what was happening nearby.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the store manager ducking behind the counter. So, that was how this was going to play out? He was in no mood for anyone's games. He was over being toyed with, and he could smell it coming.

Officer Baer grinned. Kenneth noted his smile made him look meaner and took stock of his posture. Officer Baer walked like a gunslinger out of the old west. Granted, he had several items of equipment around his waist, but that didn't require the thrown-out chest and puffed-up look.

"Yep? Whatsup?" Kenneth maintained his outward calm but watched the officer intently with narrowed eyes.

The officer failed to see the hard look that belied the greeting. Instead, he came closer into the teen's space.

"We have some business to discuss," Baer said silkily and leaned forward, trying to dominate with his presence. Kenneth wasn't impressed.

"And what business would that be?" Kenneth replied coldly.

"Let's just say you tell me what you know about the murders in the county. I don't think you're as innocent as the sheriff thinks."

"And what makes you think so? You have some proof of that?" Kenneth asked icily.

"Let's just say your record precedes you and I have, personal interest, shall we say in ensuring you don't cause any more trouble. I intend to see that you don't."

"Personal interest. Ah... I see what this is really about." Kenneth took note of the officer's name tag. The last name matched that of the football player who'd mouthed off and

threatened to beat his ass in class at school. “Well, well, ‘Smoky Bear’ looks like bullies and small minds run in the family, eh? You’re just looking for an excuse to finish what, who is it, your brother... nephew... started? Fuck you and the horse you rode in on!” Kenneth dismissed anything further the officer had to say.

Officer Baer’s face turned an odd shade of red as he reacted to Kenneth’s lack of what he felt was the respect he was due. The deputy was used to everyone bowing and scraping. Baer had his own reputation, and he wielded the power of his badge in a way that made him feel powerful and in control. He wasn’t used to finding himself losing the upper hand.

“Why, you little prick!” Baer snarled.

Kenneth knew the instant the officer resorted to name-calling that any relevant conversation was over. “You know what? I’d suggest you leave me the hell alone.”

“I ought to drag you out of here and teach you a lesson.” Officer Baer worked his hands at his sides, which made his knuckles crack.

“Get out of my face!” Kenneth was through giving warnings.

Instead of backing off, the officer made a move toward his belt. That was it as far as Kenneth was concerned.

Officer Baer never saw the lightning-quick fist that cold-cocked him in the jaw and knocked him sprawling. He landed in the middle of a pile of ice and soda cans as the free-standing drink cooler upended its contents all over the floor. It would be several minutes before he came to and pulled himself shakily to his feet. He would later be too embarrassed and shamed to report the incident. Meanwhile, Kenneth stood over his unconscious frame and had the last word.

“Roane County’s finest? You were going to beat my ass? Your badge and gun didn’t do you one bit of good, did it? God, I hate bullies! Go back to the Academy and get a clue, fucking moron! Oh, and by the way? Quit following us around!” Kenneth resisted the urge to kick the prone deputy on his way out.

“Sorry about the mess,” Kenneth told the manager as he passed the counter at the front of the store.

“I didn’t see a thing,” the manager replied. “I’ll take care of the mess when Junior there wakes up.”

“Thanks man,” Kenneth told him.

“No problem.”

He was halfway to his car when a honking horn drew his attention and a red hatchback pulled in. Rachel was leaning out

the window. “Hey! Whatsup!” Kenneth greeted his friends and walked over to them.

“We didn’t know you were in town, or we’d have asked you earlier. Would you like to go over to my house this afternoon? That is if you aren’t doing anything?” Rachel asked.

“Sure,” Kenneth agreed. “I was just leaving anyway, and it’s probably a good idea to be somewhere else before the trash gets taken out here.” Kenneth shot a sour look over his shoulder. Deputy Baer would be waking up about now, he figured.

“You want to ride with us?” Rachel asked.

“Nah, that’s okay. I’ll drive over myself and not leave my car here. You guys have good timing actually,” Kenneth told them.

Rachel pulled her head back in, and Kenneth walked over and stuck his in the car. “Look, there’s that same police car we saw earlier,” Rachel said to the others. “See? I told you.”

“You noticed that too, did you?” Kenneth asked. “He’s not going anywhere for a little while, so you don’t have anything to worry about.”

“So you think he’s following us around as well,” Mary Lou observed.

Instead of answering, Kenneth grinned at Sierra. “Looks like somebody got some wheels, and I see our buddy is with you.” Kenneth reached out and put his hand on the coyote’s ruff, who nosed him in return.

“Just got it yesterday.” Sierra grinned back. “I can go anywhere I want and stay out late now.”

“Well, that’s a good thing.” Kenneth pulled his head out of the car and slapped the door. “I’ll be along in a few. You all go ahead.” He dismissed them with another slap on the car door. Time to go. He could hear loud noises from inside the Rocky Top that indicated the mess was getting attention. He turned and walked to his car without hurrying. There was still no sign of the officer as he pulled onto Kentucky Street and headed to Rachel’s house. That really was good timing, he thought. He looked at the bag on the floorboard. *This will fit in with my plan just fine*, he thought.

What Bryan had told him about going astral with Mary Lou had intrigued him and given him the idea for this. As for Moira’s words, well, she was another story. Moira had turned a casual idea into an imperative. Kenneth didn’t know exactly what they were going to do, but he finally admitted that he would have to involve himself directly.

The coven notwithstanding, he knew a few things himself about energy work. If he had any guesses, they were going to be forced to kick it up a notch, and he wanted every advantage. “*Help them,*” Moira had said. Well, he couldn’t back away now, knowing what he did.

“I don’t owe you anything, Moira, or should I say Skuld? I don’t owe the people of this County anything either. What have they done for me besides? But, them? My friends I care about. I can’t just let them be eaten for lunch,” he said softly into thin air.

No one was here to listen, but he knew somehow that Moira would hear. Goddesses were like that, always in everybody’s business, just like some women. Kenneth grinned at his own thought. Then he sobered. He knew enough not to give her away, though. It wouldn’t be worth it to cross her directly and reveal who she was.

Moira’s existence presented Kenneth with a religious question that he pondered on his way to Rachel’s house. Usually, when he’d heard people mention fate, it was in a very allegorical sense. It was as if by claiming something was fated, they could avoid making hard choices and thereby pawn off their responsibility on some nebulous idea that they had no control over their own lives. At least, that’s the way he’d always seen it.

Presented with Fate up and walking around, he had to admit he was being forced to rethink. Were they only toys moved around on a chessboard being played by God after all? An all-knowing, all-seeing God would see and know what everyone was going to do before they did it. Did that preclude free will, and were they simply trapped into going through meaningless motions? *Obviously, Fate is more than just a principle*, he thought. So what does that actually mean for all the rest? If Skuld was up walking around, what about the other gods and goddesses? Were they also ‘real?’ What would that revelation do to his own faith? Were they all just aspects of the One God who obviously could appear as who and what was needed at the time, or were they separate entities?

Kenneth thought back to Moira’s words during his conversation with her. “*You do much talking and not enough listening to that part of the Source of All that you follow.*” He’d been too angry at the time to think about it then.

“Oh,” Kenneth said aloud in realization as the answer suddenly hit him. “She’s just as answerable to God the All-Knowing as all the rest of us, and whether that God is male or female, neither or both doesn’t matter at all. We are all a

reflection of that, whether man or woman, since we all come from the same creative Source.” Suddenly, all the wars and deaths through time over the question of whose god is the right god, or goddess, seemed more pointless than ever.

“I get it.” Kenneth nodded. He rubbed the painful throbbing in his temples. Kenneth’s habit of pondering the nature of the Universe didn’t usually give him such a headache.

He pulled into Rachel’s driveway. Rachel’s sparkly black Firebird was there, as was Sierra’s cute little hatchback.

The girls’ voices sounded muffled inside when he got to the door. Without bothering to knock, he pushed the door open and went on inside. It was a small house, and he’d been there often enough that he was at home here. Just as he’d figured, they were gathered in Rachel’s bedroom. His footsteps sounded hollow on the worn hardwood floor.

When Kenneth walked into the room, Rachel and Sierra had their heads hung over Mary Lou’s shoulder as she held a book in her hands. All three were looking intently at it and didn’t notice the bags he carried. They were mumbling to themselves and largely ignoring him. Rachel had a notebook on her lap.

“Hey, Ken,” Mary Lou said. She didn’t look up but instead ran her finger down the list she was perusing. “Ok, so we have two of them. What about you Sierra, did you see anything that fits?”

“I like the choices under Draya,” she replied. “But I don’t like the spelling. I will go with D-r-i-a. It rings like my real name, but it’s short and easy to say.”

“It means ‘woman,’” Mary Lou said as she looked at the name meanings listed. “At least from the Greek derivative.”

“Before you ask Ken, we are all taking group nicknames.”

“Oh? It might have been nice to inform me of that fact,” he said. “Should I be worried?”

“We just did tell you!” Mary Lou laughed.

“It has to start with a ‘D’ otherwise, it can be anything you want. You wanna see the book?” Sierra asked Kenneth.

“Nah, you pick for me,” he laughed. “I’ll be interested in hearing what you come up with.” He began pulling items out of a paper grocery bag. “So, let’s hear it,” he said.

“Hear what?” Mary Lou asked.

“Your new names.” Kenneth rolled his eyes. He set out a large candle holder and a cigarette lighter, followed by a large white candle.

"Oh. Duh." Mary Lou giggled at herself for being slow on the uptake. "I went with Danika, it means 'gift of the star.'"

Kenneth nodded. "Appropriate," he said. "What about you, Rach..?"

"Dara," Rachel told him. "It means 'wisdom.'"

"Or, to possess." Mary Lou noted. "But we can use it however we want and make the names ours," she said. "And Sierra chose Dria. So that makes three."

"So what about me?" Kenneth asked and struck a martial pose with a big grin on his face."

"Hmmmm, I know!" Rachel laughed. "We'll call him the Dragon just like Bruce Lee!"

"That's soooo overdone though," Mary Lou objected. "Maybe a derivative?"

"Here, this works. D-a-r-c-o-n," Sierra spelled it out. "I like it better than Dracos, which means dragon."

"I don't see that there," Mary Lou said.

"You just said we could do it how we want, and if you switch the 'a' and the 'r' around, you practically have the word Dragon anyway. Ok, Ken that's what you're stuck with!" They laughed.

"I kind of like it," Kenneth answered. "Darcon works for me."

"It's very you," Mary Lou declared. "Hey, this is going faster than I thought! We just have to come up with names for Carly and Bryan, and we'll have it."

"Why are we doing this again?" Kenneth wanted to know.

"Just because we can." Rachel smiled. "And it's cool. Here, Mary Lou, give me the book." Mary Lou handed it over.

"What about the ones we were talking about before Ken got here? I liked those, and we can ask them if they like the names."

"I'm pretty sure Carly will like Dythia," Mary Lou said. "I think she'll like the meaning. 'The Moon's Priestess' fits her."

"That's beautiful," Kenneth told her. "Tell her I said she's stuck with that." He sat down on the floor and crossed his legs. "What did you find as a possible nickname for Bryan? Oh, and are you guys going to get down here with me, or did I bring this stuff just for kicks and giggles?"

"What are we doing?" Sierra asked as they all moved. Sierra's pet shifted with her, put his back to Sierra and stretched out.

"Drevan for Bryan," Mary Lou said. "But he'll have to agree to it, and so does my sister."

"Nah, that works. They all do actually," Kenneth mused. He folded his hands in his lap and leaned forward as the girls sat in front of him. "All right then, Danika, Dria, and Dara," Kenneth

emphasized each name. “We’re going to do a meditation. Remember when I said we could develop our mental and spiritual gifts?”

They nodded. Rachel shifted a little closer, and Mary Lou folded her legs into a comfortable position. Sierra leaned against her cousin’s bed.

“Mary Lou is already working on this, but everyone will benefit,” Kenneth said. “What I want you to do is make sure you are in a comfortable position, and when I light the candle, you look at it, relax and just watch the flame.”

“And what does that do?” Mary Lou asked.

“Don’t ask questions. You’ll see if you’ll just be patient. Now, relax and empty your mind. This is an Eastern meditation method.” Kenneth leaned forward and picked up the lighter. With a couple of clicks, he lit the candle.

Kenneth was right. Mary Lou got the idea pretty quickly. It wasn’t long before the mesmerizing dance of the candle flame made her start to feel vague. She found herself swaying slightly back and forth as she tranced. Mary Lou felt the urge to leave her body and astral travel again. However, she held herself back because she wasn’t sure where Kenneth was going with this exercise.

Instead of letting her awareness go elsewhere, she concentrated on seeing the flame. She saw that instead of the small tame flame she expected, the candle flame was burning brighter and much taller. As she watched, the wick changed and morphed and curled with its tip flattening out in several split mushroom shapes. Though the flame was nearly six inches as it burned, the candle was barely burned down. That brought her back somewhat, and she looked across the flame to Kenneth, who smiled into her eyes.

“That is am...”

“...amazing and beautiful. Yes, I know,” Kenneth finished Mary Lou’s sentence for her. He put his finger to his lips to shush further conversation. She raised her eyebrows. He’d said exactly what she was thinking. She didn’t try to comment further.

As she sat and watched the candle slowly burn down, Mary Lou realized she was almost hyper-aware of her friends around her. Her breathing slowed, and she could almost feel her heartbeat matching theirs. She fancied that the flame before her burned brightly within each of them. Kenneth’s was calm and steady, Sierra bright and chaotic, Rachel hesitant and reaching. Kenneth sensed when they were responding as he’d expected,

and he reached for Rachel and Sierra. "Now, close your eyes and join hands." As the four of them joined hands, the effect strengthened to the point it felt like electricity between them. "Feel that?" he asked them.

Rachel gasped as she felt the tingling in her hands. Her eyes flew open, and she looked around. "That's not my imagination is it?" she asked him at nearly a whisper.

"Nope," he said. "Concentrate."

Mary Lou smiled at Rachel's reaction but didn't open her eyes. She was getting used to being immersed in the energies around her. Despite her intentions, Mary Lou started to sway again, and she was drawn deeper into and through her subconscious mind and then outward. She looked up in her mind's eye and watched as a single eagle circled overhead against blue sky. Storm clouds rumbled on the horizon.

Carly dreamed of flying again. As the ground below her raced underneath, she let out a joyful cry and spread her arms, letting herself go to ride the currents of air as a golden eagle. Carly flew over wild unpopulated land, seeking below for she knows not what. At her breast, the red jewel rested on her feathers. She banked and looked below to a jagged rocky coastline. Something big splashed in the sea. The eagle that is Carly caught a glimpse of a scaled blue-green serpentine head. She banked and circled lazily, feeling free and out of the sea dragon's reach.

She reached for the sky and rose into the blue. White fluffy mist topped a lowering grayness over the horizon. A storm rumbled distantly. Carly felt no concern. Her sharp eyes caught movement below. There were men coming from a village on the island. She circled closer to see where they were going. It felt important somehow.

Carly saw a black form creeping closer. The large panther seemed familiar. She watched it for a few minutes, swooping low enough to nearly brush its head with her talons, but avoided a raking attack. Instead, she hissed at a snake curled up at the doorway to the barrow. She stayed her attack again, however, and entered, folding her wings.

The dark barrow was the same familiar room lit with candle lanterns and a forge she had seen in her dreams several times before. The whole scene played out for her. The dead, staring eyes of the children struck her to her core. She wanted to weep. She looked at the woman bound helpless as she was

beaten and ravaged. She heard the snake slithering almost silently behind her and the soft paw pads of the large cat.

All Carly could do was watch helplessly as tears wetted her cheeks. The man turned to his fire, and Carly crept over to the injured woman and brushed her bruised cheek with a feathered wingtip. Instead of the solace she tried to share, Carly found herself drawn in and suddenly looked out of the eyes of the woman. She watched as her tormentor was brought down and dragged out by his feet.

Outside, she was released, and her babies laid at her feet. The gaping holes in their chests were horrible to see. Her mind could barely register what was happening. Her screams as she clutched her dead children to her breast were pitiful to hear. Her curses matched her tears as she swore revenge. If only her bruised body could move enough for her to rise and cut the throat of The Wolf where he now lay bound and gagged. She tried to rise and found her legs trembled too much to hold her. She collapsed in a heap again, crying her soul out for the Universe to hear her pain. The gods themselves heard and knew her broken heart.

“Ingegerd, my dear.” She felt gentle hands upon her. “I’m Skuldii, the village healer and midwife. I was informed, but too late to get here any sooner. I am sorry for the loss of your children. Come, and I will help you.”

Carly/Ingegerd found herself lifted to her feet. She looked up into beautiful, striking silver eyes. “Moira?” Carly struggled to separate dream from reality. Silver eyes twinkled, and a slow secret smile played about the healer’s lips. “Come, child, it is time to go.”

Carly found herself again speeding along on the breeze. Her mind was so full of what happened she almost failed to register the white dragon which winged past her. She found herself picking up speed and felt a falling sensation.

Carly jerked awake out of her dream back in her bed, in her room. She found that her cheeks were wet with tears. She looked down. She was smeared with real blood. None of it was her own. She looked herself over, and there were no wounds. Carly was scared.

It was the middle of the day, and her mom and dad were still outside when she woke from her nap. Carly rose, stripped the sheets off her bed, and quickly put them in the washing machine.

She didn't want to answer questions she didn't have the answers to. After a quick shower, Carly tried a phone call. Mary Lou was gone out somewhere with Sierra and Rachel. They would have to talk later.



23

THE MEDICINE WHEEL

“**M**ary Lou, wake up. Mary Lou! Hey!” Rachel was shouting and sounding panicky. M.A.R.Y.L.O.U.!

Somewhere deep in her awareness, Mary Lou thought she heard people talking and shouting. It didn’t mean anything. She continued to sway to the rhythm of the waves on a long distant shoreline.

“Here, I’ll get her,” Kenneth declared. “WAKE!” He demanded loudly, right in her face. Kenneth snapped his fingers and projected the thought into her mind.

Mary Lou jerked, and her eyes flew open. Groggily, she blinked several times and looked around at her friends. Sierra was smirking again with her half-smile, Rachel’s eyes were huge and round, and Kenneth looked amused. “There, that’s better,” Kenneth said. “The rest of us were done fifteen minutes ago,” he told her.

“We were worried about you,” Rachel said, nodding. “Don’t scare me like that again.”

“Why, what’s wrong?” Mary Lou asked. She still felt vague and almost light-headed, as if she wasn’t sure which was the reality and which was the dream.

“That was no dream,” Kenneth declared. “You left, and pulled the rest of us with you.”

“I did?” There he was, reading her mind again.

“Yeah, it was kinda’ cool up until the part where that big guy was killing those kids,” Sierra declared. “We didn’t stick around long after that. Ken brought us back.”

“Then where were you guys? I saw Carly but,” Mary Lou asked. She was still not thinking clearly.

“Umm. Did you not see the two dragons and the rattlesnake?” Kenneth asked her and grinned. “By the way, nice totem you’ve got. That panther is huge,” he said. “But then you wouldn’t wake up.” Kenneth looked at Mary Lou intently. *I thought I’d have to go in after you.*”

"But you didn't have to. I'm fine," she said aloud. Then she realized he'd not spoken or verbalized the last comment in any way. "Wha... Did you just?" Mary Lou trailed off. She looked at Kenneth, startled. He *was* reading her mind! She resolved to work that one out later when he wasn't prying in her head. She didn't quite glare at him. He was expressing concern for her after all. She didn't stop to think what it meant that she'd actually heard him.

Kenneth didn't miss the implications, however. He just grinned at her and tried to look mysterious. Now that he knew she could, the game would be on. Besides, he thought, *the ante' is so high, upping our side is all good.*

Rachel, however, didn't get the undercurrent. "Yeah, he had to wake you up, and there for a minute, I thought you weren't going to come out of it at all. You were just sitting there."

Sierra was the first to say what they were all thinking. "You told us about this Wolf guy, and what we saw fits the story. Was that him?"

"I believe so," Kenneth said. "I think that somehow through the astral, we're being shown a part of what really happened. Carly is a key point, and because of Mary Lou's connection to her, she was drawn in to see what Carly saw, and we tagged along."

"I am confused," Sierra said. "What does Carly have to do with it? I'm the one he keeps coming after."

Kenneth folded his hands back in his lap and leaned forward into Sierra's space. "I believe I have all this figured out. Think about the role-playing games if that helps you understand. He's coming after you because you released him, Sierra. Not only that, but you took the beads which had him bound. That creates some kind of connection, and obviously your friend Tyrone has some kind of interest in you too, or he wouldn't have tried to get to you. Either way, you're screwed, and you did that one. You can't blame that on anyone but you."

Sierra winced. "And what about Carly?"

Kenneth sighed. He wasn't happy about little Carly being at the center of what was going down.

"She has a connection, don't ask me how, to the woman Wolf attacked. That would be the princess Ingegerd and whether Carly is a reincarnation or a descendent, or both, who knows?" Kenneth shrugged. "The one thing I do know is that fate has a hand in all of this and we're stuck dealing with it. Carly has no choice in the matter, obviously." He thought back to what they'd been shown of the deaths of the children and Wolf's attack on the

princess. How was Carly handling reliving that scene? “We need to call her to make sure she’s okay,” he said.

“From what you are saying and told us the other day, I agree she doesn’t have a choice, and we don’t either, but then we had that part figured out already,” Mary Lou replied. “I think we should also talk to the professor again,” Mary Lou said grimly. “We know now, or at least we have a good idea what we’re dealing with. I’d like to see what he says we should do next.”

“You have his number. Go ahead and call him,” Rachel suggested.

“I guess I could,” Mary Lou said. “Let me go dig his number out.”

They all waited while Mary Lou fetched her purse and the card with the professor and Moira’s number on it. “Hey, I actually didn’t lose it,” Mary Lou said as she went to pick up the phone at Rachel’s bedside.

They listened to a one-sided conversation for several minutes as the professor happened to be home. “Okay. Okay. Yes, Professor Holderman.” Mary Lou explained what they’d found out and had figured out from the information they had.

“Ummmm, guys? He says he can meet us this afternoon.”

“Where at?” Rachel wanted to know.

Sierra’s stomach dropped when she heard the reply. She got ready to balk. No way!

“He says he wants Sierra to show us all where the cave is. We need to go in there and see what’s left. He says he talked to Moira as well, and she agrees that’s probably the best thing we can do at this point,” Mary Lou explained.

“No. I’m not going back there,” Sierra said.

Mary Lou wasn’t going to give her a choice. “Sierra, you don’t have to go in. Just take us up to where it is, and we’ll go in.”

Kenneth shook his head in agreement. “That’s the same thing Bryan suggested too, and I think everybody’s right. We should go take a look for ourselves.”

Sierra sucked in her breath. She started to say something, and Kenneth interrupted her.

“You started this whole thing. It’s time you step up and see it finished,” Kenneth told her firmly.

“But,” Sierra objected.

“No buts.” Kenneth turned. “Sierra, you said that you used to live down off Clymersville Road in walking distance of this place, up on Rockwood Mountain, right? Tell him we’ll be there, Mary Lou. Ask him where and what time.”

“Okay.” She turned back to the phone. “They’re saying Clymersville, professor. Do you know where that is? You do? Okay.” She half-turned to her friends. “Back to Rockwood, we go. He says he’ll meet us at Clymersville Road down by the church at six this evening. Oh, and SilverFox is going to go with us. She and Moira are over at the professor’s, and Moira wants SilverFox to accompany us.”

“How convenient that Moira is there,” Kenneth commented dryly. “The clock says it’s after four-thirty now. We should head that way.”

“What about Moira?” Mary Lou asked.

“Never mind. Let’s just go,” he said. “I’ll drive. There’s room in my car for all four of us and the four-legged fur rug too. We can stop for something to eat on the way, and since Sierra can show us where to go, we won’t need directions.”

Ghe teens left Kingston heading South on Highway 70 past the college. When they reached downtown Rockwood, Sierra showed Kenneth where to turn off of the main road. They passed several straight cross streets laid out in square blocks and headed directly toward the mountains looming behind the town. When they’d gone literally to a dead-end crossroad Sierra directed Kenneth to turn left.

“There’s only one way you *can* go,” Sierra explained. “The road simply ends the other direction, and on the opposite end is the church, and just past that is where we’re going. Where *you* guys are going,” Sierra corrected. She nervously took a bite of the burger that she’d gotten in town when they stopped at the Rockwood Rocky Top. A few minutes later, they were pulling into the parking lot of a Baptist church.

Professor Holderman stood beside his car. SilverFox sat in the passenger seat and waved to them as Kenneth pulled up alongside.

“You must be Professor Holderman,” Kenneth observed.

“The same.” The professor nodded. “You all are ready, I presume? We should get in and get out before it gets dark.” His eyes grew round as the coyote popped up and stuck his head out the window.

“I see you have a friend with you,” the professor said. He shook his head. They had managed to surprise him. If he had doubted before, then the presence of a coyote sitting practically on top of Sierra chased away the rest of his misgivings. *Whatever*

the Spirit world is up to, he thought, I better sit up and pay attention.

“This is my dog,” Sierra said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Hello, Sierra’s dog,” Professor Holderman said with dignity. He got a yip in return, and the coyote put his paws out the window so he could sniff the professor up and down. “Well, do I pass?” he laughed.

“He likes you,” Sierra grinned.

“You have protection. That’s all to the good,” the professor said. “Anyway, I am ready when you all are. Sierra, would you do the honor of showing us where this burial cave is?”

“If I have to,” Sierra said. “But I don’t want to go in there. I’d rather wait outside.”

“Then lead the way,” the professor said. “Do we walk from here, or do we need to drive to another location?”

“End of the road and up above the quarry,” Sierra told him.

“Alright,” Kenneth said. “In that case, we should park closer so we’ll have the cars nearby if something happens.

“Good idea,” Professor Holderman said. “Oh, and by the way, you can call me John Medicine Bear or just John for short.”

“I’m Kenneth, or uh, Darcon as the case may be.” He grinned at the girls. “Don’t ask.” He laughed and gestured toward the back seat. “It’s their fault.”

“I heard about you from Moira.” Medicine Bear didn’t mention that he’d seen Kenneth before.

“An interesting woman,” is all Kenneth would say. “So, I say, let’s rock n roll! I’m ready to get this over with.” He put the car in gear and gently eased forward. He pulled down the slight grade and out onto the road. At the curve, he pulled into the access where Sierra indicated.

“Here,” Sierra said grimly. “And don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Come on,” he said. “If we’re here, let’s go.” Kenneth turned his car off, opened his door, and stood up. He bent down and gave Sierra a glare when she didn’t move. “Well, quit being slow! You have to show us where this place is. I’m not wasting what little daylight is left running all over looking for a big hole in the ground.”

Sourly, Sierra got out of the car. When she turned around, she saw a petite raven-haired woman approach. Mary Lou was exiting the car from the back seat and greeted the new arrival. They embraced warmly.

“SilverFox! It’s great to see you again. So, you’re coming along on the grand adventure, eh?” Mary Lou said

“Moira wanted one of us to come with you guys to investigate and see what’s going on,” SilverFox told her seriously. “Given what you guys told us, you also might need help. Medicine Bear is quite capable, but we have different specialties, and I can provide backup if you all come under psychic attack. Medicine Bear deals directly with spirits and messages from beyond the veil of the spirit world, or afterlife if you want to call it that. He honors his ancestors by walking the path of healer and medicine man. And, it’s about time too.” SilverFox grinned at her companion, who nodded in acknowledgment. He knew he’d fallen down on the job and didn’t need the priestess to remind him.

“We’re both here in case one of us needs to deal with a situation while the other of us gets the rest of you away,” Medicine Bear said. “We shall see what we shall see.”

“That makes me feel a little better,” Sierra said from behind them. “It sounds like you know what you’re doing.”

“Let’s hope so.” SilverFox smiled and put her arm around Mary Lou’s shoulders as they started walking. “I can also start to show you how to use your gifts in a magickal sense. That’s spelled with a ‘k’ by the way, if you were wondering.”

“Oh?” Mary Lou was curious.

“It differentiates directed spiritual energy work, which is what we do, from stage magic and sleight of hand,” SilverFox added.

“So, since you’re a witch, do you cast spells on people?” Sierra wanted to know. She walked behind the rest, hanging back but close enough to overhear. Her coyote friend forged ahead, acting like the dog he pretended to be.

The path past the pole gate which marked the entrance was flat and easy walking if you discounted the brambles and leafy weeds that wanted to entangle anyone passing through. Curved slightly to the right, the boulder and tree-lined path was marked by tire tracks wide enough to be made by heavy equipment and large trucks.

“To answer your question, in a nutshell, no. I don’t do that. For one thing, why would I want to? For another, that would violate every precept of the Craft and my oaths to my coven and goddess,” SilverFox chided. “The sacred oaths are binding and must not be broken, or else.”

“Or else what?” Sierra asked.

“Very bad things happen to those who break trust. It’s the nature of the Universe. Think of it as karma, if you like. By

breaking a trust, you leave yourself open to more negative influences than you may be able to handle. You are lucky if it only ends up an uncomfortable lesson in what not to do ever again.”

“You sound like my preacher.” Sierra wrinkled her brow.

“That’s not preaching, my dear,” SilverFox laughed. “It’s life. These are basics of not only the Craft but in becoming a responsible adult. When you use magick, you are charged with even more responsibility because its misuse can have far-reaching consequences you are unable to foresee.”

“Now, you sound like my mother!” Sierra giggled as she replied.

“I’ve been accused of that before.” SilverFox smiled. “Ah, we appear to be getting somewhere. It’s time for you to lead on, I think. Please show us where this cave is.”

They rounded the bend after only a few minutes’ walk and came out in a large, relatively flat area with various-sized stones and rocks. They discovered fairly quickly that they would need to watch their step. Rachel nearly fell over an uneven place when a stone turned under her foot. Weeds were sparser here, and half of them were just dry stalks, remnants of the previous growing season. They caught up to Kenneth and Medicine Bear. The two stood by the edge of a huge crescent-shaped cut in the mountain’s base.

“Wow!” Mary Lou exclaimed. “That’s deep! We don’t have to climb down there, do we?” She looked dubiously at the hole in the ground and mentally calculated how many houses she could stack one on top of the other and still fit in there. At least four, probably five, she decided.

“No, go on to your left,” Sierra told her. There’s a place you can climb before you get to the next big drop-off. You have to go ‘up’ to get to it.”

“Okay,” Mary Lou said. She peered at the area Sierra pointed to with her finger. She couldn’t see anything. “There’s nothing here!” she objected.

“There’s plenty here,” SilverFox said tersely. She was growing progressively paler when Mary Lou turned to look at her. “I can feel the oppression. This place is sick. The ground has been violated, but there’s more to it than that.” She stalked forward toward the incline where bushes and more thick weeds surrounded tumbled boulders.

“I’ll wait for you guys here,” Sierra declared. She found a large flat rock and sat down to wait.

Mary Lou followed SilverFox since she seemed to know what she was doing. Kenneth and Rachel were a few steps behind, with Medicine Bear in the rear.

"Danika, wait up a bit," Kenneth called, using Mary Lou's new nickname. "Let SilverFox go on ahead and come here just a minute." He had an odd expression on his face.

"Is something?" Mary Lou started. Kenneth finished her question before it was out of her mouth.

"Wrong? Yes. This one isn't going to be hard to figure out. SilverFox is right. It's like a bad smell you can almost taste. But, here. I have something you're going to need. Courtesy of Medicine Bear since I didn't think of it ahead of time." He handed her a flashlight and a set of extra batteries and gave Rachel a light as well.

"Ah yes. Caves are very dark," Mary Lou said ruefully. "I should have thought of that, especially since I've been in a cave and couldn't see my hand in front of my face."

Suddenly SilverFox let out a string of expletives that belied her cheerful seeming personality. They all looked around to see the priestess kneeling on the ground. She had a knife stuck in the dirt with her hand on it.

"Are you okay?" Rachel walked up to SilverFox, concerned.

"Yes, but I know how this happened, and it's not entirely the fault of Sierra and her friend." SilverFox's eyes were closed as she concentrated on taking a psychic reading of the area.

"Which part that happened?" Rachel wanted to know.

"How the Viking got loose from his burial chambers here," SilverFox answered. "It's because the company that runs the quarry literally dug enough ground out that the seal on his tomb just fell away. That was part of the binding on this piece of his soul. Of all the places they could dig, they just had to pick this spot." She shook her head. "Sierra is right. It's up there. The mountain has partly slipped some more, but it's stable for now, and there's enough crawl space left for us to enter," SilverFox told them.

The priestess opened her eyes and rose from the ground. "Medicine Bear, you can take it from here. What I'm sensing is leftovers. I don't feel anything immediately coming down on us." She nodded at the professor.

"f the rest of you would wait here for a few moments, please." Professor 'Medicine Bear' Holderman stepped ahead of the group and climbed the short distance to a hole in the rock

surrounded by boulders. He knelt in front of the opening and unslung the large leather pouch which hung across his shoulder. Medicine Bear opened the leather bag and removed the tools of his heritage. They felt like old friends to his hands.

With reverence, he acknowledged the tools' connection, and his, to the long line of men and women who had carried this very same sacred medicine. First out was a pouch of tobacco. He took a pinch of the slightly moist tobacco and left an offering to the side of the entrance for the ancestor spirits. Next, he extracted a turtle shell rattle with a handle wrapped in gray fur. He lit a charcoal briquette and placed it in an empty turtle shell, lit it, then added another pinch of tobacco. He wafted the smoke across the entrance to the cave before he set it down, still burning just inside the opening. The rattle provided a rhythm to Medicine Bear's short prayer that he uttered first in the language of his ancestors. He prayed again in English, more for respect for his companions than for need.

"Mother, Father God, we come with sadness in our heart. We ask for your blessing as we enter your sacred womb. Walk with us ancestor spirits and lend us your aid and protection. We honor those who have gone before us and acknowledge the sacrifice of those who died to give us safety, peace, and protection. Bless this place with your healing medicine. Wado."

Sierra's curiosity overcame her reluctance, and she joined the group to be able to see and hear what was going on. "Is all this necessary just to go in the dumb cave?" she whispered to the priestess.

SilverFox glared at Sierra. "Perhaps you should be quiet so you can learn something instead of criticizing," SilverFox whispered back. "If you had treated it with more respect from the beginning, we wouldn't be in this mess, now would we?"

Sierra didn't have a good retort. She just set her jaw, gave the priestess a hard look, and went back to her rock to sit down.

Her friends missed the exchange between Sierra and SilverFox, being absorbed as they were by what Medicine Bear was doing. When Medicine Bear motioned to them to come ahead first, Rachel and SilverFox climbed up behind him, followed by Mary Lou with Kenneth in the rear. The coyote, who had been foraging around the underbrush to follow rabbit scent, joined them.

Medicine Bear put all of his belongings back into his pouch except for the lit incense in the turtle shell. To this, he added another pinch of tobacco and slid it ahead of him with one hand

while holding a flashlight with the other. There was no other light available within the cave, so he switched it on. He paused just inside. The smoke from his incense gave the light an ethereal quality as it moved and swirled in the air currents from the entrance and highlighted by the flashlight.

The interior chamber beyond the entrance was small and piled with loose stones. Most of these Medicine Bear was able to move aside as he moved forward to make room for SilverFox to enter. To the left and right straight ahead were two more openings in the cave rock. His light didn't reveal much. They would have to explore.

"Hmmmm," Medicine Bear commented.

"Do you see anything?" SilverFox asked as she finished crawling through the opening on her belly.

"Not yet," came the answer. "I hope we don't need climbing gear. I left all that back at the car."

"At least you have it if we need to send someone to fetch it," SilverFox observed. "Ah, yes. It's definitely bigger than it looks from outside." The priestess shone her light around the cave also. All there was to be seen was the granite, slate, and limestone, which made up the gray stone of the cave walls and the two openings in the back.

"Should we split up?" Rachel was next to enter. She could see well enough with the other two lights on that she placed her own flashlight in the pocket of her jeans. "There's two parts to it."

"Not unless we have to," Medicine Bear answered. "It's never a good idea to split up or go alone in a place like this. The party needs to stay together for safety reasons."

"Follow the right-hand rule then maybe," Mary Lou said. She had her light out and shone it at the right cut in the rock.

"Sounds good to me," Rachel said.

"AAAAaargh! Stop that!" Kenneth complained from behind. "There's no room! Get, hey! Damn mutt."

"What's going on, Ken? Oh!" Mary Lou couldn't say anything more as she laughed when she looked behind her. In spite of themselves, the rest of the party was overtaken by giggles.

Kenneth was stuck in a compromising position as the coyote, impatient with the progress, had shoved himself forcefully inside and between his legs before Kenneth was clear. Now the coyote was caught underneath the human's legs and belly with a look of consternation as he whined, flattened his ears, and looked up at the teen who glared down at him. Kenneth bared his teeth, and the coyote half yipped half yawned as he pressed himself to the

floor and tried to push on forward. All that happened was Kenneth got jostled on top of him and shoved into the roof of the entrance.

"Stop! Stay down," Kenneth ordered the coyote. "Neither of us is going anywhere with you doing that." He glared at the rest of his companions. "Are you all going to just sit there and laugh, or is somebody going to help me?" he asked.

Still giggling, Mary Lou scooted on the floor over to the stuck pair. "What do you need me to do?" she asked.

"Just pull. And quit laughing at me," he replied.

"Pull you, or pull your buddy?" Mary Lou laughed as she tried not to.

"Me," Kenneth demanded. "We're wedged, and I have no leverage. I'd say grab him by the scruff, but we don't know if he'd bite you. He is still a wild animal after all."

Kenneth gave her his hand, and between Mary Lou pulling and Kenneth scooting, they got him free of the entrance in a shower of dirt and pebbles. The coyote stood up and shook himself nonchalantly as if nothing had happened. Kenneth bent his head down and brushed the debris out of his light golden brown hair using both hands.

"**O**h wow!" They heard Rachel's voice echo slightly. She'd gone on ahead while Mary Lou helped Kenneth get free. "Pretty!" As everyone caught up to her, she ran her hands over the stone. Glints of color and sparkle reflected in the lights as they shone on the rock walls. "I wonder if any of these might come free? I wonder what this green rock is?" she mused aloud and poked at them with her index finger.

Rachel heard a throat clear behind her. Medicine Bear was there looking stern. "Take nothing with you when you leave but what you brought in here," he told her. "These minerals aren't to be mined or taken. Even if this wasn't a burial site which makes it sacred, the land doesn't need to be raped further for greed."

Rachel's face fell. "I didn't mean..."

"To offend?" Medicine Bear asked. Rachel nodded.

"Yes, they are pretty," he said. Medicine Bear glanced at what he knew was likely quartz crystals in the cave wall. He wouldn't be surprised by the presence of geodes in these layered mineral deposits. "Still, it's a state of mind that shows where your values are. I know. It's a cultural thing. But you are not bound by that. You can choose differently and respect what Mother Earth gives

you rather than taking more than you need. A lesson for the future." He winked but kept a serious face.

Rachel felt scolded and ashamed of herself. She thought back to the many times now that she'd scolded Sierra for picking up the beads from this place. "I'll remember," she nodded.

"Good," Medicine Bear replied. With that, he turned and shone his own light along the walls, ceiling, and floor. Slowly, the passage opened up, and instead of bending, they could comfortably stand up as they went. Around a curve, there was an abrupt deep hole in the floor. Medicine Bear, still heading up the party, stopped in his tracks and examined it by shining his light down into it. He couldn't see its bottom.

The floors were relatively smooth for a wild cave and almost seemed tailored into a path by deliberate means. After he eyed it critically and calculated in his head, he jumped across the hole onto a flat tablet of rock, then over to a more solid-looking portion of the path. He made it easily by grabbing onto a short, thick stalagmite extending from the floor that formed part of the rock ledge to steady himself.

"I'm not sure I can jump that." Rachel hesitated.

"Sure you can," Medicine Bear told her. "Come on across, and I'll be right here to catch you."

Rachel threw caution away, and with her heart in her throat, she jumped and made it easily. One by one, the others followed, and with the coyote now bringing up the rear, they made it to another chamber. This room was larger and had its own light source in the form of a fissure breaking through the side of the mountain where the quarry had been dug nearly through the side of the cave. The rock wall had weakened, broken, and crumbled away. Still, the integrity of the cave was largely intact.

When they entered, Medicine Bear caught his breath. Laid out on the floor was an ancient version of a medicine wheel with the four directions marked by cairns. To the side were the blackened remnants of an ancient fire. Scratched in the center of the wheel was a crude image that looked something like their four-legged companion, a sacred image in homage to the long-nosed god of his pre-Christian ancestors. A few pieces of limestone and flint sat beside the fire, laid there by the long-ago artist. The medicine man shone his light along the walls despite the natural light on a hunch.

"What are you looking for?" Mary Lou asked. She started to come up behind him.

The coyote was drawn by the power of the medicine wheel formed by the circle of stones. He laid down and curled up in the center of it on top of the image of the ancient CO-YO-TE. When he did, the Ancient One touched him with Power as the canine's physical body served as an avatar.

Medicine Bear held up his hand. "Be careful," he told them. "This, more than anything, is what we came to see. I feel the spirits heavy in this place. There is strong medicine here." He was struggling against the urge to do as the coyote was doing. He was also being drawn to settle in a trance inside the medicine wheel built of stone. He needed to look around first. "SilverFox," he addressed the priestess. "I need to talk to the ancestors, and I will not have further concentration to spare. Show them what not to disturb."

SilverFox nodded. She held them back and pointed to the constructed wheel on the floor. "Do not kick any stones around or move anything. You can walk around the edges, and if you find anything, even if it seems insignificant, bring it to my attention."

"Okay," Mary Lou said softly. She stood beside Rachel and Kenneth. "My ears are buzzing." She turned to Kenneth. "Do you feel something?"

Kenneth nodded and took her hand. When he did, her senses heightened, and it felt like all the nerve impulses in her head were screaming for release. She experienced a moment of vertigo and was glad her friend was there to steady her. When she next looked around, it seemed to her vision as if the air in the cave had become like water rippling or heat rising from pavement on a hot day; only this energy made swirls and eddies. She blinked her eyes to try to clear them. When she looked again, the effect was the same.

"What is that?" Mary Lou whispered to Kenneth.

"Spirits," he told her. "Only that's not the guy who is causing trouble. You can see them too." It wasn't a question.

"Yes. Kinda." She squinted her eyes. "I can't tell what I'm seeing. I just know I am seeing something."

"Unfocus your eyes," Kenneth whispered to her. "You can catch them better that way or look out of the corners of your eyes." He'd realized that he could see them better if he didn't try so hard just moments before his friend had said something. The more Kenneth focused, the more his second sight slipped away.

"Ken, I need to sit down," Mary Lou declared after several seconds. "SilverFox, where can I sit that I'll be out of the way?"

"Go join CO-YO-TE," SilverFox said. "He will protect you." The priestess was looking a little vague in her eyes as well. SilverFox could also see and was half in a trance herself. The illness of this area was relieved in here, and she could feel herself being pulled under by whatever was crying for attention. The spirits were not going to be denied. "I will come and wait with you."



Kenneth resisted the call while his friends took seats around the stone circle. He was here for information, and like Medicine Bear, he didn't want to miss any detail. He prided himself on always seeing everything, and he refused to be suckered into complacence by any outside source. He carefully watched each step he made and joined Medicine Bear looking around at the walls. If the professor was examining them that closely there must be something to find.

Kenneth discovered that he was right. Pictures covered the walls. Whoever was here, the one who had buried the Viking here most likely, he thought to himself, had been here awhile. He was surprised to find that their nature was not the brightly colored cave paintings he'd seen depicted in other places. These were made by shallow carvings scratched into the walls at about head level if you were sitting on the floor. He bent down to examine them closely. There were people and animals depicted in the drawings. The central theme was violent scenes of death. The longer he looked at them, the more sure he was that they told a story.

Kenneth scanned the line of drawings, looking for a beginning and end. The most violent drawings seemed to be those in the center. He moved slowly to that area, looking to understand what he was seeing. When he came to the center, he realized that he was looking at a crudely drawn map. Under it was a grisly depiction of a dismembered body surrounded by weapons. A sword was there, he noted, a bow and arrow, and a spear and shield. Those were not items that the Native Americans would wield except for the bow he realized.

"That is the warrior they called 'The Wolf.'" Medicine Bear came up beside him. "The crude map you see there is a layout of the Tennessee Valley as you would see it from this point here on Rockwood Mountain. If you were to stand at the fire tower above us, you could see the landscape as it's reflected here. That mark near the center would have been the home village to the young medicine man who carried his charge here with the command to

bury his part where no one would find it. When he returned, he knew he would be killed in the warrior's way."

"They killed him? The Natives would do away with their own guys?" Kenneth looked surprised. "Why would they do that?"

"So he could never tell another living person by mouth, no matter how he was tortured, where the evil that he had buried could be found. It would have been considered an honor, even by him, to serve his People by giving his life for them."

"I understand," Kenneth said quietly. "Before it's over with, some of us may be facing the same thing." He tried not to think that way, but he could sense death nearby and not just in the depictions in front of him.

"We will try to see that it doesn't come to that," Medicine Bear told him.

"Yes," Kenneth declared. He laid his hand on the depiction of the dead warrior. When he did, he received a shock and jerked his hand away. There was energy in the cave drawings!

"Don't be afraid," Medicine Bear said. "Your strength and ability to see with more than the eyes is needed. We have a puzzle to solve, and we need to plan."

"I'm not afraid," Kenneth said. "I was just surprised by the zap of energy that holds. Obviously, we need to figure out what we need to do, but what more can we get here? We already know the basic story of what happened."

"That's true," Medicine Bear nodded, "but we don't yet have the keys to defeat the evil that has been unleashed. He was defeated once before. We need to understand the means by which they did it. But also obvious is that they didn't destroy 'The Wolf completely, and that is what we must do."

Kenneth thought in silence for several minutes as he gazed at the wall. What is the key to the puzzle? He wondered. He enjoyed riddles for the mental challenge of them, but this was one that just frustrated him. There was no time for games!

Aloud, Kenneth worked through it. "I think the key is here if we can only see it the right way." He wasn't sure why he thought that, but it came to him almost as if it were whispered in his ear. "Grisly, yes, but it shows what they did to him. Maybe this place was never meant to be found, but maybe, just maybe, it WAS meant to be found. As if this long ago artist somehow looked ahead into the future and saw us here trying to figure it out. He's telling us what and how they did it, knowing somehow that he had to tell us something." Kenneth laid his hand back on the drawing, closed his eyes, and addressed the author of the story

scratched so long ago into the walls. “What were you trying to say?”

Kenneth remembered the story as he read it in the two books and let himself sink into the images it put in his head. He barely registered as the Native American medicine man put his hand on Kenneth’s shoulder. He let it play out as he already knew it with the images added that they’d gotten during their earlier meditation.

As the story played in his mind’s eye, the pictures on the wall seemed to come to life and become real people. He saw the Vikings driven into the trap that finally brought them down. He saw the ancient medicine man of the tribe face the Viking warrior barehanded. Kenneth sucked in his breath when he recognized cold silver eyes. Moira!

He felt the shaman stiffen behind him. He’d recognized her too, even wearing the face of another. They saw CO-YO-TE and the spirits of the clans combine to weaken the Viking’s power so that he was finally brought down. The last image Kenneth and Medicine Bear saw as the pictures faded and they became aware of reality was that of a glowing spear etched into their inner vision.

“There’s something important about the Viking’s spear,” Kenneth whispered. “It’s what he used to kill those children.”

“It would be more than just the killing of the children, or the spirits wouldn’t show this to us,” Medicine Bear whispered back. Even as they released his young companion, the spirits still sat heavily upon him.

“I must speak with them directly,” Medicine Bear told Kenneth. “I have to go in and follow this to its conclusion. We are nearing the answer.” With that, Medicine Bear walked to the medicine wheel and sat in front of the coyote, facing him so that he could look the animal in the eye. He now suspected their furry friend was acting as CO-YO-TE’s earthly avatar. Medicine bear saw Kenneth settle himself and check his light out of the corner of his eye. When the teen became still, the silence stretched.

Medicine Bear again lit the burned-out charcoal briquette and placed tobacco, sage, and cedar into the turtle shell on top of it. Softly, the breeze shifted, and the eddies in the air became whispers. The listeners fancied they could hear music and rhythm within and around them.

Medicine Bear gazed into the eyes of the four-legged animal who sat up and looked intently at him in return. The coyote

seemed to grow into more than himself somehow, and the whispers became intelligible as the coyote stared into his eyes.

"Ulfr, the Dark Wolf walks on both sides of the veil," they say. "He who cannot die must die and never be reborn. His soul is corrupt and poisons everything it touches."

CO-YO-TE's eyes turn spirit blue. "I am returned, and it is time," he tells the medicine man before him. Again the spear is shown to him. "You must sunder the veil and let the forging of his own hatred be his downfall. Fate claims Her prize. But, be warned, though your medicine is strong, other dangers lurk in every shadow. The forces of the deepest Chaos gather to threaten humanity and gods alike. A shadow stretches over this Great Valley, and the cost of failure is desecration and desolation that spreads like ravenous pollution. Each link, each bright soul must do its part to re-balance cosmic forces."

"How is this accomplished?" Medicine Bear asks.

"The light-workers will show you." CO-YO-TE grins and lolls his tongue to the side. "Their love will lead the way."

"That is not an answer," the medicine man complains.

"I am CO-YO-TE. That is MY answer. Take Ulfr, the Kin-Killer down, Medicine Man. Do what you are told and do not argue."

Prlifting on the slight breeze in the cave, a large white feather settled on the floor just in front of Mary Lou's feet. She had opened her eyes and watched it slowly fall in front of her face. Golden light cast through the crack in the cave by the last of the sun's rays sinking behind the mountain cast the coyote in an ethereal glow just to the other side of the feather.

Mary Lou reached out and picked up the feather. She twirled it between her fingers and admired the golden shimmers that gleamed on its surface. She brushed it along her cheek in deep thought. What had CO-YO-TE meant? Sunder the veil and let his forged hatred be what kills him? Frustrated, she again wished that psychic revelation would be a little less cryptic and easier to decipher! Hopefully, Medicine Bear and SilverFox would make something of all of it, she thought.

"We aren't getting the rest of the cave explored just sitting here," Kenneth observed. He reached out and playfully tapped Mary Lou to bring her out of her reverie. He was rewarded with

a smile as they got to their feet. “I suppose we should go see what we came to see.”

Medicine Bear slowly climbed to his feet as well and offered his hand to Mary Lou, who made to drop the feather she picked up. “No, keep that,” Medicine Bear said. “It was a gift from Spirit. It is strong medicine.”

“Okay. Even though you said not to take anything?” Mary Lou shrugged. It was pretty. “It looks like it came from an angel’s wing.” She slid it in her hair behind her ear, not having a better place for it.

Medicine Bear nodded. “It came to you as CO-YO-TE walked. It is yours for a reason. A message, perhaps, that you need to find your wings, he told Mary Lou.”

Rachel followed them into the passageway with the coyote at her side. SilverFox brought up the rear this time as they retraced their steps toward the entrance. Cautiously, they moved through the cave, now watching every move they made. When they reached the split, Medicine Bear moved aside and let SilverFox come up beside the group.

“Lady?” He indicated the next dark hole in the rock.

Her breath whistled through her teeth in a low hiss. “This is it,” she said. “I don’t sense any immediate danger, though.”

“Neither do I,” Kenneth muttered behind her. “But there’s something here. I know that much.” He could feel the impression of icy fingers down his back and all his hair wanted to raise on end.

“I feel cold as death,” Mary Lou complained. “I was a little cool before, but it feels like we’re walking into a refrigerator now.” She could feel goosebumps all over, and she shivered. Mary Lou ducked under the archway and walked in a bent position for several feet until they came to another alcove that opened up ahead of them.

“Oh gross!” Rachel ducked her head. “Another body!” Ahead of them, Medicine Bear and Silverfox were standing beside a crude dais, examining what had once been a human. “Is that him?” Rachel backed up practically on top of Mary Lou.

“Ow! Rachel, that’s me you’re stepping on. Watch it!” Mary Lou held her hands out to steady Rachel and keep her from falling.

“We knew there would be bones in here,” Kenneth said. “Burial site, hello!” He shook his head. Rachel tended to be skittish, he knew. “Why don’t you go out and wait with Sierra?

We're near the entrance, and you won't have any trouble getting out."

"No, I'm okay," Rachel said and involuntarily kept backing up. "I'll just stay right out here."

"Suit yourself," Kenneth said. He squeezed past both girls to join Medicine Bear and SilverFox. He immediately knew the cave had been tampered with after Sierra's last visit when he did. "That body is fresh," he observed.

The acrid smell of burned flesh identified the body as not having been there long. Its blackened remains were drawn in on itself, and almost everything but bone with a few bits of flesh turned to charcoal were left. Sprawled on a raised rock toward the back wall, it lay in sad testament to the taint of death and destruction Ulfr, 'The Wolf' left on everything he touched.

Professor Holderman sighed. "I will call the police department about the body after we are done here."

"Look around," SilverFox suggested. "If he's here, we need to find him."

"Has anyone bothered to ask the obvious?" Kenneth went still before he pulled his flashlight out of his pocket.

"Asked what?" SilverFox inquired.

"What are we going to do with him when and if we find him?" Kenneth shone his light around and walked around the small space. All he could find were more of the blue beads which rolled under his feet and a crumpled bit of leather. These he stopped to pick up and handed them to Medicine Bear. "I mean, I know we are supposed to kill him, but there's a practical aspect to this. Such as his evil undead bad ASS is ALREADY dead! What the fuck do we do with that one?"

SilverFox went still. "I don't have the answer to that. We'll figure it out when the time comes, I guess."

Kenneth shook his head, but Medicine Bear was deep in thought. The Medicine man tapped his finger on his chin.

"CO-YO-TE said we have to sunder the veil and destroy him with the hate he forged." Medicine Bear mused aloud.

"The veil, the veil, sunder the veil. Of course!" SilverFox exclaimed. "The veil represents the curtain, the barrier between this world and the other world! To kill him, we need something that will open the gateway to the spirit world and send him through it."

"But, Ken's right," Mary Lou said. "We don't have anything to work with. First, we have to find him, right? Then we have to

be able to do something about him when we do. If he's not here, then where is he?"

"He's obviously gotten loose and is up walking around," Kenneth continued. "So, again. How do we find him, and how do we accomplish what SilverFox is saying?"

"We open the veil with magick," SilverFox answered simply. "Anytime you cast a circle, you are creating sacred space, just like its supposed to be when you walk into church," she said to Kenneth. "You are in a different place outside time and earthly concerns, are you not?"

Kenneth nodded. "I can see that. Go on."

"So, the circle acts as both a sacred perimeter which we can use to entrap him and a means to move him to the 'elsewhere' where we can open a gate to send him through."

"Not bad, so far. But I see a fly in your logic ointment," Kenneth told her. "We still have to kill someone that's already dead. The spirits didn't say send him away; they said KILL. That sounds pretty final to me. No one has come up with a way that I can see to do that."

"I don't know. I am working on that part," SilverFox admitted.

Medicine Bear let out a sigh. "I know another place to look," he said. "It also involves climbing and another cave. I stumbled on it as a boy out in the Clingman's Dome area of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park."

"Oh, great. More cave crawling," Rachel muttered from behind them. "Are we on a treasure hunt or something?" She almost giggled in spite of the seriousness of their situation. "I guess that's what you were talking about when we came to see you at the college."

Medicine Bear nodded. "Yes. SilverFox is right. To take his dark soul out of this world, he has to be sent through from here to where he belongs, but conditions have to be right to do this. Many of my ancestors died by Ulfr's hand, and even more died taking him down. He has his own medicine that protects him from the Final Death and keeps him strong. He appears to be growing stronger, and I have to assume that since his remains are no longer here, he has come up with a way to rebirth himself into this world without death taking him first."

"Crap!" Kenneth said, as he remembered Bryan's reaction in their last conversation, it hit him. "We're dealing with an undead, right? Someone that's dead, but not dead, up walking

around. I think Bryan suspected what I'm thinking in that we are dealing with a lich!"

"A what?" SilverFox looked puzzled.

"A lich." Kenneth shook his head. "You must not do any gaming," he observed. "In gaming terms, a lich is a powerful undead that puts his soul into an object to keep it safe so they can't be killed. They have other powers, such as the ability to animate other dead, an aura of fear, that sort of thing. In those terms, it all makes sense. Except this is unavoidably real even as impossible and crazy as it seems!"

"Then maybe that's what the spear is about," SilverFox said. "That could very well be it. If his soul is in it, then maybe all we have to do is destroy that, and we'll be rid of him."

Kenneth thought further. "Maybe. But we'd have to be sure that was it, or we're right back to square one and possibly giving ourselves away in the process."

Mary Lou spoke up hesitantly. "I think you are on to something, but I have a feeling that this is only part of it." She had gone still and quiet, and her eyes unfocused. She was drawn to the center of the room. "The spirits say destroy him with the forging of his hatred, and..."

Kenneth encouraged her. "What do you see?" He could almost read what she was thinking, but held back so he wouldn't break her concentration.

"When we went astral, we watched him make the spear and then kill those kids, right? And the book said something about what they found when they caught him, so that doesn't disagree. Wouldn't you consider that a forging? Very literally, I mean." Everyone nodded in agreement. "And, he had to have hated somebody pretty bad to have killed children, and not only that, they were family, the king's grandkids."

SilverFox sucked in her breath and held it. This had the ring of truth to it. Excitement built in the priestess, but she waited for more. This is it! She thought.

"So. We find him AND his stuff, including the spear, and then, THEN, we have something to work with. It's the spear. We're supposed to kill him with that. At least I think."

SilverFox said with excitement. "Somehow, I know you are right, and I think I know how to accomplish the whole thing IF we can find all pieces and parts."

"How?" Medicine Bear asked.

"Let's worry about one thing at a time," SilverFox said. "I will have to work some of it out, but I have the basic beginnings of a

plan. You get me the body and his belongings, find the spear, and then we'll go from there. If Darcon here," Kenneth grinned at her and made a face. "happens to be right. Hopefully, we'll find what item contains the protected part in it. Because if there's a piece missing and he's up doing damage, that could mean that his soul is split and residing in more than one place," SilverFox finished, satisfied that she had a good part of the picture.

"Mmmmm. Maybe," Medicine Bear said. "I wouldn't look at it that way, more that he probably just didn't leave his body, and when they cut him to bits, he's still with the bits except for the part that Sierra and her friend Tyrone released. The way he was killed didn't give him time to," he sucked his breath in. "The knife!" Medicine Bear's face was a mask of sudden revelation. "It could be the knife!"

Kenneth got it too. "I see what you mean," Kenneth said. "He didn't have time to do anything or plan because the Native American warrior got him with a knife. If his soul went to an object, it would have to be something on him or in him. The knife's what struck the fatal blow, so he might have put enough of his soul there to keep the rest from real death."

"But how could he do that?" Rachel spoke up, shaking her head. "Don't people usually just die if you stick a knife in them and cut them to pieces?"

"Yeah, usually that's the way it works!" Kenneth agreed. "You have a better explanation for all this?"

"I don't know how he managed it," Medicine Bear said. "CO-YO-TE did not seem to feel the need to tell us much. But the one thing we do know is that Ulfr 'The Wolf' IS dead but not dead. That was accomplished somehow."

"Humph. That whole free will thing, again probably," Kenneth muttered. "Supposed to figure it out for ourselves and not be spoon-fed every piece of information."

"Maybe we'll learn more from the next place?" Mary Lou said hopefully. "We learned some stuff here. Maybe we'll find the spear."

"I know one part that should be at the Clingman's Dome site, but I didn't poke around much. More may be buried there." Medicine Bear shuddered as he remembered the evil eyes and the haunting laughter when the plane crashed at the base of the mountain. "Time to go, kids. We aren't going to get anything more here."

As the rest filed out and slowly crawled through the opening to the outside where the last of the sun's rays were vanishing, and

they couldn't see what he was doing, Medicine Bear bent and sadly picked up one last bead and added it to the rest. Since the desecration of this particular burial site was complete already, he realized he might be able to use them for something later to right the wrongs done. Their purpose here was done, and their quarry was gone.



24

NATURAL MAGICK

Dash the Skinwalker looked around in satisfaction. He lounged on a second-hand couch, holding the dagger he'd gotten from that weasel Tyrone. The magic dagger that called itself Ulfr hummed and whispered in his head. Skinwalker had finally learned the secret to the boy's power, and Ulfr had come to his hand willingly enough.

The thought that the boy might be of some use was the only thing that kept the blade from finding his heart and bathing in more fresh blood. Other people provided the needed rush of stolen power as he absorbed their life energy to increase his own. Gazing across the room, he laid eyes on what had made his usually brooding face look almost pleased.

A haze of sweet-smelling smoke hovered in the room above the heads of a group of seven or eight people sitting on cushions in a corner, passing a joint. Nearby, a table of giggling girls scraped white powder into piles and went about sniffing it up into straws. Bottles of pills rolled around on the floor, adding to the mess of beer cans and hard liquor. He bared his teeth. One female was missing. Tracey would pay dearly when she turned up.

Past the evidence of drugs flowing freely and down the aisle of the desecrated country church, a partial skeleton had been placed carefully on a stone dais. The bottom portion resembled the rough granite boulder from which the altar had been chiseled. Everyone present avoided going near it. Even the deepest drug-induced stupor could not bring anyone near.

Fresh blood still dripped from the ancient bones where the knife Skinwalker held had found the heart of someone curious enough to dare touch the legs and pelvis laid there. He had drained their body across the bones.

"As soon as we have the other parts, the resurrection can begin," Nash said smoothly with confidence. He played with the

dagger and spun it in his hands. “We will have to locate where the rest of the skeleton is buried. Finding the next part will be your job, I think. You will prove to me your worth to see whether you deserve a reward.”

Tyrone licked his lips. He was partly freed from Ulfr’s control over him, but not completely. Though Skinwalker carried the dagger now, he had carried it for so long he didn’t have to be in contact with it anymore to hear the seditious whispers in his head. He thought of Sierra.

“Ah, a girl, perhaps?” Nash continued. “I am sure we could make her welcome here.” He gestured at the room. “Perhaps if the resurrection doesn’t go as planned, we can break her in properly and then give her the pleasure of playing host to our demon? Won’t that be a privilege!” He laughed, drunk on a fifth of whiskey and his own power. His day was going well.

“I am sure it will,” Tyrone answered reluctantly.

“Go on, then.” Skinwalker waved at the door. “Oh, and while you’re at it, you can drag that one out and bury her.” He pointed at one of the girls who had passed out and fallen to the floor. “We don’t need flotsam in here to trip over.”

Tyrone discovered the girl’s body was cooling. He almost felt sorry for her two friends, who gazed stupidly with wide eyes at him as he drug her body out to be buried in a shallow grave outside. The church cemetery was marked by piles of dirt mounded up over fresh bodies. Tyrone threw her unceremoniously in an already dug barrow and piled red clay dirt on top. He didn’t bother marking her grave. Like most of the youngsters present, she was a runaway, and no one would think to look for her here.

Nash came up behind him as he was finishing his task. “This makes a nice cover, don’t you think?” He waved at the church and grounds. “Bring in the drugs and the girls and make sure a few whispers get to town, and suddenly no one comes around but those we invite here. Everybody else,” Nash laughed cruelly. “Well, they think the Satanists have moved in,” he said. “People’s fears have a use, whether they are correct or not, I think. We can do what we want when we want, and nobody can say shit about it.”

Nash had dropped any pretense of real Satanic activity, Tyrone noted. It was all a macabre game to him. He thrived on death. Give him drugs, alcohol, and a promise of more power to come, and he’d do anything Ulfr wanted.

The skinwalker did not realize who was really in charge, and Tyrone wasn't about to suggest it while he carried the knife. *Necromancer is what you are*, Tyrone thought. *You are a match for that knife in your hand because you're just as bad! What are you going to do when Ulfr lives? For that matter, what am I going to do?*

Maybe having Sierra here would make it tolerable if Tyrone couldn't get free. He would protect her from the fate this girl got. He knew he could. An image popped into his head of him sitting on a throne with Sierra beside him. He held a spear, and a god bowed before him. Wait, that was Ulfr, no, that was himself. He shook his head, confused. His head hurt, and his thoughts grew scrambled. Suddenly he couldn't remember what he had been thinking about before.

"The body, Tyrone. Go find the body. When you get close, you'll know where. You found part of it already, so that makes you perfect for this easy little task. Don't fail us, boy," Nash gave him a warning look.

"I will not fail," Tyrone declared. He moved off and started one of the cars that had been hidden under the trees. At least now he had wheels!

"Good man! I am in charge now. You just trot away and do what I tell you, and we'll get along just fine," Nash declared to the departing car. He tossed the dagger up into the air and caught it by the handle. He did it again and found himself suddenly sobered up.

"I am in charge," a voice thundered in his head. "You do what I say, little skraeling, nothing more and nothing less."

Nash found that the dagger had twisted in his hands, and an invisible force held the tip to his heart. He began sweating, tried to release the dagger, and found he couldn't.

The voice of the knife continued, "We will rule, and we will have a long and fruitful reign. There will be many sacrifices, and we will eat the flesh of the innocent."

Nash was soaked in sweat. The knife had pierced his skin, and a rivulet of blood trickled down his chest. When the knife finally released him, he breathed a sigh of relief, went back inside, and continued drinking until he forgot the incident. With his senses dulled by drugs and alcohol, the skinwalker missed the two young men who prowled around the edges of his supposed sanctuary. They had come and gone before anyone became sober enough to notice.



“ ”

xcuse me?” Mary Lou’s eyes were huge because she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “Say that again?”

Both of her grandparents stood before her in the living room. Each wore an accusatory look.

“We think you are on drugs,” came the answer. “You’ve been acting really odd lately. You’re withdrawn, and you won’t hardly speak to us. You spend all your time with Rachel and that crowd she hangs around with.”

“You think I am on drugs? Me? That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard!” Mary Lou exclaimed. She felt herself getting angry. With all the times she had refused offers from schoolmates of this pill or that cigarette, they’d dare accuse her! “Do I have S-T-U-P-I-D written across my forehead or something? I have no desire to screw up my body or my life!”

“I went through your room and looked through all your drawers, under your bed and your closet.” Her grandfather said.

“Oh yeah? Well, congratulations!” Mary Lou said sarcastically. “On not finding anything!”

“I found this,” he held up her two notebooks.

“Um, I hate to tell you this. But that’s not drugs; that’s my journal and my dream diary. So you can just put those down.”

Mary Lou struggled to damp down the hate she felt for her grandfather. She had hidden those books really well, and she had written some inflammatory notes about his pressures on her for sex. She knew this wasn’t going to bode well. He wouldn’t be holding those up in front of her grandmother if those notes were still there.

“No, I don’t think so.” He grinned a predatory grin, and his blue eyes flashed over his glasses. They almost matched the shine of his bald head. “There’s some pretty wild imaginings in here. You going crazy as well as being on drugs?”

Mary Lou’s eyes narrowed dangerously. She didn’t want to go to jail because of killing him where he stood. “What I write in my journal is none of your business.”

Her grandmother broke in. “You live under our roof. You abide by our rules,” she said sternly. “We called your father and told him.”

“I am NOT on drugs!” Mary Lou yelled at them. “And I am not doing anything else wrong either. So why can’t you leave me alone!”

"We are concerned about you," her grandmother said tearfully. "What have you gotten into that you aren't telling us? You can always talk to me."

"I AM talking to you," Mary Lou answered. "The problem is you aren't listening and are obviously not going to believe anything I say, so why should I? Now give those back!"

Mary Lou reached out and snatched the two notebooks away from him. She was right. The heavy gray notebook that contained her notes, scrapbook, and dream diary didn't feel any different. The blue one that contained her journal pages was much thinner and lighter weight in her hand. That meant pages were missing.

"Next time, if you want to know something, then ASK instead of assuming anything!" With that, Mary Lou stomped off to her room, slammed the door, and locked it from the inside. She heard her grandmother sobbing in the other room while her grandfather habitually rattled the change in his pocket. She didn't care.

Mary Lou stayed in her room cursing her grandfather as she saw what had been taken out of her journal. It felt like being violated all over again. She wouldn't make the mistake of leaving them behind again.

Mary Lou waited in her room while the sky darkened and the minutes ticked by on the digital alarm clock sitting on her dresser. She heard her grandparents prepare for their regular ten o'clock bedtime. She waited another couple of hours. Around midnight she got up out of bed, quietly opened her door, and slipped downstairs. She didn't bother with shoes as she wouldn't need them on the long grassy lawn as she made her way to the lake. It took several minutes of careful sliding bit by bit to quietly open the sliding glass door and then close it again. It always made a loud and distinctive sound anytime it moved.

When Mary Lou had the door safely shut, and no sounds emanated from the house to tell her she was being caught sneaking out, she made her way down the grassy edge of the long backyard driveway to the lake bank. Her feet were chilly and soaked with dew by the time she stepped out onto the U-shaped wooden dock. She scraped her feet to get the mowed grass off, which had gotten stuck to her with the wet.

The boat had been pulled out of the water the day before. Fog rose from the lake surface, which was like reflective glass. She was almost loathe to disturb the quiet surface, so she settled for sticking her feet in to rinse them and settled down cross-legged near the edge of the dock.

Slowly her nerves calmed as the quiet surroundings seeped into her. *Why do people always accuse me of things I haven't even remotely thought of doing?* she wondered silently. *I never do anything, yet everyone seems to always think I'm up to something. No matter what I do, it never seems to be right or good enough.* Mary Lou sighed. Somehow, sitting here with the quiet water as her only companion, she couldn't feel her usual sadness at such thoughts. *I just don't understand.*

As she sat, her awareness shifted, and she could suddenly feel everything connected around her. The mist in the moonlight on the water was soothing. From the cove, she could hear a bullfrog croaking and the plop of a fish in the water somewhere in the distance. The sounds and the crickets singing quietly in the background lulled her somewhat as she relaxed. Startled, Mary Lou suddenly sat up straighter.

"Is that an earthquake?" Mary Lou wondered aloud. Vibration under where she sat made her tense up. When she realized it kept on going in a steady rhythm, she relaxed again. "Maybe it's just the water?" She looked at the water. It made no sound, and the surface was completely still. "A boat, then?" She listened closely and could hear no boat. The vibration kept on, and she could almost perceive a steady humming sound in it. It was a much deeper musical note than anything a boat produced in the water. She'd swum the lake enough to know the sound of a boat.

"Hummm," Mary Lou mused. She relaxed and let herself feel and hear the vibration. As she let it flow over her, she realized the sound and vibration was coming from the earth beneath the dock. *The rocks sing!* Mary Lou realized. "Mother Earth is singing with the operation of the steam plant above, and the water transmits it!" Her breath caught, and she nearly cried with the beauty of it.

This is the real magick, right here. Mary Lou realized. *It's life and wonder and being able to hear what others miss because they are too busy yelling.* "Thank you, god or goddess, whoever you are, I hear you," Mary Lou whispered.

The moon sank noticeably toward the horizon before Mary Lou moved again. She hesitated at the top when she climbed the steps from the dock to the lake bank. She didn't want to get caught outside, but she didn't want to go to the house yet, either. Anger rose in her again. In response, her feet took her not to the house but to the swimming area. She stepped out on the foot

dock and admired the moonlight on the water. It wasn't as foggy on this side.

Looking around to make sure there were no fishing boats in sight, she dropped her clothes and slid quietly into the warm water. *Screw the buddy system! I'll swim to the island!* she thought to herself. *Who is going to stop me?*

It was pleasant gliding through the water with bare skin, and it felt free. She swam across the narrow channel to the tiny island. Climbing over tree roots and stepping up over the washed-out bank, she pulled herself dripping onto the grass. "I can watch the moon set from here," Mary Lou muttered to herself. "It looks like it might cloud up, though."

She looked critically at the sky. East Tennessee, always known for its unpredictable thunderstorms, could quickly produce one from over the top of the Cumberland Mountains to blow east over the valley. Clouds were banking over the horizon to the west, and white moonlight reflected there. As she watched, it looked like a bit of heat lightning occasionally lit up the top of the clouds.

Mary Lou watched the clouds to see if they would blow in. When they didn't move much, she looked back at the moon. Clouds gradually began to fill the sky and darkened the moon as they crossed it. They made fantastical shapes, and as she watched, she fancied that she could see animals and meanings in the sky.

Quickly, more quickly than she would have imagined, the sky darkened in earnest, and a single separate cloud blew across the moon and stopped. It changed shape as she watched into a horned beast and the moon appeared blood red inside the cloud. Mary Lou forgot her earlier tranquil mood. The teen felt threat and an oppression she couldn't shake. "What the?" It felt like a warning about the harsh reality they all faced. *Blood red moon for too much blood*, Mary Lou thought.

A light breeze began to blow from across the lake, and it chilled her damp skin. Mary Lou was forced back into the water, which was warmer than the air. She hadn't had the forethought to bring a towel since she hadn't planned to swim. By the time she reached her clothes, she was shivering. The peaceful feeling she'd attained earlier was nowhere to be found. She turned and looked at the clouds over the mountain top and remembered the book Rachel had shown them. Could she raise the wind? If she tried and failed, no one would know, right?

Slowly she let her anger rise in her. There was a lot there that she usually kept hidden and tucked away where no one would see any vulnerability to hurt her further. Now she unleashed it. As she raised her hands slowly, the wind picked up in response. Encouraged, she directed her anger to the sky and instinctively grabbed with her mental ‘hands’ for the clouds. They responded, and the clouds changed. “I’ll SHOW you!” she screamed in fury. “I can do ANYTHING! I am NOT crazy, and I am not going to let any of you win! I am coming for you Ulfr,” Mary Lou added. “There’s enough pain in the world without anyone adding more to it, and your days here are numbered!”

As the wind picked up in earnest, the clouds took on a green tinge in the moonlight, and the lightning appeared deep pink. An incredible burst of lightning and thunder brought Mary Lou back to herself. She dropped her hands and let go of the storm. Surprised, she nearly forgot to start walking to the house. She’d be in the open and vulnerable to lightning if she didn’t go immediately.

Mary Lou slipped back inside the way she’d gone out and crept up the stairs. She went to her room and had just enough time to dry off and then redress in clean nightclothes before her grandmother made her sleepy way into the living room. “What’s that? Is there a storm blowing in?” her grandmother asked. “I heard a loud noise.”

“Yeah, there’s a storm,” Mary Lou said.

“Why aren’t you in bed?” her grandmother asked hesitantly. She wasn’t about to repeat the accusations of earlier, no matter what she thought.

“I couldn’t sleep. Besides, the storm is pretty,” Mary Lou answered with a partial truth. It was pretty and very electrical, with constant lightning inside the cloud in the darkness. But, it also scared her. She hadn’t known what to do. It had just come naturally, and her pent-up anger had gotten the better of her good sense.

She wasn’t sure it was such a good idea after all when lightning hit a tree down at the picnic area of the property, and it burst open with a loud crack. It was almost as if she could feel the storm rampage with her fury, only now that she’d released it, she had no control! When her grandmother went back to bed, Mary Lou reached for the storm again and found that now her fear was in the way. It refused to come to heel.

When the storm blew over and headed further east, it left a trail of cracked and downed trees, power outages, busted signs,

and lawn ornaments blown clear across neighborhoods.

Upon her trip to Knoxville the next day with her aunt, she looked in dismay at the destruction. “Note to self,” Mary Lou muttered from the passenger seat of the car. “Never, ever do that again.”

“Never do what?” her aunt asked her.

“Oh, nothing,” Mary Lou refused to elaborate. “I’m just thinking out loud.”

“Anything you want to talk about?” her aunt asked.

“Nah, not really.” Mary Lou hoped her aunt would drop the conversation.

No such luck, she winced at her aunt’s next words. “Boy, that storm last night was a doozy! It looks like Knoxville got hit pretty hard. Look at that sign!”

“I guess,” Mary Lou said. She elected to play the disinterested teenager. All the way down Kingston Pike, they saw more storm damage. As they went, Mary Lou mused. *Did I, or did I not, cause this?* she wondered. *I’ve never seen storm clouds or lightning look that color before. It didn’t do that until I decided to see if I could do something with it.* *On the other hand, storms blow in all the time when I obviously have nothing to do with it. But that was purely unnatural!* she argued with herself. She sighed heavily. It sucked to have a conscience. *I just better not play with that again. I don’t want anyone to get hurt. The book on witchcraft neglected to say raising the wind is dangerous. Although to be fair, SilverFox did say something about power requiring responsibility, or things can turn around and bite you. I think I got bit.*

I am going to ask SilverFox to teach me for real. That way, I can avoid anything else stupid from not knowing what I am doing. Me and Carly both need to study.

25

THE SATANIC CHURCH

“**K**en, it’s for you.” Kenneth’s mother held out the phone for him to take it. “It’s Bryan,” she said. When he took the phone, she put on the gardening gloves she had in her hand and headed out the door. “If you need me, I’ll be out in the flower bed.”

“Okay, mom. Yah bro? Whatsup?” Kenneth spoke into the phone.

Kenneth listened quietly while Bryan explained what he’d been doing the day before. Bryan and a friend had been on a call down in Rockwood with the Rescue Squad. They’d gotten an earful, he told Kenneth, about some disappearances and the rumors about an old church abandoned some years ago down past the quarry and up a bit into the wildlife preserve.

“That’s where we were, as I told you,” Kenneth said. He put his guitar down so he could hold the phone better. “We ran into some weird things in the cave above the quarry but didn’t go further than that. There was no indication that we needed to. We didn’t find anything but another body that looked recently killed and a bunch of cave art left by the Native Americans. Definitely nothing like what we expected.”

“Well, I think you need to come with me and see this,” Bryan told him. “Me and Bruce, my partner on the truck, went out there and looked. Bruce is spooked and isn’t going to say anything about the place. Personally? I think it just might be where our demon ghost is hiding. I didn’t stick around long, but I saw some stuff. Since you have been in all this up to your eyeballs, I’ll show you where it’s at. You can decide for yourself if it’s what we’re looking for.”

“Where are you right now?” Kenneth asked him. His intuition was pushing at him to act. *I’d lay bets; this is it!* he thought to himself.

"I am at home right now, and I'm off duty tonight," Bryan said. "I just started working for the fire department full time, so I'm not at the plant anymore."

"So your schedule is changed, and you're available now to go woods crawling," Kenneth observed.

"If you aren't doing anything, I can come by and pick you up, and we can go out there," Bryan told him.

"Okay," Kenneth agreed. "I'm in." He stopped and thought for a minute. "What does it look like as far as the grounds? How close to the building can we get without being seen?"

"It's an old wooden structure, not that big on the outside, but from what I could tell, there were parts you couldn't see from outside because there were more than just a few people there. Whoever is in charge of the place doesn't have anybody watching. We were able to get close enough to look through the doors and windows. That's what spooked my partner. There was bones or something on an altar."

"That doesn't prove a thing," Kenneth said. "That could be anybody. But it's worth taking a look sounds like."

"Yeah, and there's thick woods around it and pretty much up to one side of the building. There's a graveyard, and it's grown up quite a bit, but there's an old gravel road leading out to it. A deer path approaches from the other side. We followed that to see if there was another way out, and there is. It just takes longer than going in there directly by the road."

"Well, we don't need to be stupid about it," Kenneth said. "We'll go in quietly and look around where we won't be seen or caught. I don't plan to be in the next batch of victims."

"I'm with you on that one," Bryan said. "I'll grab my weapons and gear and bring my bag if you know what I mean."

"Good idea," Kenneth said grimly. "Give me half an hour to get a shower and make sure I have everything I need, and I'll be ready to go when you get here." Kenneth hung up the phone and went to his room. Rummaging in the top shelf of his closet, he came up with a large black gym bag. On the side of the bag was emblazoned distinctive embroidery in the shape of a throwing star and oriental letters. He dragged this out and unzipped it.

Folded neatly in the bag were three complete sets of heavy cotton martial arts uniforms. One was white, and that one he pulled out and set aside along with his black belt. He wouldn't be needing those. Of the other two, one was a dark charcoal color, and one was gray-green camouflage print. He hesitated for a moment and decided on the camouflage set. Back in his closet,

he pulled out a hood and a set of split-toe boots and slipped those into the bag as well. These were of the same print and would make him nearly invisible in the woods. The teen thought to himself, not that anyone could really track him even without that. Years of special martial training in addition to the Aikido had left a permanent mark on mind and body. He would be fine and in his element. He wouldn't have any trouble blending into the background.

Next, Kenneth shoved a handful of throwing stars, climbing implements, rope, sword, and pistol into the bag. Lastly, he added extra ammunition for the gun. There was no sense in taking chances. He had to struggle to zip it closed by the time he was done. It barely did. His mom wouldn't see what he was taking out with him. She didn't need to know as she'd just worry about what he was up to.

Kenneth didn't know how to explain the weird supernatural death trap they'd been handed. How could his mom understand when he didn't completely understand what was going on and why himself? Gods, demonic undead, and dead bodies, not to mention spirits. Who would believe that the Shadow Angels' current truth was much stranger than any fiction anyone could invent?

Kenneth shook his head. If he tried to explain it to where it made any sense, he'd surely be committed to a mental health facility. He had no plans to visit a psychiatrist again. The last one had barely believed he could see things before they happened and had just wanted to shove pills in him so he'd quit 'imagining things.'

Kenneth wanted to hiss through his teeth just at the thought of the man. Kenneth knew he wasn't crazy, and he was obviously a lot smarter than the supposed professional.

He'd hoped that they could explain to him what all of it meant and how it worked. Instead, he had ended up lying to them when he realized they wanted to make a lab rat of him with chemicals and head games. So much for the American system of mental health services!

The dumbasses had obviously never heard of spiritual gifts, and maybe they should read their Bible, Kenneth thought to himself. At least he'd had a place to go to find his own answers.

He mused on these things during his shower. Sometimes you have no good answer, Kenneth decided. Some things can't be explained, and you just have to roll with it, take it at face value,

and simply survive through what life throws at you by adapting. God would take care of the rest.

A knock came on the bathroom door. "Ken?" his mom said loudly through the door.

"What!" Kenneth yelled back.

"Bryan is here. Are you going somewhere with him?" his mom asked.

"Yeah, mom," Kenneth's voice echoed in the small bathroom. "We're going to go ride around for a while and probably pick up a bite to eat while we're out."

"Okay. I'll give you some money," she said agreeably. "I'm too tired to cook after digging in the garden all afternoon. You can get yourself what you want, and I won't have to worry about dinner except for myself. Your brother's gone out as well. I'll leave you a twenty on the kitchen table." Her footsteps retreated away from the bathroom, and it didn't take him long to be ready to go.

Kenneth grabbed the money before he left and smoothly slid into Bryan's car. He turned and placed his bag in the back seat next to Bryan's, which was nearly as large as his own.

"I'm ready," Kenneth said. He slapped the dashboard of his friend's car, and they pulled onto the road in a shower of gravel.

Kenneth found that they practically retraced the path they'd taken a few days earlier. Medicine Bear had left them with arrangements to meet on Saturday to go up the mountain on the other side of the Valley to the highest point in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Somewhere near there was the next cave they'd be visiting.

In the meantime, he and Bryan might find out something that would help SilverFox with whatever plan she was concocting for them. Kenneth hoped that was the case. The girls were ready for a break, he knew. He could see the strain on all of them.

He thought it was also time to push his friend's skills to see how far she could go.

Class is tomorrow night, and I think Mary Lou is ready to test. She's making amazing progress, even with her asthma bothering her. Stubborn as she is, she just doesn't quit, even when she should. He mentally shook his head. Ox-headed is what she is. But he had to give her credit; she was getting pretty good despite the asthma, and sparring seemed to bring out something in her. Heaven help anyone trying to face her with a sword in her hands. Kenneth grinned to himself as he looked out

the window. *She's quick and moves like a cat striking with no fear in her. She just glares, and any opponent wants to back down before she even attacks. Except for me, that is. The rest of those pansies don't even want to spar with her.*



Kenneth's thoughts were interrupted by the car pulling into a wooded area and stopping. Quietly both he and Bryan got out and retrieved their bags. Bryan had pulled off the road and backed into some bushes. He pointed to a path, and Kenneth nodded.

Both of them changed clothes. Kenneth's camouflage contrasted with Bryan's black. Critically, he eyed his friend. Not the best thing for woods crawling, but the sun was starting to dip below the horizon, so Bryan could use the long shadows until the sun went down. Then, they'd largely be going by feel and the moonlight to get back. Both guys put utility belts on. Bryan added a knife and a pistol while Kenneth made sure his throwing stars were secure before adding his pistol and clips into his belt pouch. He didn't have to add a knife. Those were secure in his boot. He slid his hand down his leg to double-check that he could get them out when he needed them. They believed that they were prepared for about anything.

Leafy bushes and trees provided plenty of cover as they walked with all their senses engaged. The deer path was just that and wound through the underbrush at the mountain's base and over logs. It took them over a narrow stream and gradually uphill before the terrain leveled out again, and the going became easier. Several minutes later, Bryan stopped and pointed out a roof barely visible through the trees. "There," he mouthed silently.

Kenneth nodded his understanding. He quested with his ears, eyes, and second sight. He could hear barely audible voices. That meant there were people outside. He could sense that there was but a handful. He grimaced at the psychic scent of depravity that hung over the place. They'd need to go around, as it would only take one person to spot them.

"On which side does the underbrush back up against the building?" Kenneth whispered to Bryan.

"To the right," Bryan whispered. "In back." He gestured.

Kenneth flashed the thumbs-up sign and crept forward until he found a break clear enough to let them pass quietly. They cautiously slipped forward, keeping an eye out for any sticks that would likely crack under their feet or stones that might trip them up. Branches were pushed aside, held, and released gently so

they wouldn't flip or shake. As they approached the old church, they both went into a crouch and moved slowly so as not to give themselves away. Eventually, they made it to the back wall of the church.

One arched window on the backside of the church was broken and patched with a wooden board. Regular glass covered in too much dirt to see out or in clearly covered the other three windows.

Kenneth found a leafy bush that could hide him next to one of the windows and tried to peer inside. He was glad of the camouflage-wrapped ninja fashion around his head and face. There were white-robed backs turned to the window. Otherwise, his view was blocked. He crouched back down. No one had seen him. He motioned Bryan ahead and watched as he crept to the corner under a large shadowed shrub.

Bryan peered around the corner in front of the church. What he saw there might have made someone with a weak stomach throw up. Bryan however, was only made sick at heart. A child of about ten or twelve lay on the ground broken and bleeding. White robe blowing slightly, an adult stood shaking over the body. Bryan couldn't see their face, but looking around quickly and not seeing anyone else close, he made up his mind. He waved Kenneth back and down, and slipped out of the bushes. He grabbed the robed figure from behind, put a hand over their mouth, and dragged them back into the bushes where Kenneth waited with a knife drawn.

"Scream, and you're dead." Kenneth threatened. The figure nodded, and Bryan pulled the hood off. A familiar chocolate brown face and short black tightly textured hair appeared.

"Oh, shit!" Bryan exclaimed softly.

"Diane? Officer Stanley?" Kenneth frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"Did you kill that kid?" Bryan was feeling murderous.

"No," Diane answered. She struggled to sit up.

Kenneth's knife pressed against her throat a little harder. "Explain," he demanded, "and quietly."

"Skinwalker," she whispered. "His name is Nash. He's running this place. These are the people we arrested down at the park! He's been causing the disappearances. I got a lead from one of my contacts in the drug ring who has been supplyin' these people. Skinwalker killed that kid earlier."

"Skinwalker," Kenneth said. "That explains a lot."

"What do you mean?" Diane whispered.

"Native American boogeyman, only some skinwalkers are real with real abilities. This guy's found him a racket here," Kenneth said, thinking hard. "It would fit right in with what one of them would be doing to gain power over others."

"Maybe this really is the guy!" Bryan said.

"No way," Kenneth said. "It doesn't fit. Who else is here, and why are you here?" He looked at Diane.

"I'm tryin' to get answers. Just like you are evidently," Diane answered. "I just didn't imagine it would be this bad. There's some guy helping Nash. He's been sent off to find something, body parts or some such. Nash keeps talking about resurrection. I don't understand what it's about."

"Oh, my God," Kenneth said. He looked at Bryan. "Yep, we're in the right place." Kenneth made a fist pump. "Ok, here's what we're gonna do. wait, I need to know something else. Have you heard about someone called Ulfr?"

"The skinwalker keeps calling the knife he carries somethin' like that," Diane said. "Why?"

Kenneth and Bryan looked at each other again. "That's the key to stopping this whole thing in its tracks. Now we know where it is, and we were right. It's the knife."

"What are we goin' to do?" Diane whispered.

"Can you get us in and out of there?" Bryan asked softly. His eyes flashed with contained fury.

"There are more robes hangin' inside by the back door. If you each grabbed one, probably nobody would know the difference."

"Sounds good to me," Bryan said through gritted teeth. He popped a clip in his pistol. "I'll take care of this sonofabitch!"

"No!" Kenneth said. "We need to wait!" But Bryan was already gone around the corner. "Damn! And he calls ME impulsive!" Kenneth complained.

"Wait for what?" Diane was struggling back to her feet. A difficult task since her feet were on the hem of her robe.

"This guy you're calling Nash is only part of the picture. The real threat is in the, ah evidently bloodthirsty, knife," he told her as he looked around the corner at the dead child. "We have to get a certain person's remains gathered up and do something to those and this damn knife. Don't ask me what, and then this will all be over."

"I see," Diane said, although she really didn't.

"I'll explain later." Kenneth waved his hand, dismissing the conversation. "Right now, we need to keep Bryan from getting himself killed."

Diane reached under her dirt-stained white robe and pulled her own pistol. "Well, in that case, here goes nothing," she said. "I was getting tired of waiting around to see what would happen next anyway." She shoved a handful of ammunition home with a firm click.

Kenneth followed Officer Diane Stanley out of the bushes and up the steps into the church. The old vestibule was unguarded, as promised. He quickly grabbed an extra robe and slipped it over his ninja hood. When he pulled his face mask down with the robe's hood low over his face, he looked like every other occultist present and enabled him to hide in plain sight. It had the added benefit of hiding his weapons.

"Look and act casual," Diane whispered.

Kenneth nodded at her and flashed another thumbs-up sign. Where was Bryan? Kenneth looked for his friend. He didn't think a direct assault on whoever was in charge was a good idea. He was all for shooting the crap out of all of them, but greater concerns outweighed that satisfaction. *At least for now*, Kenneth thought. *We can't lose our heads and fuck it up. We have an undead on our hands that's worse than anything this guy Nash could ever dream up.* He didn't let himself dwell very long on that thought. He had things to accomplish here. *Get Bryan, get the information we need, and get out!* Kenneth glanced at Diane. She would have to take care of herself.

Kenneth was halfway through the room with one eye on the bones on the altar and the other questing to find Bryan. A scuffle broke out near the front. Kenneth recognized the skinwalker.

Bryan was engaged and trying to hold the big man off long enough to bring his weapon to bear. The knife flashed up over Bryan, and he was pushed against the altar. Bryan just barely managed to dodge the knife in time and break free of Nash's grip as Kenneth arrived to help. Kenneth grabbed the arm with the knife while Bryan finally got enough breathing room to aim and fire, but the trigger never pulled.

A cold blackness settled over the combatants. It pulsed and moved in ripples, stealing their will and sapping their strength. If they had been able to look up, they would have seen the shadow creature which attacked. If they had looked further, they would have noticed the black threads of power emanating from the knife in Skinwalker's hand. It was more than just the cloud of darkness Skinwalker wielded naturally. This was so much more. It ate away at them like a parasite.

Kenneth and Bryan felt the difference. Bryan tried to fight his way free, but he couldn't move. If the knife came for his heart now, he was helpless!

Kenneth was pissed, however, and wasn't about to let the demon lich or the skinwalker have them without a real fight. "Damn sonofabitch, give me that!" Kenneth demanded. He attempted to disarm his opponent and found that he couldn't budge him.

The knife let off a black aura to his sight, and it literally twisted by itself in his grip. Slowly it descended as Skinwalker grabbed him with one hand and aimed for his heart with the other. Eerie pinpoints of light shone in his eyes. Just as Kenneth thought he was going to lose the battle, a loud pop went off that made his ears ring.

Skinwalker howled and let go of him. When he fell with a bullet in his leg, Bryan and Kenneth were glad to see Diane standing behind him with her gun pointed at the floor.

"Why didn't you just kill him?" Bryan panted.

"I couldn't risk firing anywhere but down here in close quarters. I wouldn't want to hit one of you," she said. "Taking his leg out from under him is effective enough. He's off you boys now," Diane observed, then her brown eyes widened. "Oh, my, GOD! Look!"

Skinwalker had another problem. The knife had twisted in his grip again and suddenly plunged its hilt deep in the man's belly. He let out a scream, and the blackness surrounded him, pulsing in time to the man's heartbeat. As they watched, a tall human-appearing figure coalesced over the other man as the dark cloud pulled together.

"Shit!" Bryan exclaimed. "Ulfr is in control of whatever that thing is doing."

"Time to go," Kenneth declared. "We'll figure out the rest later. I don't know about you, but I'm not touching that knife until we have a way to stop it and the lich as well."

"I'm coming with you," Diane said in no uncertain terms. "I've seen enough to give me nightmares for the rest of my life. I need to get out of here and report this to the sheriff immediately."

As soon as Nash went down, the other people in and around the building seemed to awaken. Fighting their way through the press of bodies between them and the door took several minutes. Diane was grabbed and punched, and Bryan got tripped and his

robe pulled off by two people trying to hold onto him. Kenneth pulled his robe off, and they fought their way free in earnest.

They nearly ran back down the deer trail. It was almost dark. Halfway to the car, they stopped, panting.

"You can't report this," Kenneth told her firmly. He was the only one not winded or breathing hard.

Diane frowned. "Why not?"

"What are the police going to do with a knife that can kill you by itself?" he asked her. "I mean, really, think about it. All you will be doing is putting more people at risk. Do you want that on your conscience?"

"No," Diane answered reluctantly.

Bryan agreed. "Even if you bring a whole SWAT team down here and storm the place, while they might be able to handle taking out that group of wackos, they aren't equipped to deal with everything else in there."

"We're working on a way to neutralize this bastard," Kenneth said. "You can either work with us or go off half-cocked and get yourself and a lot of other people killed."

"You said we," Diane observed. "Who is we? Just you and Bryan? What about the girls?"

"Them too." Kenneth frowned. "Nobody else seemed able to do anything, so we got elected."

Diane winced. She wished she could argue with him on that point. She knew the Department didn't know what was going on. She'd been sent on countless fruitless searches before she'd stumbled on the right lead on her own. But how could they know or do anything about it? Who in their right mind would ever believe this? Diane was inclined to pinch herself to see if she were dreaming or awake herself, and she had just seen a man die, killed by a ghost with her own eyes.

"Come on, let's get to the car," Bryan suggested. "On the way, we can tell you what we know if you'll work with us on this." They went further down the trail.

Diane nodded. "Okay, but you better have some kind of plan because this is already way out of control. If you can't convince me, then I am going straight to the sheriff."

Diane's normally dark skin had taken on a new pallor by the time they reached the car. She was already worried and frightened, but she was now convinced they were all in way over their heads.

"So, how the hell do we deal with all of this?" Diane wanted to know.

Bryan shook his head. "Very carefully," he said. "Thanks to our little visit, we know that nobody can go in there alone and expect to come out of there alive. In addition, now they will probably be suspicious of anyone they don't know."

"What about all the supernatural mumbo jumbo?" Diane responded. "Obviously, to take the place, it's going to take more than a handful of people, but as you said, who is equipped to deal with the rest?"

Kenneth stripped his outer layer off and tossed his uniform and boots into the back of the car. "We'll worry about that part. Our friends say they can come up with a way to take the demon thing you saw out completely. But it's going to take a little time to solve this and get ready to do it."

"At the rate people are dying, how much time do we have?" Diane observed.

"That can't be helped," Kenneth said logically. "When you think of a better plan than whatever the coven and the medicine man can come up with, I'm all ears. We have to have all of the pieces in place before we do anything else. If I have to be involved in this, I have no intention of being stupid about it."

"I admit I'm at a loss," Diane responded. "But I can't sit back."

"Then let it be for now," Kenneth interrupted her. "You can't do anything about it other than get yourself dead, so don't try. When the time comes, I'm sure you will be able to find more than enough trouble out of all of this, probably sooner than you think," Kenneth told her. "Now, if you want to continue this discussion, hop in. I'm starving and ready to get something to eat. You can come with us, or we can drop you off wherever you want."

"Alright, you guys can just drop me at the apartments down the street," Diane told him as she got in. "Here's my phone number. Call me as soon as you know anything more." She handed Bryan a card. "I won't be able to sit on this one forever. Sooner or later, the sheriff will find out about the Satanic group's activities, and heaven help us all when he does."

"Hate to tell you this," Bryan said. "Those people are much worse than Satanists, and they are doing things not even a Satanic group would dream up."

"Ulfr is in a class all by himself," Kenneth agreed. "What we're facing is true evil, pure and simple in a way that most people can't imagine."

"The threat is more than just death, isn't it?" Diane thought aloud. "What we saw back there was corrupt and creeping. It's about terrifying and controlling everyone just as much as it is killing." Her eyes were haunted. *That poor child, she thought. I wanted to stop Nash from killing the kid, but there was nothing I could do, and his mother was standing right there too stoned to lift a finger or even care.*

Diane felt deeply ashamed of her failure, and the fear that had ultimately kept her from acting until the boys had shown up. Why had she been so scared? She, a veteran of the police force, when face to face with that monstrosity, had been too frightened to do anything except stand and tremble. Maybe it was time to give up her badge if she could do no better.

It was full dark by the time Officer Diane Stanley exited Bryan's car and watched them drive away. Never one to have been afraid of the dark before, she shivered in spite of herself. Not even the gun on her hip made her feel any more at ease. Suspicious, she looked around and quickly got into her patrol car. She felt a little better with locked doors around her. She drove home, thinking that she would never see anything the same way again.



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KIDNAPPED

SATURDAY, JULY 5, 1985

Sierra was encouraged by the fact that no one had run screaming from the first cave site, so she elected to go along on the second exploration. "I can handle it," she insisted. Sierra was adamant when questioned on whether she would rather be left behind. The teen wasn't going to be shamed again by her fears, and Rachel was going. Her cousin was nervous but full of questions for Medicine Bear as he drove the three of them into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Sierra rode in silence most of the way. She felt the absence of her coyote friend.

Medicine Bear had insisted the coyote be left behind since they were going into the national park. "He's not native to this area," Medicine Bear had told them. "We will be in tourist areas, and some people will recognize what he is; particularly if we run across a Park Ranger. He may get shot as a pest in the park. Coyotes are not protected."

It had been enough to convince Sierra that her pet would be better off left home. Well, actually, she thought a little miffed, he's taken up with Kenneth lately. She'd left the coyote with Kenneth that morning, and the coyote had not seemed to mind. In fact, he acted perfectly content to settle on the stone porch at Kenneth's feet and lounge there.

Kenneth had promised to hang around his house and watch their four-legged buddy. Bryan was working a fire with the fire department, so just the three of them were heading up the mountain. Mary Lou, SilverFox, and Carly were meeting with the coven to cook up some kind of plan for directly facing Ulfr and wouldn't be coming along.

Sierra shivered in spite of herself at the thought of the creature of her nightmares. Kenneth called it a lich, but she still wasn't certain she believed anything except that something kept

coming for her, and it scared the daylights out of her. Maybe it wouldn't bother now that she'd ditched the beads. She hadn't told the others, but she'd gone back to the cave the next day and thrown them into the opening as hard as she could. The coyote had then only reluctantly gotten in the car with her.

"Sorry," she'd told him. "We don't need those old things anyway," she said. "Everybody's spending too much time dwelling on them, and they've only been trouble for me since I brought them home. They're just stupid beads. I don't know why anybody would get excited about that." She hoped that it would all go away if she didn't have them anymore. She refused to consider the small knot of terror deep in her breast that she'd just made the worst mistake of her life.

The car was climbing a steep incline. Sierra's ears popped with the change in elevation. It brought her out of her reverie to listen to Rachel and Medicine Bear's conversation.

Rachel finally got around to asking what she really wanted to know. "So," she began. "With all this huge area of mountains, how on earth did you find the one spot with this guy's bones in it? It seems like a lot of coincidence," Rachel said.

"First of all, you're how old?" Medicine Bear asked.

"I'm twenty-three," Rachel responded.

"And you still believe in coincidences?" Medicine Bear laughed. "There are no coincidences, my dear. There is free will, but there is also the clockwork design of the universe. Things happen as they are supposed to happen. Whether or not you choose to believe, everything works according to its nature, and events occur based on the way things are set in motion. Some say that is God's plan, and others say that it's a series of random events."

Medicine Bear paused and then continued. "In this case, the Spirit world is pretty clear that we all have an important part to play in the larger workings of the world and that God is watching closely to see what we do with what we are given. You can view that as you wish, but if you open your eyes, you'll notice we have been dropped right in the middle of an age-old battle."

"What do you mean?" Rachel asked

"The battle between light and dark, good and evil... ever heard of it?"

"Yeah," Rachel said. "I talked to my mom's minister about everything."

"And what did he tell you?" Medicine Bear asked her.

"That I need to stay away from all of it, and stay away from everybody that might drag me into any of this stuff. He said that I need to be careful."

"He did, did he?" Medicine Bear shook his head. "What are you supposed to be careful of? I can guess, but I'd like to hear it."

"He said magick is of the devil and witches, and pagans are evil." Rachel looked at Medicine Bear. "I'm not sure what to think, actually. What I see and feel doesn't seem bad to me, but he's a minister and knows what he's talking about, right? So I'm a little confused."

"Just because someone is in a position of authority doesn't mean they have all the answers," Medicine Bear told her. "There are popular errors in interpretation of what the Bible says, and in some cases, translation to modern language encourages those errors. As to what he told you, magick itself isn't good or evil, nor is the use of spiritual gifts. What counts is what is in the heart of each individual person. We are expected to make choices to use those gifts wisely, and if used in service to mankind, do you really think God is going to object?"

"No," Rachel said. "I don't think God would object."

"Good," Medicine Bear told her. His mouth was set in a grim line. "Before this is over with, we'll have to use every tool at our disposal to defeat this evil. It's been dropped in our laps, but think of it this way. If we couldn't handle it, God wouldn't put us in this position. We can work together as Christian, Pagan, and Native Medicine, or we can splinter our efforts and hand Ulfr, and whatever dark power is behind him the victory before we start."

"I get it." Rachel nodded.

"If it will make you feel better, get your Bible out and look in Corinthians for your answers. It speaks about spiritual gifts and explains these things there. Go to the source and read for yourself rather than listening to someone else," Medicine Bear told Rachel. "As to your other question, I was on my first vision quest when I was a boy. I got attacked by a bear there at the cave. I ended up inside when I was injured."

"A vision quest?" Rachel looked puzzled. She had no frame of reference to decipher what he meant.

"Yes. It is where you go out into the wilderness where you can be alone with God, or gods, whatever your religious preference. You are meant to seek a vision that is essentially whatever messages that Spirit is trying to give you but are normally too busy, too stressed, or too distracted to be able to hear."

Interestingly enough, SilverFox and Moira have adopted the use of the vision quest for their Wiccan students,” Medicine Bear said. “I happen to agree with the wisdom in that.”

The car whined as it climbed steeply. Rachel went silent as she looked past the tall trees and watched the breathtaking views across the mountains in the breaks in the trees. Tourists were parked at nearly every overlook. Most sported cameras, and many had kids in tow. Shorts, T-shirts, and caps were the standard touristy dress as it was still quite warm even as high up as they were getting. Medicine Bear had to slow to a crawl as their car ended up behind another mobile house masquerading as a large RV.

“Can’t those people move?” Sierra sounded irritated. “How can they even get something so big up here in the first place?”

Medicine Bear shook his head. “They’re tourists.” He smiled in amusement. “Don’t expect much in the way of real camping skills. Some of them have to have everything plus the kitchen sink. This is why I wanted to leave early this morning. We can get stuck in traffic and still get to where we’re going, get in and get out while it’s daylight.”

When they finally reached the top of the winding seven-mile two-lane road that looped around to the summit of the mountain, Medicine Bear parked the car near some boulders to the side of the parking lot. “In case you didn’t know, we’re right astraddle of the Tennessee-North Carolina border here at Clingman’s dome,” Medicine Bear told them.

“Wow,” Sierra said. “It is beautiful up here in the Great Smoky Mountains.”

“Yeah, it is,” Rachel agreed. “Do we have time to go up to the top of the tower and look?” She stood staring at a brown painted sign. “It says Clingman’s Dome tower is just a half-mile that way.” Rachel pointed at a paved walkway.

It was Sierra’s turn to be practical. “We should probably get done what we came for and go.” She didn’t really want to linger anywhere near a place where they were looking for Ulfr’s bones. It would be bad enough carrying them away, and she’d rather have the whole thing over with.

“I agree,” Medicine Bear said. He keyed open the trunk of his car and pulled out an empty black heavy cotton knapsack. “For what we’re to find here.” He told both girls as he showed the bag to them. “We can’t exactly go carrying this thing around in the daylight for everyone to see.”

"Where are we going?" Sierra asked nervously. Medicine Bear headed out on foot with Rachel and Sierra following close behind.

"Just follow me and watch your step," he told them. "We're going off any main trails. Stay with me, and you won't get lost. Keep your eyes open for bears and snakes."

Asily traversed at first, they quickly left the paved path behind for a smaller side trail. Eventually, they turned off onto what appeared to be little better than a deer path. Tall spruce trees were everywhere, standing and fallen onto the forest floor. The path got steeper since their goal was to go downward rather than across.

"What's wrong with all of the trees?" Sierra asked. "They don't look very good."

"They are sick." Medicine Bear answered grimly. "This is a high elevation spruce forest, very rare in the southern states. Partly because of their elevation they are vulnerable to pollution. All the tall white trunks you see in contrast to the green around them are dead and dying trees. It's a fragile ecosystem and also one that provides headwaters for major streams and rivers. It is a very sad state of affairs." Medicine Bear said sadly as he looked at the devastation.

He pointed up near the summit of the mountain. "When I was here as a boy, there was a plane crash over there on the mountain. The Wolf's evil taint spreads and corrupts everything that comes near. I was never sure whether he somehow affected it enough to bring that plane down even bound as he was."

"Were you scared?" Sierra asked.

"Yes. Scared enough that it made me turn away from the path of my forefathers. Only, one cannot run from who and what they are." Medicine Bear sounded sad and regretful. "I abandoned my responsibility, but now it has followed me and brought me home after all these years. It's time my spirit reclaims its place."

Medicine Bear casually handed the empty bag to Sierra. "If you will hold that, please. We are close to our destination, and I need to prepare for our entry. It's been forty years since I've been here, and I can only hope this site hasn't been disturbed."

Oppression seemed to sit heavy on them as Medicine Bear unslung his pouch and lit his smudge. This time, he used a bundle of sage and cedar tied tightly together with string and lit the end of it. He blew the smoke on the girls. "For cleansing," he

told them. Then he turned and held it high, honoring the sky, and held it just above the ground to honor the earth.

“Spirits of this place,” he began. “We honor you and ask for your pro...” Before he could finish, a loud cracking noise came from just above them and interrupted Medicine Bear. Suspiciously, he looked around. Knowing that the same bear wouldn’t be there that had attacked him before didn’t make him feel any better. He was distracted by the remembered pain of the bear’s claws knocking him down the hill. Resolutely, he made up his mind. This could wait, he decided. He reasoned that he would rather they not run into anything on the trail that would delay them. He extinguished the sage and cedar bundle to burn again later.

“Quickly, come with me, ladies. We need to expedite this endeavor.” Medicine Bear climbed down carefully and more deliberately than the last time. Sierra and Rachel slipped and slid down the slope behind him. The group approached an area of tall boulders and stepped carefully around loose rocks. They turned to see an opening in the hillside. A bone-chilling cold emanated from inside, and the day seemed darker somehow. Rachel shook her head to try to clear her sudden onset of vertigo. Sierra hung back and clutched the bag.

“This has not been disturbed,” Medicine Bear said. “He’s here. I can feel him, just as angry and ready to strike as ever he was.”

Sierra wavered on whether to start back up the trail or go into the cave. Standing there looking at the fear on her companions’ faces, she made up her mind. *I am not going to run this time.* Sierra thought to herself. “I am not going to let this guy win. I can do this,” she declared.

Sierra could already hear the insidious whispers. *Come closer, it said. Free me. We will rule the world. Loki must be served.*

Medicine Bear blanched. He could hear the voice as well. “So that’s the way of it,” he nodded. “I should have thought. He’s a Viking and a priest. Loki’s dark, chaotic power is what he craves most.”

Sierra felt herself become strong as if she could do anything and get anything she wanted. The feeling took over, and she walked into the cave confidently. *See, I don’t need any mutterings, magick, or anything else,* she thought. The other two followed her in. She almost felt contemptuous of their pitiful efforts to take what was rightfully hers. SHE had discovered Ulfr,

so to her should go the spoils. She was glad she'd thrown those beads away!

Medicine Bear didn't realize at first what was happening. He was glad enough that Sierra had the bag as he didn't want to touch anything. The thought of it made his skin want to crawl. Too late, he realized his mistake.

Sierra went directly to where the Viking's skull was buried and uncovered it as if she knew exactly where it was. She lovingly pulled the blue beads away from the wrapping as if she were rescuing a lost child.

"Sierra, no! He must stay bound!" Medicine Bear exclaimed too late. "Do not unleash! AGHGH!" He put his hands to his ears as a scream filled the cave and echoed. It emanated from the bony head. It was a sound of pent-up fury.

Sierra hissed and licked her lips. Her eyes had suddenly gone cold and dark as a striking serpent. Slowly, Medicine Bear and Rachel backed out of the cave. They turned to find a slim African-American man standing behind them.

"You have something that belongs to me," he told them conversationally. "I believe I will take that," he said. "Actually, you have two things that belong to me. I will take both." He held up his hand and gestured to Sierra with one hand while he trained the nose of a pistol on them with the other.

Sierra stepped forward with the bare skull in her hands. As she passed her friends, they could see no light or intelligence left in her face. Medicine Bear sucked in his breath. He grabbed Rachel and held her fast as Sierra walked back up the trail, followed by the boy Rachel knew as Tyrone.

When they were out of sight up the trail, Rachel turned to Medicine Bear. "Why did you hold me like that? We have to do something! We can't let her go with that monster!"

Medicine Bear fell to his knees in shock. "It's too late," he said. "The Wolf has possessed her, and if we try to intervene now, he could kill her or he could kill us. We will have to report back to the others that we failed. At least, with the boys' discovery, we know where they are going." He put his head in his hands. "Pray the witches come up with a way to defeat the Viking, or Sierra is lost to us."

"NO!" Rachel yelled and stomped her foot. "I refuse to believe or accept that she's gone forever. We'll find a way! We'll get her back and kill that demon or lich or whatever the hell he is once and for all!"

"Then we better get started." Medicine Bear had tears running down his face to match Rachel's. He wasn't cut out for this. He'd failed his task, and he'd failed to protect an innocent. With no choice but to go on and try to rectify his mistake, the medicine man rose and collected himself.

Rachel stomped back up the path. She knew Medicine Bear was right. They'd have to get all the Shadow Angels together on this. Mary Lou, Carly, and SilverFox better be discovering miracles. She was ready to walk into that thrice-damned satanic church that Kenneth and Bryan had found and tear it apart with her bare hands if necessary to get her cousin back!

A few hours later, a phone call came through at Kenneth's house. He went deathly still as Rachel explained through her sobs that Sierra was gone and the Viking's skull with her. Quickly processing the situation, he mentally narrowed their options down to one.

"Then you and Medicine Bear meet me at Moira's house. Mary Lou and Carly are already over there. I don't have her number, didn't keep it, so call her and let her know. I need to have a little talk with the priestess, and we have to decide how we're going to handle getting Sierra back before something happens to her."

Rachel sobbed at him some more over the phone. Kenneth could hear Medicine Bear in the background and knew he was there with his friend. "Rachel, give me to Medicine Bear. We need to act, not panic. We can panic when it's over."

"Yeah, Medicine Bear?" he said into the phone. "Where are you guys... Sevierville? Okay, call Moira, then get back as quick as you can. It should take you about an hour and a half to meet me at Moira's house. We'll go from there."

Kenneth hung up the phone and lingered, thinking for just a moment. He quickly called Bryan, who was home after the fire. "There's no time to rest," Kenneth told him. "Be ready in fifteen minutes. We have a real emergency." He hung up the phone again.

"Let's go buddy," Kenneth addressed the coyote. "Sierra's been taken by those whack jobs. We better figure out pretty quick how we're going to get her back." He grabbed his bag and stashed it along with all of his weapons in the trunk of his car. He opened the back door. "You want to ride back here where there's lots of room, or you riding shotgun?" he asked the coyote.

The coyote hopped in and settled on the back seat for an answer. "Good enough," Kenneth said and shut the door. He revved the engine just before he pulled out in a spray of gravel.



"Ordinarily, there would be no way you two would be sent into such a situation as we are facing. This is a job for experienced elders, not kids. It's flat dangerous is what it is," SilverFox was saying. "I don't like it at all. But we've no choice because we don't have enough people to be everywhere at once," she sighed, "and against her usual policy, Moira is adamant that I teach you as much as possible in the short time that we have. She assures me that you are both far enough along on your own that all you need is the mechanics of how it all works."

Both girls nodded. They were standing in the home circle behind Moira's house. Carly spoke, "We've been doing dream work, precognition, meditation, and astral travel. We've also been working with energy. Mary Lou or I mean, um, Danika here managed to call up a storm."

"Good, but not good." SilverFox glared at them. "Learning is one thing, but not playing with what you can't control. What you are doing shows that you have plenty of power to spare, but not the ethics or the sense to use it wisely," the priestess admonished. "But then, that's what I'm going to pound into you."

"Our Wiccan Tradition has strict rules and teaching methods. Our aim is to produce teachers and leaders who can walk into any circle on short notice and be effective. By the time you swear your initiatory oath at First Degree, you will be equal to most trained to Third Degree in other Trads."

Moira requires you to work and work hard for it, or she simply won't fool with you, and neither will I. This path isn't for the faint of heart. It's an initiatory mystery religion and requires self-exploration and soul searching. You may find that it isn't for you at all. If you don't want what I have to teach, then you are welcome to simply walk away whenever you wish."

"I want to learn," Mary Lou said adamantly. "I'm not going to quit."

SilverFox looked into the young woman's eyes and read the truth of her character. "We'll see," she said. "Your strong will is going to stand you in good stead because that's where your true power lies."

"What do you mean?" Carly asked.

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“Magick, when you break it down to its most basic components, is ‘change in accordance with will,’” SilverFox explained. “When you are self-possessed, strong and calm within yourself, you can employ energy effectively on yourself and your environment,” she continued. “Some people mistake this for ego, and it’s true that self-confidence plays a role, but without it, you are weakened because doubt saps your will.”

“Wait, I see other applications for that,” Mary Lou said slowly. “When people try to tear you down, and you let them...”

“Then you are giving your personal power away,” SilverFox said. “Rest assured that many will who should know better. Once you are initiated and working as an elder, you might as well accept that there will be a great big target painted on your back. Some of it is ignorance, but some of it is jealousy and spite, just because you are who you are.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Carly complained.

“Maybe not, but we’ll discuss the fairness of the world, or lack thereof, later. We have real work to do,” SilverFox said. “Just realize that those people who feel that need also feel the lack of their own confidence, in which case you win before they started,” she pointed out. “Just avoid being part of the problem. That is all you really need to worry about.”

“That’s not so easy,” Mary Lou said.

“No, it never is,” SilverFox agreed. “For many of us, that takes a lifetime to learn.”

“What about people like Ulfr?” Mary Lou wanted to know. “He was once a person just like you and me, right? How did he get to be so evil, and maybe so evil that he can cheat death?”

“Why is the sky blue?” SilverFox answered the question with a question. “That is part of what you need to figure out within yourself. I can give you our Tradition’s statement of ethics that you are expected to follow, but ultimately it’s what lies within your own heart that matters. Certainly, if I didn’t believe you can prove yourself able to be responsible with the tools I am to give you, then you would not be here. The fact you ask that question tells me a lot about who you are inside. Someone who is truly evil would not concern themselves with it. As for cheating death? Well, we are going to help him with that little problem.” SilverFox winked. “So, let’s be about it.”

“Okay, I’m listening,” Mary Lou nodded. “Where do we start?”

“We’re going to dispense with basic energy work, you already know how to do that, and we already discussed the faith aspect

of Wicca the other night. Remember, we are dealing with duality; basically a balance between dark and light, the moon and sun, feminine and masculine, all expressed in nature and represented by the Lord and Lady, god and goddess. This balance runs through everything and IS everything. You got that part, correct?"

"Yes," Mary Lou answered. Carly nodded.

"Good." SilverFox turned and walked to one side of the stone circle. "Essentially, it is all part of the One Source, but we apply our view of it for the simple means of understanding what is too big for the imagination to comprehend. Inherent in the duality is also equality. Ergo, this is how we achieve balance in our spiritual and mundane life as well as energy work, or magick if you will," she said.

"That makes sense to me," Mary Lou said.

"To work with these ideals, we use visualization techniques and apply our will to them to manifest our new reality," SilverFox explained.

"What?" Carly looked confused. "Can you repeat that in English?"

"Fine. Basically, it's this. What you imagine and can picture in your head becomes real." SilverFox smiled. "That's an oversimplification, but in practice, that's really all we're doing. Faith, a strong will, and connection with Deity will do the rest. This isn't something that can be faked. Without true spiritual existence, it won't really work. Those who don't have that must look for cheats to gain a semblance of it. Those cheats exist but aren't worth it in the long run."

"Gotcha," Carly responded.

"So, since you understand that part of it, you can put it in practice. We are going to apply all of this to our basic ritual framework, as it gives you an effective method by which to accomplish your goals. The circle itself is laid out in four quadrants, just like the medicine wheel we encountered in the cave, remember?"

"Yes." Mary Lou nodded and smiled. Her feather from the medicine wheel was now beaded and hanging from a clip in her hair.

"These are the watchtowers, the four winds, the four directions, the four elements etc. Each corresponds to an ideal. East to air and thought. We use the color yellow like the sun, which rises in the east, to stand for this element." SilverFox moved through the circle slowly as she spoke.

“Next is south for fire and passion, creativity and direct action. We use the color red for this element. West is water for emotion and love. The color here is blue, like the Pacific Ocean, which lies to the west of us if you need a visual. Finally, in the north resides the element earth, representing stability, tradition, physical reality, and connection with everything around you, including your blood relatives and ancestors. That is where your base is, your roots.”

“So far, you understand this, right?” Encouraged by their assent, SilverFox continued. “In the center of the circle resides Spirit, i.e. your soul, and its connection to the Divine Source. It surrounds you and moves through you in all directions. Think of the circle as a bubble rather than a flat, one-dimensional object,” SilverFox said. “Now, realize that in this circle, you reflect the macrocosm or the universe. Call on the gods in this sacred space, and you act as a conduit for the Divine Powers.”

“Okay, I get all of that,” Mary Lou said. “I can see how it works, especially after being in ritual more than once now, but I have to ask how we’re going to use this to bring the demon lich guy down?”

“his is the framework for how we can entrap him,” SilverFox answered simply. “Evil cannot exist in the same place as love. Love trumps everything, and light shone on lies reveals the truth. We will have to set up a circle large enough to move Ulfr out of time and place and then merge reality and the Otherworld within that circle so that he can be dealt with as an equal. Love and our kind of magick is something he has no way to understand. That gives us the edge we need.”

“He’s dead, but not dead.” Mary Lou sat down on the ground, pulled her knees to her chest, and stared at the priestess. “I am trying to see this, but if he’s not alive to kill, what can we really do?”

SilverFox laughed. “I put two and two together. The only thing I don’t know is exactly how he gained this semblance of immortality. But, I have worked out how to bring him down. I ran it by Moira, and she says it will do the trick.”

“Then, what does this accomplish exactly? We have to actually kill him,” Mary Lou’s tendency to argue based on logic asserted itself.

“As an undead, broken apart as he is, Ulfr exists here and in the otherworld at the same time,” SilverFox answered. “It’s a paradox. But, if we join soul to body again and rob him of

whatever he did to cheat final death, it will become a matter of fighting him person to person, the same as if we were dealing with any other human opponent.”

“I think I begin to see,” Mary Lou mused aloud. Carly looked thoughtful.

“When Kenneth and Bryan came back and let us know that he’s trying to resurrect himself, then that gave me the final piece we needed. He wants to live again. If he’s alive, he can die. He’s already past his normal life span by hundreds of years. We will be righting a wrong and protecting everyone in the process.”

“And, your final solution to this is, we cast a circle around him and resurrect him. Then we kill him, probably with the spear,” Carly said. “But then, aren’t we committing murder? How are we any better than he is if we kill someone? If he’s alive and not some demon ghost thing, maybe he can be saved.”

“No, Carly sweetie, he cannot be saved by any means available to man, woman, god, or goddess. He is far beyond that now. I understand your concern, and it does you credit, but we are dealing with an immortal evil. If we refuse to intervene, that spells danger no matter how you slice it. If what the Spirits say is true, the very soul of mankind is at stake. Lack of action will do more harm than delivering his Final Death.”

“I see,” Carly said sadly.

“We will let him resurrect himself,” SilverFox said. “We don’t have the body parts, so we have to let him run his course and then act swiftly while he is still weak. We will key a very specific spell to him and then take him out completely.”

“I thought you didn’t cast spells?” Mary Lou asked, puzzled.

“I said I don’t; I didn’t say I couldn’t,” SilverFox replied. “This is a special circumstance, and karma is on our side for doing what we must.”

“There’s one problem with that,” Carly broke in. “We also don’t have the spear.”

 loud male voice interrupted. “That’s okay. We’ll get it!” They turned to find Kenneth and Bryan standing beside Moira. “We’d better be about it fast too.”

Mary Lou took one look at Kenneth’s face, and her empathic ability kicked in. She touched him mind to mind and knew instantly that something was wrong. Her guts suddenly clenched of their own accord.

“What’s wrong? Why are you here? What else has happened?” Mary Lou asked.

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“They got Sierra this morning. She had Ulfr’s skull, and he took control when they were at the cave. Medicine Bear and Rachel are also on their way here,” Kenneth said grimly.

The color drained from Mary Lou’s face. She was glad she was sitting down already when that bit of news was delivered. *Ulfr has Sierra!* She looked at her younger sister and saw the shock she felt mirrored there.

“SilverFox, finish up here,” Moira instructed. “Get them grounded, so they are thinking clearly, and then bring them to the house. I’ll activate the phone tree and call the council of elders to meet here tonight on short notice. We have a lot to discuss.” Moira turned on her heel and walked smoothly up the stairs leading to the deck and inside her house.

“Well, really,” Mary Lou said to Carly. “If ever we did have a choice, now we don’t have any at all. Because I don’t know about you, but I’m not taking this sitting down.” Mary Lou stood up to emphasize her point. “Teach me the spell SilverFox. I’ll make it work, no matter the cost.”



“How on earth did one of ours get taken to that den of insanity?” Will was asking. “We had ways to protect the girl, so how did we fail?”

“Sierra is the one weak link.” Moira said deliberately. “She has no faith in herself or anything else. With no self-possession, she was easiest to possess and manipulate.”

“It’s my fault,” Medicine Bear admitted. “I didn’t see what was happening until it was too late to stop it. Ulfr took hold of her, and she just left and took the skull with her.”

“Did you check to see if the spear was there?” Dythia asked.

“No,” Medicine Bear admitted. “We were so upset by Sierra’s sudden change that we just left and headed back here.”

“No matter,” Kenneth broke in. “It isn’t there.”

“You know where it is?” Mary Lou felt a faint glimmer of hope before it was dashed.

“No, I don’t know where it is exactly, but if you give me a detailed map and a ruler, I think I can tell you where the other burial sites are. I thought about it on the way over here. I should be able to figure it based on the map we saw in the cave and all the information we have so far.”

“It sounds like we’re a day late and a dollar short on finding the sites. They’ve beat us to it.” A middle-aged man introduced to them by the pagan name of Watchkeeper spoke up. He was a

police officer. Officer Diane Stanley sat next to him. She had also been invited, but she was bemused by the group and sat silently listening. Knowing one of the coven was an Officer of the Law like her had put her more at ease.

"Yes," Kenneth agreed. "But they're focusing on resurrecting the Viking rather than getting the Spear, so that's what we need to go for before they get around to it. When we have it, we'll still need to check the other places where the body parts are buried, but I'd say they'll have those too by the time we get there. We don't need those for what we have to do, so I say skip it and get what will do us the most good."

"I still think we need to get the kids out of this," Selene remarked. She was a tall, well-dressed blonde who worked as a nurse at Harriman hospital. She was still wearing green scrubs as she had not been given time to change after work. "They have no business being involved, and one of them has already been taken. Personally, I don't want to see any child at risk in this." She looked pointedly at the thirteen-year-old who glared at her. "We all know this is a violation of standard policy. Why are we breaking it by even having them here for this discussion?"

Moira interrupted smoothly. "They are here due to the fact two of them carry Ulfr's blood in their veins, and one of them carries the reincarnated soul of one of the victims of his machinations. The oaths that were sworn then have come full circle."

"What!" Kenneth glared at Moira. "Why didn't you tell me this before!"

"You didn't ask, and it wasn't important information until now." Moira smiled serenely.

"What else have you withheld?" he demanded.

"Who do you think you are?!?" Cassandra exclaimed. "To be talking to her like that? You are a guest in her house and have no right to demand anything!"

"Shhh. Peace, Cassie. He does." Moira held her hand up without looking at the other woman. "He is being asked to do more than his share, and he has done well. His leadership and input have been important to getting all these kids where they need to be for this task. He was handpicked and put where he is for a reason."

"I'm waiting." Kenneth had no intention of backing down. "What else can you tell us that will help? And don't feed me any bullshit about not interfering! You are in this yourself up to your neck." He still didn't dare reveal Moira's true nature. He was

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willing to talk back to her because of what she was asking of him, but he would not forget who she was.

"I will fill in the blanks for you, my dear." She stood up so as to be face to face with him. Her silver eyes grabbed him as no others could. They made him feel like a mouse under examination by a hawk.

"Research of the genealogy involved will reveal that the long ago Princess Aesa, born to Ingegerd of Ulfr's rape went to England as a young woman and married into the Wells family, who had come across the channel from northern France with William the Conqueror. William finally achieved what Harald Hardrada could not and took the throne of Britain after the others weakened themselves fighting each other. Your two friends are descendants of that branch of Wells."

"I have a genealogy book that my aunt compiled," Mary Lou said. "That wouldn't disagree with what you're saying, but how did you know? My aunt couldn't trace much detail that far back. The only thing she could find was that two brothers, both named Wells, landed. The heraldry from that is pretty cool, but I have no way to prove what you are saying other than that I know I have both gentry and royalty in my ancestry."

"You have more than you know," Moira said softly.

"Moira would know if anyone would," was all Kenneth would say on that subject. His eyes were still locked with the goddess. "What else?" he asked.

"King Magnus and his sister Ingegerd both swore oaths the day Aesa was born that they would personally exact revenge. Both died before they could carry out their wyrd. But, the nature of the crimes committed against them was so heinous that the very gods themselves heard.

Ulfr, the Kin Killer, was also an oath breaker and thief. Of all the crimes he committed, the crimes against Ingegerd are considered the worst. He must pay for those by her hand."

"She's long-dead. Unless you are telling me we have another undead up walking around," Kenneth said bluntly. Wait. No, you don't mean!" He turned and looked at Mary Lou and Carly sitting beside her. He dismissed Mary Lou and looked at Carly closely. "Her?"

A smile crossed Moira's unlined face. "Yes, that is exactly it." Moira read his thoughts. "You know that sometimes Father God, our Elohim, allows for souls to return. You see these things yourself, even as you question them. All of you are linked through the past in one way or another. Aren't you the one who

said he understood that everything is connected through the one Godhead? With God, all things are possible, even reincarnation if that is what God wants, yes?"

Kenneth wanted to grit his teeth. "Busybody!" He muttered and looked away from her again. She HAD been listening the day he'd talked to her while he drove down the road alone in the car.

Moira surprised him by laughing. "Logic does not only belong to Capricorns." She winked. "So, my dear sweet boy, Ingegerd lives, and she has sworn to bring Ulfr to his knees."

They heard the intake of breath, and everyone looked at Carly. She had involuntarily stood up, and her hand went to the ruby hanging at her throat. "So that is why I've been dreaming that same dream over and over and over again! Sometimes it's like I'm seeing from outside myself, but more often than not, it's like it's happening to me, and I can feel every bruise and see all the blood everywhere. It's so vivid!"

"Memories of one of your past lives," Moira said pointedly. "There are others, but for now, this is the one that speaks to you because it is the one that is important to your current task."

"How do you know all this stuff?" Bryan had gotten so agitated that he found his leg bouncing. "Who are you to know anything?" he asked.

Moira turned on him in a flash. "I know." She stared him down, and he went still.

"Trust me," Kenneth said. "She knows, and she's always right." He told his friend.

SilverFox chose to break into the conversation at that point. "Moira is a strong psychic. One of the best, in fact. I have never seen her be wrong about anything."

Bryan nodded and held up his hand. "I was just asking. I'll take your word for it. I know what that's like because I see things too."

Moira looked around at them. "You are all old souls with gifts barely tapped."

Kenneth listened to what Fate said and considered. "Fine. Then how do we use all this to win? One of us is missing from this little powwow if you'll notice. SilverFox said she was working on a plan. We're out of time, so I'm all ears."

Kenneth's wording got Medicine Bear's attention. He spoke up as he rose from his own chair. "I've got an atlas with maps under the seat of my car," he said. "I keep it there for when I take trips. I'll go ahead and go get it if you don't mind waiting a minute, so I don't miss anything?"

"I suggest a ten-minute smoke break," SilverFox said. "Medicine Bear can retrieve his map, Kenneth can show us where he thinks the spear might be, and I'll tell you all what I think we should do. Mind you, it requires some revision based on new information, but I am sure it will work."

Moira clapped her hands. "War council in 10 minutes!" she said. "Don't straggle."

Carly walked over to Moira when everyone else walked out. "Skuldii?" she said and shook her head to clear it. "I know you. Somehow I do, and I've been seeing and hearing you in my dreams. You've been teaching me, teaching us, haven't you? Through dreams," she spoke softly. "Ken knows too, doesn't he?"

"Go on outside and take your break, child," Moira told her gently. "You know who you are, and that is what matters. Ken and I have our own issues, which are not yours to concern yourself with."

"Okay. By the way, thank you again for the necklace. Now I know why you gave it to me. It was mine all along." She smiled and followed the rest out the door.



"After my closeup look at the map in the cave and the cave drawings, I think I can approximate where the fourth and final burial site is with a detailed map of this area." Kenneth was bent over a hastily erected card table. "Somebody give me a ruler and a pencil." He stepped over the coyote who had made himself at home under the table with the brindle dog.

"Was there something on the map that indicated where these places are?" Bryan asked him. "Otherwise, aren't you just guessing?"

"I'm guessing, yes, but it's an educated guess, and we can start looking in logical places rather than running around on a wild goose chase," Kenneth replied. "I'm basing it on two things. To start with, think about where the first two locations are and where the old Native American shamans would have likely gone. The first place we found was Rockwood Mountain, and the second was Clingman's dome. Both are high points with visibility for navigation. These guys didn't have maps like ours. They would have used the stars and major landmarks to keep from getting lost and probably as lookout points. At that point in time, those would have been remote locations, not easily accessible."

"He's right." Medicine Bear nodded. "That is exactly what they did, in addition to markers left by others of the tribes. The further you go back in time, the more simplistic the methods become as communication, like everything else, develops over time."

"I also noticed that several of the drawings were done in a triangular shape. If my hunch is correct, this tribe also found some meaning in a three-point shape," Kenneth said and continued.

"As Medicine Bear has said, they wouldn't have told anyone where they were going. In general, they would have followed a pattern. So, we can literally triangulate the third using simple angles. That should be where the third location would be for a burial site," Kenneth said. "I am going to draw an intersecting line. Ah! Thank you." Kenneth waited for SilverFox to hand him a wooden ruler and a pen. "... and see where we end up. I'm fairly confident it will be significant."

Kenneth paused in speaking and ran his finger around the map. He drew a dot at the summit of Rockwood Mountain and another in the center of Clingman's Dome. Then he drew a line between the two points. Next, carefully angling the ruler by eyeing his line, he drew two more lines. Peering closely at the map, he grinned in satisfaction. "Aha!" he said. "Big Ridge State Park... Medicine Bear?"

The medicine man looked startled. "There are old burial mounds and the remains of an abandoned Native American village there," He said. "The spirits are strong there, and they are not welcoming of visitors. They say they are protecting something. That's it! That has to be the other place. If we go looking, we'll probably find the rest of The Wolf's remains and the spear!"

"Not so fast," Kenneth said. "I'm not finished."

"What else?" the teen had Medicine Bear's attention.

"Viking weapons are heavy and bulky, as anyone who has tried LARP; that is, live-action role-play in medieval period costume, can attest. I don't believe his belongings would have been carried very far, and they wouldn't have gone out with the body parts. The only thing that did was the knife that killed him. They simply didn't want to remove the knife and left it where it was. The rest? Well, what about a central location between the three points? Maybe I'm wrong, maybe I'm right, but we can look there first. Where was the village actually located? Most people

of that time period settled along waterways, so where is a central location, near water, with a high point nearby for reference?"

"That's an easy one," Selene spoke. "That would be what is now, Knoxville, Tennessee."

"Agreed," Kenneth said. "If we follow the pattern logically, knowing there is a labyrinth of caves all through Knoxville..."

"Ooh, ooh, ooh! It could literally be anywhere," Carly said excitedly. "But I know where we should go to start with!"

"Where?" Mary Lou asked her. "What am I missing here?"

"The T.V. Towers!" Carly replied. She practically bounced in her chair. "I look out my window every day and look right at the highest point in Knoxville. It's why they put the television towers there!"

"Sharp's Ridge! That makes a lot of sense," Mary Lou said. "The Tennessee River is close by, so there's your water."

Kenneth glanced at Moira and noted the look of satisfaction in her expression. He nodded. They'd got it.

"Sounds like as good a place to start looking as any," Rachel said. She hadn't spoken all evening. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. "We can go and check it out tomorrow."

"That is exactly the thing I was going to suggest," SilverFox said. "Some of us need to check out Big Ridge, and some need to go up Sharp's Ridge and look for the spear."

"I am sure the Spear of Chaos is where you think it is," Moira named it for everyone present. Her voice had gone nearly singsong. "Go to Big Ridge and take care of the spirits there, Medicine Bear. They are disturbed at the loss of what they are guarding."

Medicine Bear eyed Moira. He had seen her do that before, and it always indicated a True Seeing, but his vision in the cave where he saw her involved in taking down Ulfr the first time had given him a few sleepless nights. She wasn't an undead. She lived and breathed, and he sensed no evil. She was a kind of manifest Spirit, he realized, but what?

"I will go," Medicine Bear agreed and bowed formally. "I will see it done tomorrow."

"The Spear of Chaos," Kenneth repeated softly. He knew enough about Moira to pay attention to everything she said. "Is that like the opposite of the Spear of Destiny?" he asked her.

Moira smiled at him. "That would violate free will," she said just for him. "I know you will remember."

"I remember everything," Kenneth declared. "But you could make this easy once in a while by just telling me!" He eyed her.

The look of satisfaction was still there. What was Fate up to now? But she remained silent.

“So, now what about the rest of our plan?” Mary Lou had missed the byplay by talking to Bryan. The girl looked at SilverFox and Moira. She was worried about Sierra, and she wanted the conversation to get back on track.

“I still say a few good ole’ boys and their shotguns would be a perfect way to solve this.” Kenneth grimaced at them. “But since that doesn’t seem workable, given what we’ve seen of Ulfr so far, I’d like to hear what SilverFox has to say.”

“If only it were that easy.” SilverFox stood up. “Okay, here’s what we have to work with. No body, so we presume all body parts will be taken to one location since Ulfr is planning to resurrect. What you boys saw in the old abandoned church was blood magic. It’s one of those cheats I was talking about earlier to you girls.” SilverFox glanced at Mary Lou and Carly. “He’s gathering power through death and being fed life through the blood of his sacrificial victims. I have to presume he will succeed and plan for the worst-case scenario.” She arched her eyebrow at Moira, who nodded agreement. Encouraged, she continued.

“So we have a body that is regenerating. I have to also assume all parts of the soul will come back together so that we will be dealing with one human and very pissed-off Viking with a large chip on his shoulder, able to wield deadly power of his own. He’s bad enough in death, but we’ll be facing him with all his faculties and on his home turf. At that point...” She looked at Kenneth pointedly. “The knife shouldn’t be a problem, and we can dispense with worrying about that unless he hasn’t regenerated when we go, in which case it’s a different circumstance altogether,” the priestess said. “That’s the bad news.”

The Shadow Angels all listened in rapt attention, supported by the coven sitting around them. Kenneth analyzed the situation as SilverFox outlined it. His gut told him he’d be leading this fiasco, so he’d better pay attention. Carefully, he weighed the pros and cons and came up with his own version of how he thought things would go.

“What’s the good news?” Rachel asked. “I’d like to have some of that for a change.” She sniffed, struggling not to cry.

“The good news is that if we get the spear, we have the upper hand. It will be something he wants. He may try to bargain for it,” the priestess said hopefully.

“Or he could just take the thing outright. You know?” Bryan said nervously. He laughed a little and looked around the room.

"That's possible," SilverFox conceded. "But if he's alive, it gives us a real weapon with which to strike him down," SilverFox continued speaking animatedly. "We also have magick, we have Ingegerd, and we have all of us to go in and create a distraction while the girls deal with him appropriately. Carly, since you are bound to it in some way, you will have to carry the spear and make the final strike. Since you have that to worry about, you can't be doing anything else, so the rest of us are your support team. We have to get you to where you need to be to do your job."

"How's magick going to help?" Bryan asked. "I know how all the psychic stuff works, but show me something concrete here. What we saw in there was bad enough to scare the pants off anybody."

"For real," Officer Stanley nodded. She'd been quiet up to now, but Bryan was articulating her own concerns.

"We call the Oathbreaker's Spell and cast a circle around the whole building. Because Mary Lou also carries the blood of the wronged and Ulfr himself, she should have the power to make it stick. The Oathbreaker's Spell will key to the broken promises to king, family, and country. Through that, we will pull the spirit realm and the mundane world together."

"If he's already regenerated, why do we need?" Kenneth began. He could follow her logic, but he wanted to make sure the holes were considered.

"To do it that way?" SilverFox asked.

"Yes," Kenneth said.

"Because we aren't just dealing with a live person. Ulfr is undead. That means to be alive; he exists in both the material world and the spirit realm. Even as he regenerates and 'lives,' portions of his spirit are not vulnerable to just plain death. He must be forced into a state where he's lost the protection of his immortality. How he gained it isn't important if we do this right," Medicine Bear commented. "I see now why my Native ancestors failed." He had his elbow on his knee and his head in his hand, thinking.

"They had no way of knowing, so they acted on their best guess the way they'd stop anyone else. Stick a knife in and expect him to die. Only they discovered it didn't work, so they deferred the problem for later by binding and burying the leftovers." He sat up straight and faced Moira. "They didn't have the knowledge needed, even with the Spirits guiding them, of how to deliver real death in this case."

“Speaking of binding, I believe you also have some of the beads, Medicine Bear?” SilverFox asked.

“Yes, I do,” he admitted.

“We should use those as necessary for protection as a last resort. I don’t want to use them too soon or carelessly. We also have CO-YO-TE and his avatar with us.” SilverFox smiled down at their four-legged friend. “He will go in with us for added protection.

“We will likely have to fight our way in physically as well as magickally,” Kenneth observed. “Those folks aren’t going to let us just waltz in there again.”

“Exactly!” SilverFox agreed. “That’s why we have you.” She smiled sweetly. “You protect the girls and get Mary Lou and Carly both where they need to be. The rest of us will provide support. Once the circle is cast with all of us inside it, we go in, kill Ulfr, get Sierra out and take the circle down. We’re done, no harm, no foul. Everything is all good once again.”

Kenneth couldn’t help laughing. “You do realize that the best-laid plans never survive the first engagement? That’s an age-old saying, and I’ve found it to be true. A dozen different things can go wrong here, and a lot revolves around ‘if.’”

“What also worries me is that the whole thing relies on me and my sister not screwing anything up!” Mary Lou complained. “What if we can’t find Sierra?”

“That’s one bridge we can’t cross until we get there,” SilverFox said. “Meanwhile, you and your sister are going to spend most of your waking life with me until we make sure you know how to work the shift of the mundane world to the spirit realm and how to manipulate things once you’re there.”

“There’s no time!” Mary Lou’s eyes were big with worry.

“There’s no choice,” SilverFox said firmly. “In this instance, you have to set aside free will for the good of the group. You can’t go in there without the training to do it the right way because all the rest of us will be depending on you. We will balance time and ability. You’ll just have to work hard and be a quick study. There’s not the time to be pretty about it, I agree, but I’m not sending you in unprepared!”

“As for your concerns, Ken, if you have a better plan, I am willing to listen,” SilverFox told him.

“No, I don’t have anything better. But we better be prepared for the unexpected,” he said. “If Ulfr really is a lich and as powerful as we think, he’ll have tricks up his sleeve. I wouldn’t put it past him based on what I saw with my own two eyes to be

able to do anything the storybook guys can do, including animate other undead. It's going to suck if so much fiction is actual reality."

"What?" SilverFox said. Her eyes grew round.

"Didn't plan on that one?" Kenneth asked acidly. "Truth is stranger than fiction, and you need to know your enemy better than that. I'm not borrowing trouble, but as Bryan noted, we've run into this guy, but you haven't. It's not going to be the picnic you're painting it. We're dealing with real demonic forces. It's not an airy-fairy wave the magic wand and make it all go away kind of deal."

"But," SilverFox stammered.

"Oh, I'm not saying this won't work. What I am saying is you need to plan on things not going your way more than you have already and be able to adjust accordingly," Kenneth said.

"I will take that into account," SilverFox said. She grew quiet and subdued, thinking.

"Folks, it's getting late," Moira told them. "You all are welcome to find a place to sleep here for tonight. I don't think there's much else to hash out until the spear is found. Worry about it tomorrow when you've all had some rest."

27

SHARP'S RIDGE

GTwo cars turned off Broadway at mid-morning and headed up the hill to the central portion of Sharp's Ridge and the park near the broadcast towers. The gray Chevy Celebrity led the way. Inside, Mary Lou was driving with her sister in the passenger seat and Kenneth in back. The other two followed in the black muscle car. "My car's fast. So I'm driving," Rachel had insisted. "I want to be able to go places in a hurry if something goes wrong."

"That's why all of us are going and not splitting up, Rach," Kenneth had said. "You planning to abandon us?"

"Not unless something comes after us," she replied.

"What a comforting thought," Mary Lou had smiled. "At least I know how to get there. I'll take us to the park at the top of the ridge."

When they arrived, both cars parked at the top of Sharp's Ridge overlook. The coyote exited the car behind Kenneth and practically plastered himself to his legs.

"At least we have a nice view," Bryan said as he stood looking out across the City of Knoxville. "Ken, this was your idea. You got any thoughts?"

"Nah," Kenneth answered and nearly tripped over the coyote. "Wait. On the other hand, maybe." He considered the coyote at his feet, who was whining softly as the rest of the Shadow Angels gathered around. "I think our friend here is trying to tell us something." Kenneth buried his hand in the fur at the coyote's neck.

"Some protector he's turning out to be," Bryan remarked with a half-smile.

"Shhh!" Kenneth held up his hand. "We need to work with him."

"It's ok, Bryan. You didn't see him at the cave. He can tell us what we need to know," Mary Lou spoke in his ear.

"Then where's the spear?" Bryan asked her loudly. "I'm getting goosebumps, and I don't want to stay here."

"Exactly," Kenneth said. "That's because you're picking up on what we came to find, although I think it's going to require Dythia here and our furry friend to locate."

"You don't have to use my Pagan nickname outside of the coven meetings," Carly told them. "Although I don't mind." She walked over to the coyote and bent down to look into his eyes.

"It fits you," came the reply.

She didn't answer him. Instead, she addressed the wild animal sitting nose to nose with her. "We need that spear," she told the coyote. "I know your kind are the tricksters of the animal kingdom, but we have to be serious now. Can you show me? Will you help me take Ulfr down for good?" Carly asked. "He killed my babies long ago."

The coyote flattened his ears and then lifted them. He licked the tip of her nose and stood up. She saw that his hackles were up from his neck to the base of his tail. He slunk bonelessly down the road toward the drop-off at the end of the ridge. A few cars passed them, turned around in the cul-de-sac, and drove back by. All were single men in cars who stared at them as they passed the teens. After walking a short distance following the coyote, the Shadow Angels came to the edge and stopped.

"I feel the wrongness. It's almost palpable in the air up here." Mary Lou said. Her sensitivity had gotten stronger in leaps and bounds with all the spiritual and energy work she'd been doing. "It's here. I can feel it like a shadow hanging over the city and extending across the whole valley."

"My goosebumps have goosebumps," Bryan complained as he rubbed his arms. "I'm not even cold."

"It's down there somewhere," Carly pointed. "The yucky feeling seems stronger on this side." The coyote gingerly stepped over the lip of the hill and carefully angled down. They found a narrow footpath there and followed him again. They passed a lot of scrub brush, trees, and copious amounts of various trash that had been thrown down over time and blown by the wind.

"Wouldn't it have been easier to walk up from the bottom than go down from the top?" Rachel whined. "It would have been a lot shorter walk. We're over halfway down!"

"If we'd known where to go, maybe." Mary Lou grimaced. She knew she'd have to walk back up the hill. Hopefully, her asthma wouldn't kick in. It was a good thing she was in shape from all the martial arts training. "On the other hand, where we're

parked, we won't get towed by the City of Knoxville. I heard the towing fees are practically ransom to get your car back."

"Come on, you guys, move your asses!" Kenneth was right behind Carly, following the surefooted canine along the steep trail. He looked around and saw the rest of his friends straggling behind. "We need to stay together, remember? No telling what we'll find, and we don't need anybody else grabbed up!"

The coyote crossed a stone outcrop and stopped at a jumble of rocks. He sniffed around, and impossibly his hackles raised even further. Growling low in his throat, he began to dig in an area of pebbles and stones.

Mary Lou came up behind him and realized the futility of what the coyote was attempting. It was her turn to take charge. "He can't do that by himself. We're going to have to help. Carly, see if you can make it over to the other side. Ken, you're taller than me. Can you reach that rock to move it and keep it from rolling over anybody when we get the rest of these shifted?"

Kenneth eyed the situation. "I think so, but if we aren't careful, this whole hillside could slide. No guarantees there."

"It can't be helped. Obviously, we have to get this thing out, and I don't see another way, do you?" Mary Lou said.

"Then let's do it," Kenneth replied. "There is no sense in standing around talking about it when we have a plan."

Over the next hour, they all carefully shifted rocks. The coyote insisted on digging. Before long, he was covered in gray limestone dust. He pulled back, sneezing when he'd dug halfway in under the large rock they had finally been able to move and allow to roll safely down the hill. He shook himself and slipped slightly. Kenneth grabbed for the coyote just as what he feared might happen, did. Forgetting his concern about the animal biting if grabbed, Kenneth put his arms around the coyote's neck and pulled him to the side just in time. A hole opened up with the loose stones and soil caving inward and the hillside above them slipped.

"Rockslide!" Mary Lou yelled. "Get free if you can!" She had been keeping one eye on the rock above them while they dug. She wasn't quite panicked. There was no time for being scared.

They were pummeled with loose gravel as they all tried to move far enough away that they wouldn't be caught and made to fall. Rachel was unlucky and slipped on the loose stones on the path. Bryan fell too while trying to catch her. For less than a minute, the side of the hill went downward. To the Shadow Angels, it seemed to take forever to stop.

"Is everybody okay?" Mary Lou yelled when everything was still. "Rachel, Bryan? Where are you?" Now she started to panic as it felt like her guts fell when she saw her friends were nowhere to be seen. Her sister had been able to safely jump out of the way she noted.

"Down here! We're a little worse for wear but otherwise not injured!" came the answer.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Mary Lou said. "Ken, are you and our coyote buddy ok?"

"I've got something in my eye," he replied. "My dignity is nowhere to be found, and our friend here got hit by a stone. Otherwise, we're ok." He let go of the coyote, spit, and snorted, trying to clear his nose and mouth of limestone dust. He wiped his eyes disgustedly.

Mary Lou's eyes got big and round. "What is that!"

Everyone went still. Shivers went up everyone's spine. A low moaning sound was emanating from the hole they had uncovered. It went on for several seconds, then something black and misty looking seemed to gather just inside the opening. It was hard to see clearly through the fine dust particles filling the air around them. The moaning stopped with a hiss, and the darkness dissipated like smoke hiding in the dust.

"Huh!" Kenneth said. "I've still got grit in my eyes. Did I just see that?" He blinked several more times.

"I don't think that was your imagination," Mary Lou said firmly. Her lips were a tight line.

He laughed briefly, but no smile touched his face. "Who's going in first?" he asked as the two people who had fallen downslope slipped and slid their way back onto the pebble-covered trail. Everyone gathered around, looking at the hole with dubious expressions.

"I still have my flashlight from our last cave trip if anybody wants it," Mary Lou reached into her pocket and held it out.

Kenneth took it from her. "Oh, don't expect anyone else to do what you'll have to do yourself anyway!" He rolled his eyes.

Mary Lou hung her head, looking sheepish. She would have to do better than this, she knew, if she was going to go up against the undead directly.

"No, Ken," Carly forestalled him. "Stop. Give me the light, and I'll look around. The spear is for me to take, so stalling isn't going to help. You guys stay out here in case there's another rock

slide. If the soil moves again and covers the entrance with all of us inside, who will know where we are to come find us?"

"Good point," Kenneth said and transferred the light to the youngest member in their group. "Just be careful," he added and pulled his own light out of his back pocket, grinning at Mary Lou's nonplussed look. "She's right. You guys move on out of the way and get to where you're safe."

"What about you?" Mary Lou asked him.

"I'll be fine," he said. "Fate is on my side." He laughed and moved up close behind Carly to shine his light inside. "Hmm. It's not very big, is it?"

"Doesn't appear to be," Carly answered. She looked around inside. "It's pretty much just a hole in the ground. I can't see anything amiss, so I'm going in."

"I'm right behind you," Kenneth told her.

Carly crawled in slowly. Carefully, she tried not to dislodge any more stones. It was almost big enough for her to stand up and about four times wider than she was tall. A lot of the loose debris from the cave-in covered what might be called a floor. Once inside, she could feel her skin practically crawling with disgust and the need to back out of there. Her breath hissed with anger as she felt it reaching for her soul. "I know you're here," she snarled. "I can feel you, and you aren't going to take me over the way you did our friend. I am going to ensure that your maker pays dearly for his crimes, and then I will see you destroyed if it's the last thing I do."

"Careful, Carly," Kenneth admonished from the entrance. "That thing will have you at that rate. Stay calm, find it and let's get out of here."

She raised one eyebrow. "You're one to talk about staying calm, with your temper! Hey, I see something!" she whispered urgently.

"Where?" Kenneth's light followed hers to a spot close to the back wall. "I see it too. Check it out and see what you come up with."

Carly dug handfuls of loose dirt and fine limestone pebbles away with her hands. Her efforts were rewarded as her fingertips touched something hard that was clearly not stone. Further digging revealed a round shape on top of a jumbled mound of other items. She picked it up.

"It's a battle shield," Carly said and lifted it up to set it aside. She also found the rusty remains of a sword that looked like it had been buried a thousand years, then bits and pieces of badly

damaged armor. When she had moved all the other items in the pile she sat back and stared at what she had come for.

Unlike the other items that had severely degraded, the spear's metal tip shone in the light, looking freshly forged. Its shaft glowed with a light of its own. The rune set into its end looked vaguely familiar. She was loathe to touch it.

Carly forced herself to reach out and grab it and promptly let go. "I found it!" she called to the others. "And a bunch of other stuff as well!" Carly could hear excited voices outside. Kenneth backed carefully out to tell the others in the group what was there. A couple of minutes later, he stuck his head back in.

"We should probably bring all of it," Kenneth told her. "We won't leave anything behind for anyone else to happen across. If there's beads, pick those up too. We'll take all of it to Moira, SilverFox, and Medicine Bear and let them worry about the stuff. The spear, we'd better not lose, I think. We'll keep a hold on that ourselves."

"That's exactly what I was thinking. I'm going to hand these out one at a time. Here, take this," she said, giving him the heavy shield by tipping it up and rolling it, then waited for him to pass it off to those outside.

One after another, the Viking's ancient worldly possessions were picked up from their burial chamber until only the spear was left.

The girl took hold of herself and picked the spear up again with a sigh. This time she didn't drop it, but she could feel and hear it whispering to her in her head. Resolutely, she closed it out, like shutting a trap door in her mind. She tried not to remember where and how she'd seen this spear before. That would come later, she told herself. For now, she had to get it safely to Roane County, and they could complete their plans to rescue Sierra and kill the lich. Then hopefully, their troubles would be over.

Carly made her way out by crawling backward and dragging the bulky spear behind her. Once outside, she could stand. She picked up the spear, placed it butt down on the ground, and looked at it in daylight. She gasped and nearly started to cry. The spear, buried for hundreds of years, was shiny to the light because it was still wet with the fresh blood of Ingegerd's children.

"Holy shit!" Bryan exclaimed. He came up to her and looked closely. "Who would have guessed? My God, it's still bloody! What is that thing?"

“Trouble,” Carly stated flatly.

“Ewwwe! That’s awful,” Rachel shied away. “I’m heading to the car. I don’t want any part of it.” She started up the trail ahead of everyone carrying the armor bits.

“Time to go,” Mary Lou declared. She grasped the shield more firmly and put it over her shoulder. The leather straps that were once attached to the shield had long ago rotted away. “Let’s get this stuff to a safe place.”

“Agreed,” Carly nodded. “C’mon, Ken.” She glanced at Kenneth. “Let’s go see what Moira has to say about it.”

“Good idea on that one,” he said. “Let’s see her explain this.” He shook his head. “Spear of Chaos, why am I NOT surprised?”



Far, far away in the belly of the underworld, chains rattled as spasms from the last dose of venom subsided. His faithful wife sat patiently with a bowl in her hands, protecting Loki from the worst effects of the poison dripping on him from the serpent above. It was a punishment that showed the depth of Odin’s godly displeasure with the trickster Master of Chaos.

“Soon,” the woman whispered soothingly. “Soon, Odin will pay for this, and you will rule Valhalla. The mortal rivers above us on the surface of the earth will run red with the blood of the followers of Light.”

“Maassttterrrr,” A whisper echoed darkly in the chamber. “I have news of the mortal realm.”

“What news?” the raspy voice asked.

“The spear. It has again seen the light of day.” A black mist, blacker than the darkness around it, coalesced out of thin air. “Children have discovered it.”

Silence stretched. Only the steady drip, drip from above, could be heard. Then bone-chilling gleeful laughter boomed out. “Excellent work. And what of my priest?”

“Ulfr yet lives, my Lord. He has been changed,” the spirit said.

“If he lives, that is enough. Keep watch and report back to me. If the spear is freed, it won’t be long before I am as well. When it is ready, ensure that it is brought to me here,” Loki ordered.

“Yes, Lord.” The Chaos Wraith rose like smoke and disappeared after acknowledging its orders.

Laughter again rang out and lasted long. It was cut off with a strangled cry as the bowl was pulled away to be emptied once again. Loki choked on a face full of venom. He cursed and shook. Above him, the earth responded in a series of minor earthquakes.



“**G**ood work!” SilverFox declared when they arrived back in Rockwood. “Now we have a chance. The Spirits never lie.”

“They may not lie, but trying to figure out everything they are telling us is another matter entirely. And, what if we’re wrong in the interpretation?” Mary Lou asked her.

“You just need to learn to interpret better,” SilverFox dismissed the question. “To ask ‘what if’ is never going to help you.”

Mary Lou’s eyes were red and puffy. She’d told her grandparents she was spending the weekend with friends. She didn’t tell them it was so she could concentrate on learning the ritual spellwork she needed. She’d been up all hours of the night and had gotten up early again this morning. The wording of the Oathbreaker’s Spell was drilled into her brain.

Repeatedly, SilverFox told her she must be able to ‘ground, center and shield’ while she did everything else. She’d gotten the hang of that too. Now, to learn to call the quarters and do it effectively. That was going to be the most crucial part, and it was left for last.

“Air, Fire, Water and Earth...” she practiced casting a circle. Once she had that down, she was shown how to aspect and channel the ritual energy from the ambient energy around her.

“The goddess will support you when you need it most,” SilverFox told her. “Reach for the higher feminine part of your inner consciousness, and you will find her Divine spark inside you,” she said.

“You are Woman, and therefore you carry the highest and most sacred power within you, given by our Creator God... the ability to create and nurture life itself. That kind of love cannot be taken from you. It is part of your nature. You are a portal to bring new souls into the world. This truth is why the priestess always stands in the center of the circle as the earthly representative of Divine Light. Your job is to channel it and represent this power in all magickal and spiritual endeavors.

When you can do this, you may stand strong with a priest at your side with equal respect and in balance.”

Mary Lou made a face. “I don’t trust guys very much. All they have ever done is hurt me. Why should I let anybody close enough to see who I really am inside? If I don’t feel anything and I keep everybody out, they can’t do any more damage.”

SilverFox came close and spoke softly. “You will grow eventually and find that balance in your heart. When you do, it will be a truly beautiful thing. For now, you need the counterbalance the goddess provides. She will help you heal and mature into yourself. Not all men are here to harm you. You’ll see. There are some men who like a strong, independent woman who carries the goddess within her.” The priestess patted her shoulder and hugged her.

“If you say so,” Mary Lou said.

“I do,” SilverFox replied. “Now, however, I think you are ready to face what Ulfr has to dish out, and your sister is ready as well. Ulfr is one male who doesn’t like women very much, and we’ll show him what we’re really made of!” she laughed.

“Carly and I have been working on the astral side of things while you work on the magickal parts. The good news is that you’ve been taught to fight. As a warrior, we won’t have to worry about your safety as much as hers.

She will be limited in what she can do because she’ll have the spear. But once the two planes of existence are merged, she’s got the strength to take control. She will have to,” SilverFox said seriously.

“There’s a lot that can go wrong. Kenneth is right on that,” Mary Lou observed.

“Yes, he was right. But I can’t see how that changes anything about working our side of things. Come on, let’s go on in the house. Moira has cooked us up a good dinner, and we’ll lay whatever final plans we need,” SilverFox said.

“Who all is going besides us Shadow Angels, you and Medicine Bear?” Mary Lou asked.

“The whole coven is coming along for support,” came the answer. “All of us will channel energy to you and your sister. Also, I heard this afternoon that the police officers are quietly talking to select others and will be bringing along an escort.”

“That will work out then if the local Sheriff’s Dept. gets wind of things,” Mary Lou said. “And in this case, the more, the merrier. I hope that Sierra is okay.”

Mary Lou Wells

“We’ll get her back, surely. It’s only going to take two or three more days, and everything will be in place,” SilverFox said as they went up the stairs onto the deck.

“I’m ready to go kick Ulfr’s ass now!” Mary Lou complained.

SilverFox nodded. “It is understandable that you are impatient. But as I’ve already told you, we have to follow the plan so everybody knows what they’re meant to be doing and we don’t lose anyone else. We don’t want you going over there half-cocked. Hopefully, I don’t have to tell you not to approach astrally either. Ulfr walks the Spirit realm as well as the material world. We need you safe, sound, and ready when it’s time.”



28

THE RECKONING

WEDNESDAY, JULY 16, 1985, ROCKWOOD MOUNTAIN
WILDLIFE PRESERVE

Late afternoon thunder rumbled distantly across the plateau as the mountain updrafts joined with the 91-degree heat and summer humidity to spawn scattered storms. However, nothing threatened close by as the Shadow Angels and their allies crept silently through the woods, converging toward their goal.

With the seriousness of the situation, they moved much more quickly than they might have otherwise. Kenneth prayed the strategy they'd cobbled together last minute would hold. He knew there was no choice at that point but to trust that his companions would do what they were supposed to. He mused that things would go very bad in a hurry if not. He couldn't hear them but could sense Mary Lou and Carly still with him somewhere behind. Their quiet competence assured him somewhat. The girls could handle themselves. He wasn't as sure about the coven coming in from the opposite direction.

Moira had assured him they'd be needed as backup in case everything else went to hell in a handbasket. They were there to help hold the circle while the rest were distracted.

Then, of course, there were the cops. There were too many people and too many things that could go wrong. At least one of the officers was also a trained pagan priest. He was level-headed, so they should be able to come in without guns blazing and ruining everything. They were with the coven, so he was only somewhat worried that his objections would be realized. His caution to SilverFox was uppermost on his mind. Their best-laid plans could go out the window in a hurry. He had avoided the other cops, especially when he'd seen Officer Baer from a distance. There was still no love lost between them.

Professor Holderman was with the other two Shadow Angels since the person who'd typically key the third part of that triad was locked inside the church they were aiming for. The shaman led the other approach. Rachel and Bryan would have to protect him while he took care of business.

Mentally, Kenneth ticked off the minutes as he waited. The two girls on his team came up beside him, where he crouched behind a fallen log in a blackberry patch. He looked around at them, put his fingertip to his lips, and shook his head. Both nodded. They knew not to speak before it was time. Mary Lou was to be the one to approach first. As the Shadow Angel with the most varied training and flexibility, she had the most to do to start the ball rolling.

Looking at her, Kenneth realized just how far she had come in a year. In spite of her issues, she had gained confidence and determination. What she was had always been there. She'd only needed a chance to find herself. Mary Lou seemed to hear his thoughts, for she turned and shot him an amused wink. She turned her face back toward the building they were watching, now all seriousness.

Kenneth experienced a brief tingle of recognition as the coyote silently came up behind him. As soon as they'd piled out of the cars earlier, their four-legged friend had made himself scarce. However, they hadn't worried about the animal, as it was the coyote's habit to come and go on his own schedule.

Kenneth ran his hand through the fur on the coyote's neck as the animal sniffed his ear. When the teen turned and blew in the coyote's nose, he snapped playfully in the air. Kenneth grinned. He'd found himself getting fond of the coyote, unpredictable and playful as he was. Nevertheless, he didn't allow himself to forget the animal's nature. Kenneth put his finger to his lips. "Shhhh," he whispered softly and turned his attention back to what Mary Lou was doing. Carefully so as not to alert their target, he extended a supporting thread of energy toward his friend.



Mary Lou sensed that the correct time was approaching. Carefully, she shifted the swords on her hip and adjusted her clothing to be sure nothing was loose enough to catch on the foliage and betray her presence before she was ready. She felt inside her wrapped top to be sure her athame knife was still strapped securely. It wouldn't do to lose that at the last minute.

She also waited with her senses open for the mental click that would tell her everyone was in place. In the meantime, as Kenneth had done, she checked over her companions.

Carly was the only one of them not in black or camouflage. Her red tunic stuck out like a sore thumb, a gift from Moira, who surprisingly also enjoyed sewing. The ruby at her neck, of course, was powerful enough by itself to be a beacon right to their position. In her hand, Carly held the spear that was to be their trump card. It hummed with black power. She could see Carly resist the urge to wipe her hands. Its evil made one feel dirty just touching it, and it practically called out with its own voice. It wouldn't take long for their undead to notice its presence. Mary Lou was irritated that they had to be the team holding the spear, but it couldn't be any other way. They had to keep possession of this last artifact at all costs.

Kenneth was dressed in loose clothing of mixed black and camo. He was practically bristling with weapons she both could and couldn't see. He was giving her another one of his piercing looks. She grinned back at him.

Mary Lou finally felt the mental 'go-ahead.' It was time for the frontal approach. If all went well, they would be able to rescue Sierra and eliminate the demon lich's influence forever. She felt no fear as she rose from a crouch and set her feet on the trail leading directly to the dilapidated church. She had already faced her own demons, and they were worse than anything this 'creature' could dream up. Her companions stayed put for the time being.



Mall was eerily quiet as Mary Lou approached the church. A healthy dose of adrenaline pumping through Mary Lou's veins readied her and put all of her senses on alert. Suddenly, crows in the treetops sounded the alarm. As she rounded the last curve leading to the front of the church, screaming erupted from beyond the graveyard. Three repeating pistol shots echoed sharply. "Damn!" Mary Lou cursed under her breath. They were supposed to wait. What were the officers doing firing their guns? They'd been told! Well, she had her own job to do. It was too late to go back now.

Mary Lou approached the front steps of the church and stopped. Here, she confronted their thousand-year-old enemy. She examined him closely.

Ulfr was regenerating. The power sustained by his illicit theft in the Other-world was enough to regain him the semblance of living flesh over his aged bones. Sierra's traitorous act had given him the final piece needed to start the process. Mary Lou didn't blame her, of course.

This 'thing' was both an undead and an energy vampire. It had the power to bring abject terror, corrupt, kill by psychic means, and they had also seen that it could take over an unguarded mind. It also had access to the old heathen magicks. They'd been warned Ulfr would be difficult to kill, and it would be all too easy to be entrapped. No matter, Mary Lou thought, we're not without our own methods! She heard more pistol fire in the background and winced. Not those methods, she mentally shouted at the idiot firing. What the hell are they doing?



“**O**h my god!” Officer Diane Stanley groaned on the other side of the property from where Mary Lou faced Ulfr directly. “Put your sidearm away! It’s not going to do you any good!”

She didn’t bother with the nicety of adding ‘sir’ to her statement. Her fellow officer was white as a sheet as he emptied his pistol into a nightmare straight out of late-night cable T.V.

“Mulligan! Stop!” Diane demanded. She was close to sobbing but forced herself to hold together. The boy she had failed to save just a few weeks before had just taken hold of Officer Baer and, with the help of two other animated corpses, torn him to pieces.

Contrary to the plan, the officers recruited to help with the assault on the cult’s headquarters had dug their heels in when they saw the group of civilians prepared to accompany them.

“What are they doing here?” Officer Baer had asked loudly and rudely. “We don’t need help from unarmed civilians!” he’d declared. No amount of explaining their role had convinced Diane’s colleagues that the Wiccan coven had any place there, much less the teens involved. “This is a matter of police investigation, and we can arrest anyone who interferes.” As a result, the coven was a few hundred yards behind and unable to help when disaster struck.

Diane had been expecting something to happen. By that time, she’d seen enough death to toughen her up for anything, or so she thought. Even Diane was unprepared for the putrid grisly sight that came up under their noses. She paused while her stomach rebelled. She wished offhand for a drink to rinse her

mouth as she finished throwing up and grabbed hold of Mulligan. “Guns’re not gonna work,” she gasped as she repeated herself while bent over. “This is black magick. They aren’t alive,” she pointed out.

They were standing in the graveyard behind the church. Resolutely, Diane pulled her baton. She pressed her sour mouth into a firm line. “Fine, then. C’mon suckers! Let’s see how you deal with having your heads and legs busted in! Can you walk then?” Diane challenged, and her terrified fellow officer followed suit. Quickly they were surrounded as they moved back-to-back, looking for an opening to break free or take their adversaries out.

“What do we do?” Deputy Mulligan asked as the animated mob came closer.

“We fight,” Officer Diane Stanley declared.



Ghe demon undead grinned at Mary Lou. Distraction had cost her dearly, and the lich beckoned to her, urging the girl inside. There was an incredible pull on her mind and body. An internal battle of wills raged while neither moved. Mary Lou found herself losing, and she found herself nearly at the bottom step. She’d better do something fast!

A throwing star whizzed by her face and buried itself in the middle of the creature’s chest. The diversion allowed Mary Lou to break free and throw up her shields around her mind. She reminded herself to thank Kenneth later, as there was no mistaking who owned that particular weapon. She heard running footsteps behind her and realized they had faded around the corner. He’d go where he was needed. She wasn’t worried about him or her sister at that moment.

“I don’t like you!” The statement sounded slightly uninspired even to her, but she kept talking as she grounded herself for what she had to do next. “I am your daughter, you know, several generations removed. I have Norse Viking blood through Ingegerd’s princess Aesa. I believe you’ve forgotten a detail, sir,” Mary Lou laughed. She began to speak the lines that would key the Oathbreaker’s Quatrain and anchor their magic in the material world. They could all be pulled into the otherworld permanently without that anchor when they expanded the Gate inside the church to include the whole area. With so little time, she would have to manage both things simultaneously.

“Cursed by a king...” Mary Lou pulled her athame ritual knife drew the sigil for the elemental archetype of air above her head. It hung between her and the undead, outlined in a faint blue fire only visible to those with the ‘Sight’. “I call the Watchtower of the East! Spirit of Air, come to this circle and bring clarity of thought to anchor our purpose!” Facing east, she made a throwing motion, and a golden pillar of light appeared.

Agitated, the undead half turned as if he were to go inside. He turned back and raised his hand, pointing at the girl facing him down. Mary Lou didn’t waver.

“Hounded by Fate...” She next drew the sigil for fire with her knife. “I call the Watchtower of the South! Spirit of Fire, come to this circle with passion and anchor our desire!” A hundred yards south of the building, a pillar of red light appeared.

Ulfr, seeing the first real threat to him in centuries, still hesitated. He was confused. This was a magick unlike any he’d encountered. The girl said she was of Scandanavian descent, his own flesh and blood, yet she used no runes of power! Still, she was no match for him, and he was used to living between the worlds, half in the material realm and half inside the other world. Let’s see how this mortal daughter dealt with the full extent of his power! He didn’t shrink at killing his own.

Mary Lou felt a bone-deep chilling cold quickly fill her limbs. She doubled over, wracked with physical pain, fear and cold. She looked up to see her enemy with hand outstretched and a triumphant smile on his skeletal face. Or at least she thought it was a smile. It was hard to tell since there was so little flesh there to make one. The empty eye sockets bored into her soul, and she felt herself starting to fade. Mary Lou fell to her knees, gasping for breath and her eyes watering. This was an energy attack, she knew, but stopping it! Gods! No wonder Sierra and her friend Tyrone fell to this bastard! But... she... would... not bend knee... to this evil!

“If you thought I didn’t know you were coming, you were mistaken,” Ulfr hissed at the upstart girl on the ground. “I’ve killed greater enemies than you, and I know your plans.” Hatred was palpable in the hollow voice.

“You don’t know my plans, you evil coward!” she continued through gritted teeth. “Sierra doesn’t even know. So, bite me!” she spat at him.

“Thaaat, can be arrangeddd,” Ulfr drawled. Mary Lou grew weaker the longer she engaged her undead ancestor and the stronger he became.

Furious, she drew her katana, and in a single smooth lightning-quick slice, she severed the length of staff in his hand into two pieces. The cold attack withdrew, and Ulfr bellowed. “You will pay, you skraeling scum!”

Still, Mary Lou faced him without fear. She wondered, however, how her companions were faring as she heard multiple screams. Hopefully, they were doing better than she was, but it didn’t sound promising. She still had to get the second half of that circle up, or else! She raised her knife, blade down this time, and knees firmly planted on bare earth, her sword resheathed at her side. Time to raise the stakes and get her momentum back! She began to pull power mentally as she plunged the blade of her athame knife straight downward.



Meanwhile, Kenneth, ever so pessimistic about this plan from the beginning, saw that it wasn’t going well at all. It was originally his suggestion that they all come to kill the bad guy. However, he still preferred his first inclination to go down the street and gather up the local boys and their shotguns and take care of this the way good ole’ boys take care of business. He was ready to kick butt and take names, but this was ridiculous!

After he’d distracted the demon lich long enough for Mary Lou to start keying the Oathbreaker’s Curse, he’d ran around the corner straight into this mess. Kenneth barely had time to register the situation before he was up to his eyeballs in zombies and minions. He drew a sword.

“What the fu..? Damn it!” His first strike fell flat due to surprise and his adversary’s inability to feel pain. “Carly, stay close and watch it!”

“Crap!” Carly was surprised into cursing too when she saw what they faced.

At their side, the coyote yipped excitedly. He leaped with fangs bared and pulled Kenneth’s target off its feet. After going for two more, the coyote pulled back and pricked his ears, hearing something only he could pick up. He yipped again and took off, running at an angle toward the hillside.

Kenneth didn’t pause to look where their four-legged companion had run off to. He was too busy fighting as he noted the other team’s position in the graveyard.

The sword worked, he found, if you cut their heads off, mostly at least. Blunt objects to the head permanently stopped

them as Bryan's effort with a staff attested from what he could see through the press. You had to bust them up pretty good to be effective. He didn't bother pulling his pistol to deal with the corpses. That would only be effective against the living. He swung in an arc, getting two at once and nearly gagged as ick went everywhere. "Arggh! This crap better come off my new shoes!" Kenneth snarked.

Crack! Crack! Bryan smacked one down and then worked his way through the grabby mess toward Kenneth. Maybe they could manage paired up! Bryan joined Kenneth and Carly, who was using the blunt end of the spear to good effect. What she hit stayed down and didn't move again.

"We suspected there would be undead because of the lich, but I didn't imagine it would be this bad!" Bryan grimaced, wrinkling his nose.

"This is like a bad 'B' movie...or a roleplaying game!" Kenneth complained to Bryan. Corpses were coming up out of the ground, shedding dirt, ripping cloth, and creating a nightmare scene worse than anything they imagined they'd face. Knowing intellectually what they might face hadn't really prepared them for this.

"This is supposed to be reality! Somebody forgot to read these things the rules that they aren't supposed to be up walking around," Bryan agreed. "Read them their Miranda rights... hey, you're all under arrest!"

"You got any dice on you?" Kenneth asked.

"Why?" Bryan asked.

"Maybe we can roll a 'turn undead!'" Despite themselves, they laughed. The levity helped ease the freak-out factor of their situation. When Kenneth realized it, he kept up a running commentary. "Here, Bryan!" He pulled his second sword and handed it over. "It's faster!"

A dry skull went flying. "Booyah! Natural twenty with a vorpal sword! Ha-ha! Sucked to be you!" Kenneth exclaimed.

Their blades cut the air and connected. Back to back, with Carly helping, they worked on clearing a path through a group of animated corpses. They worked their way toward Rachel, Medicine Bear, and the coven through the maze of jumbled memorial stones and fallen statues. Kenneth realized the police officers were cut off, and they wouldn't be able to get to them. Confusion reigned in the other group, and the vocal complaints mounted.

"Ugh! These things are disgusting... hey watch yourself!"

“Smack it in the face - kill it!”
“Oh God, they stink!”
“Ewwwww... it’s on me... gross!”
“Aim for their heads!”

Some of their opponents wore white robes, and their faces were melting. Others were simply mostly bone. It was enough to make the skin crawl and make them all want to run for their lives. There was a sick scent in the air reminiscent of putrid meat.

“Omigod! Undead sure smell like plain ole’ dead!” Kenneth silently agreed with whoever was complaining about the smell. Some of these things had to be practically fresh. How many people had the demon killed recently?

“Don’t back down!” Bryan yelled. “We can’t give up to these freaks... there’s too much at stake!” Slice! Smack! He hit one with the flat of the blade and sent it flying. “Everyone, head toward the front of the building! We need to get clear!” All of them could see first-hand the importance of winning. However, they were losing people, unable to deal with the sheer numbers the demon lich could command.

“Get me out of here!” Rachel was down and hurt, unable to walk on a sprained ankle. She finally lost her nerve. “I can’t deal with this. Get me out!” she screamed in full panic. “No! Stay away from me!” She tried to hit one coming up behind her and missed.

With no choice but to keep fighting for her life, Rachel spun around on the ground and knocked her white-robed attacker off its feet. It kept coming, and she sobbed and stabbed at it until she finally crushed something vital enough to make it lay still.



Ghe rest were still trying to give a good account of themselves. The Medicine Man had gotten separated, but the main cluster of undead was not focused on him. He found himself a sturdy branch and was hitting the monsters from behind. Luckily, these things weren’t bright! With sudden inspiration, he fought his way over to where a downed officer’s pistol lay on the ground. Medicine Bear picked it up, belt and all, and wrapped it around himself.

“They are after the spear!” Carly yelled. Their enemies had suddenly changed tactics. Carly managed to hold on to it, though it was nearly ripped from her grip multiple times.

“Ah hell!” Kenneth cursed. “Get the fuck off her, you bastards!” He attacked and attacked again.

"Get closer!" Kenneth suggested. "We have to protect her no matter what!" Despite the close quarters, the fighters closed ranks around her. It was making for a serious stalemate. "Mary Lou better do something soon."

Someone in the midst of the coven started shouting. It was a male voice, the priest? At least somebody hadn't lost his nerve. The pagan priest, also being a veteran police officer, was hard to shake. Moira's priest was trying to organize something inside the melee.

"We've got to try something different! We don't have room to breathe, and we can't keep this up! Join hands. We'll fight magick with magick!" The rhythm of the battle changed as the coven began chanting. Their adversaries slowed.

Try as he might, Kenneth couldn't see Moira anywhere. Was she gone? If so, he didn't give a hill of beans for their chances. He looked around, taking quick stock of their situation. It looked poor indeed. "Where's a god when you need one?" he complained.

As if that was a signal, a mass of gray fur ran at full speed as they noisily yipped their way down the hill. A handful of the coyote pack split off from the rest and began working their way to Kenneth. A greater number slammed directly into the mass of undead that had trapped the stranded police officers. Smoothly, they flanked them in a standard pack hunting maneuver which effectively channeled the undead together enough to give the living a chance to fight more effectively.

Still panicked and sure he was going to die, Deputy Mulligan saw the unknown pack of canines as an additional threat. He drew his sidearm and took aim at a nearby coyote. Officer Stanley realized at the last minute what was happening. No!" She grabbed Mulligan's weapon just as it went off. "They are trying to help, you idiot!"

A yelp from the pack indicated that the bullet did not entirely miss. Diane realized that one of the pack was down and fought her way to stand over the injured coyote. Resolutely, she wielded her stick to protect them both. Never one to pray before, Diane found her cheeks wet with tears as she openly prayed to whatever Power might hear and help them. Mulligan was down and not moving, yet Diane didn't give up. Finally, nothing else came at her, and she nearly keeled over. When she could breathe again, Diane bent down and ran her hand through the fur of the coyote.

"Damn!" She recognized the pet coyote that had accompanied the teens so faithfully. She put her hand on his ribs.

He was breathing shallowly and whimpering. “Let’s get you to a Veterinarian,” Diane whispered to him. She looked around. They were free of the press as the rest of the pack took care of business.

“You saved my life. Don’t you dare die on me now!” She tried to pick him up and realized he was too heavy for her to lift. “Hang on, buddy. Help will come.”



Sword and stick flashing, Kenneth and Medicine Bear finally sliced enough of an opening in the thick of battle for Bryan to reach Rachel. Carly was right behind him as they joined up with the coven. At least they might be able to add some protection while they did whatever it was that they were doing. It was working, at least! The undead had started turning around rather than continuing to grab at them. With relief, Kenneth saw that Carly still had the spear.

“Now’s our chance! We need to get to the church! If I can’t get inside, I can’t do anything!” Carly spoke with imperative.

“But Mary Lou hasn’t given the signal!” Kenneth objected.

“She will. You can bet on it. Besides, we don’t have any choice but to trust her to hold up her end. Just get me to that door. My sister will be there when we need her.”



Mary Lou closed her eyes and screamed, not in fear but in anger. “You are NOT going to win!” Both hands were on her knife, the blade of which she had plunged into the dirt. As it began to ground out Ulfr’s psychic energy attacks, her awareness went to the rumbling they’d heard over the mountain just a little while earlier.

As she pulled on it with her will, the wind rose, shaking the branches of the surrounding trees. The sky darkened to a gray-green color as the thunderstorm blew in. This was old magick she was doing and it was simple enough that this demon would have no trouble manipulating the weather... except that she had gotten there first and had a purpose. Unlike her previous attempt at controlling the weather, this storm was hers! Looking up, she could see the roiling clouds above them.

SilverFox had taught her to see the ancient elemental guardians more clearly, and she could feel their strength reaching out to mingle with hers. Lightning flashed pink over the

mountaintop. The kinetic energy she now controlled gave her more than enough strength to fight off the last of Ulfr's draining energy attack. She didn't have to use her own life force to finish!

"Hunted by your enemies!" Mary Lou continued, stronger. She drew the sigil for water in the air with her hand. "I call the Watchtower of the West! Spirit of Water, come to our circle with depths of love, anchor our need!" On the western edge of the clearing, a pillar of blue light appeared. The clouds above also opened up and began pouring rain. Thunder rumbled near constantly and the sky darkened. The Oathbreaker's Spell was nearly complete.

"With blood debt owed to your own flesh!" She drew the sigil for earth, finalizing the last anchor point. "I call the Watchtower of Earth! Spirit of Earth, come to our circle to witness the rebirth of these souls, anchor us with your healing ray!" Mary Lou threw her hands up as the green pillar of light appeared near where they had entered to the north.

"Now! I name you an Oath-breaker, kin-killer, and by the hand of your daughter, your deeds must come to reckoning!" She rose, burning, glowing to Ulfr's demonic senses with the sheer amount of energy filling her being. What had she just done? He backed away from the three-foot curved length of bright steel she drew easily. He was not afraid, but he would go into his own space where he had the advantage. Stepping through the door, he shut it in her face. No matter, she laughed in triumph. She'd achieved her goal, and it was a partial victory.

Turning, she saw the rest of the group coming up behind her. She noticed Rachel was supported by two of the coven. Her sister was there with the spear. Good. She eyed them critically. Bryan was panting and wiping a smear of blood off his forehead. Medicine Bear was limping and looked grim but was resolutely preparing weapons in his own way. The pagan priest drew the Medicine Man aside and talked earnestly to him. The Shaman would have help she saw.



Kenneth looked tired but unhurt. He was finishing what looked to be a Golden Delicious apple. He could eat at a time like this, in this mess? Ah well, she knew guys were almost always hungry.

She looked around again. She nodded at them, relieved that everyone seemed to be mostly in one piece.

"We can do it now!" she said. "We can start the shift since I have it anchored." She looked at her little sister. "We're only

partway there. You ready sis? We don't have to stand around in the rain." She smiled in grim satisfaction.

Carly nodded. It hadn't been easy getting as far as they had. She carried holy power as an invisible mantle around her. She was Seeress and Priestess. Had she lived in ancient Greece or Rome, she would be honored as an Oracle. In Russia, she would carry the title of Shaman. Were she an official member of a Native tribe, she would be a medicine woman, a healer. Were she older, she would be a charismatic Minister. But, because she was of mixed blood and simply a young American, she fought an ancient evil unrecognized and unremarked in her culture.

At the age of nearly thirteen years, Carly was already wiser than many women three times her age. Her companions did not doubt her. Most importantly, she also carried the blood of Ulfr 'Kin-killer,' and her dreams revealed that she also carried the soul of her long-ago ancestor, who had lain in childbed cursing her tormentor. Fate had promised that the gods would hear. She had come full circle.

"I'm ready." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly to calm her nerves. "Go ahead and open the door." She paused and added, "If Sierra is still alive, I'll get her out of there."

No one was directly inside the door as it opened. When it opened, however, reality turned and warped. Mary Lou and the coven had cast the circle and created a bubble, a power shield around and within it. The Shaman chanted and commanded the Spirits beyond the Veil to stay back. It would be all too tempting for other things to try to come through, and they didn't need more problems.

The other-world touched the material realm, and the light took on the cast of twilight, neither day nor night. Without the anchor to Earth that Mary Lou had cast, they would all be lost. Thunder came as if from a distance, yet it continued to rain with a light mist rather than the downpour all around their space. The church and grounds all moved elsewhere within the boundaries of the pillars of the four directions. The Shadow Angels and their allies were everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Carly would face the ancient enemy as he had been in life. She would face the demon alone in his own Hall while her companions held them firmly in this space between worlds.

The young girl walked through the door resolutely carrying the spear as the ancient kings would carry it, as a right of rulership. The ruby hanging on her throat glowed brightly with

the power of Holy Light. The consecrated stone would help shield her. She mentally thanked Moira for the gift of the gem.



Because of the special circumstances of shifting the material plane to the other world and merging the two, the rules and environment of both worlds would apply for the duration. Physical objects and people could freely exist in the spirit world while the world of spirit could cross over within the boundary. The Shadow Angels had planned for that. Carly knew another benefit. Walking in the astral realm meant she could manipulate her environment as a potter manipulates clay.

The same rules applied to everyone else within the boundary she knew, but would Ulfr realize it as well? He'd been immortal for ten centuries. During that time, his thoughts were shaped by the nature of his existence. The Shadow Angels had been walking the astral planes and were becoming masters at controlling that environment within its rules. However, Ulfr was unused to physical reality. Perhaps she would have an edge.

Carly took several steps into the room. Her clothing changed at a thought to a loose and comfortable flowing red robe with silver trim. A silver circlet bound her hair, which shifted from her usual golden brown to deep red tresses that fell down her back. Youth dropped away from her. Carly appeared aged another fifteen years and with the full bloom of womanhood upon her. All eyes turned toward her commanding presence.

"Ingegerd, my princess, my queen... so nice of you to join us. We were just about to finish up." A man stood on a dais beside a large stone altar at the other end of the people-lined hall. A prone female was laid out across its flat surface. It was the man who had spoken. Carly nodded with satisfaction. In the heat of the moment, the confusion she'd hoped for seemed evident in the response.

"And just what are we going to be doing today?" she asked sweetly.

"We are going to serve the Master," came the reply.

"I see." Carly/Ingegerd looked to the man's left on the dais for the one who spoke. A young dark-skinned man stepped forward. The description of this one matched the description of Sierra's friend. Her eyes turned to the female on the altar. She was barely recognizable as Sierra. Her eyes looked blankly upward as if she saw something far away.

"And how are we serving the master?" Carly asked.

"He is giving my woman a gift, and we will be together forever."

To her Sight, a black oily ripple surrounded the girl's body. Carly was repulsed by the suggestion that being possessed by this monster could possibly be a gift.

She looked up at her ancient nemesis. He was splendid in the flesh, every inch the Viking warlord. Tall, with flowing black hair and black eyes, his curling mustache and goatee accentuated his strong nose. His broad shoulders and rippling muscles hinted at a life of action. It was illusory, she knew. Ulfr imagined himself as he was in life, so it was as if he had never perished. His heart beat, and his blood filled his veins. He was vulnerable for the first time in a thousand years. Did he know?

"Ulfr," she acknowledged with a mocking bow. "Descendant of Cnut, cousin to King Harald, my uncle twice removed. You have much to answer for. This girl," she gestured toward Sierra, "is not yours to take."

"You and I have unfinished business, bitch." Ulfr's tone changed, and he raised his hand. His lackey raised a knife and began to plunge it toward Sierra's chest in response.

"Not so fast," Carly purred. With a flick of her wrist toward the altar, Sierra transformed into her primary totem and woke to full alertness. The knife struck sparks against the stone as it missed. Fangs sank into Tyrone's wrist as the rattlesnake pumped venom into his arteries. That was a shame. She would like to have saved him also, but she could see now that Tyrone was too far gone. Even without the demon's influence, he would be a danger to himself and others.

Tyrone's body stiffened, and he howled out loud. When the serpent let go, bedlam broke out in the church. Followers of the dark power represented by their 'Master' were shocked out of their silent stupor. Someone dared to challenge him!

"She was never yours to take Tyrone. The woman chooses her mate, as is right and proper. You cannot possess what isn't yours through heartfelt love."

Tyrone fell whimpering behind the altar. They all knew he wouldn't last very long. Behind her, Carly heard fighting erupt. She smiled at Ulfr, not because of the loss of the evil dead's assistant, but because she knew her companions were in full support, battling the living cultists. "This time, the odds are a bit more even, I think. And yes, we do have unfinished business."

She spun the spear and turned in a quick circle to strike her enemy down. Only he wasn't there.

Reality shifted again, only this time the whole area twisted and changed. Their environment reflected the same dark underground barrow where Ulfr had committed his original crimes. The fires backlit the burning dead and the forge in the pit. The children were laid out with wide, terrified eyes, waiting to be killed again.

Carly/Ingegerd nearly came undone as the remembered dream tried to play out for her. But her spirit had done its mourning. In spite of the tears on her cheeks for the loss of her babies, Ingegerd's portion of her soul took over the fight. It was her battle. She had been promised her reckoning, and she was ready to claim it.

When a flashing broadsword came at her from the darkness, the spear was there to meet it. She could feel the spear's hunger, its desire to drink blood once more. The remembered pain of watching this same weapon buried in her daughter was a distraction, but she fought as her Viking blood bid her fight. Parry and counter parry, strike and thrust they battled. Finally, however, the Viking's greater size and strength gave him a blow that knocked the princess/priestess off her feet. She rolled out of the way of the sword. She jumped to her feet and ran outside with the spear still in hand. Ulfr followed.

The cultists clashed with the Shadow Angels and the coven. This time, the fight was fairer since she had Ulfr distracted. Quickly looking around, Carly saw the professor, who was largely keeping out of the way. An idea and a plan began to form. Ulfr was too large. She couldn't get to him by simply fighting him. She would need the means to cheat. She caught Medicine Bear's eye and motioned to the top of the mound. He nodded.

"Shift it again!" she yelled to him. "You control it and confuse him! We'll bring him down at the falls!"

With a turtle shell and components suddenly manifest in his hand, Medicine Bear began to chant in his native language. He'd need only moments to trance, but Ulfr was right behind Carly.

With not a moment to spare to wait, she transformed into her totem, the golden eagle, and holding the spear firmly in her talons, winged to the top of a tree. In response, her pursuer changed into a wolf.

"You are still my woman, and I will have you, this time forever. I'll grant you power, and you can sit with me beside our Lord Loki. You cannot sit there indefinitely Ingegerd. It is fate. I

hold all the pieces of the puzzle, and you may only shine at my side. Together, we can bring the world to its knees. We will rule the world, Lady, you'll be Queen. Loki has promised me the Kingship. He has promised the return of the Old Ways that we may kick out all usurpers and take over by divine right!"

"Are you even hearing yourself?" she asked him. "You are not making any sense at all. Besides, Loki never gave anyone anything. I wonder, 'priest,' did you read the fine print on your contract?" She shook her head. "What part of trickster, and not in a good way, I might add, did you miss?"

"He promised when I release him that I would sit at his right hand, a symbol of rulership!" Ulfr stood dark and handsome, his wolf pelt shining, confident in his purpose and mission. He knew that there was no way he could lose. God had promised! He laughed a smirking bark.

Carly thought for a moment. Suddenly it struck her with a horrible sinking feeling. Had they made a tremendous mistake? In solving one problem, were they creating another? But Loki was the master of the double entendre and loved speaking in riddles. It wasn't always clear until an event was past what it was that he meant.

"Oh my god!" She nearly let go of the spear and fell out of the treetop when it hit her. "Shit, shit, shit!" What were they to do now? They could not kill him with the spear, yet it was the only weapon they had that could. But they would be trading one evil for a greater one. If only she had known the letter of the contract before this!

Carly/Ingegerd had seen the spear consume the bodies and souls of innocents. She screamed in anger with the voice of the Eagle. What cruel irony that in all these centuries, the one thing that could cleanse the world of this evil would then be able to cause the ultimate end of mankind! Ragnarok, Armageddon! The final ultimate battle of the gods and men! That's what Loki was really after, his freedom to start the war. To get free, Loki had to have this literally gods damned spear! She looked with contempt and pity on Ulfr.

"You've been tricked, priest!" She wanted to weep. "And we are your fools," she said softly out of his hearing.

Hesitating only another moment, she spread her wings. Crying the unfairness of the universe to the sky at her feather tips, she rose on the thermals and then plunged toward the earth. She wanted to fling the spear as far from her as possible, but

instead, she held fast to it. At the last moment, she spread her wings and settled to earth in front of the wolf.

What was she doing? Ulfr was puzzled about what she meant. He'd been tricked? Instead of attacking her, he waited for the explanation.

Everything twisted in crazy colors and blurred into a different reality. The shaman's chanting could be heard in the background. She faced her enemy, woman to man, in her own guise. Her golden-brown hair and amber eyes in her child's face were more beautiful than had been her disguise.

"I hold pity for you Wolf, for only now do I see what you've truly done. You are the greatest victim of all. You have been named kin-killer. You lost your home, your family, your self-respect, and your hubris earned you the enmity of the very gods you purport to champion. And now you think to release Loki from his chains beneath the earth, but you are more his servant than you realize. Some men believe this to be myth, but both of us know that the short memory of mankind changes not history nor future, except to ensure that the mistakes of the past are repeated. Disbelief will save no lives. Neither will it save yours."

Roaring sounds of falling water surrounded them. The dirt beneath their feet was moist, and mist rose about them. Nearby, something white flashed in the trees, perhaps reminiscent of a white stag. Creeping up behind Ulfr was a huge black panther, and rising from the water, a blue-green serpentine head towered over them. Carly was comforted by the presence of her sister and Kenneth. She wondered where the others were.

Looking around, she saw they were in a forested ravine. A huge waterfall graced its end, and the water rushing past them foamed white. Oddly, arrows littered the ground. A red fox pawed at one of the arrows. Ulfr recognized their location, and a fury he had not experienced in centuries overtook him. Ulfr knew this place, and he would not die or be trapped here again! There was that old man again, chanting with his smoke and his warriors around him!

Wait, that's not right, he stopped, confused. He again felt the pain of his soul being split, and he howled. The old man walked forward and the smoke wrapped around Ulfr.

He bellowed and lifted his sword. Carly merely looked at him with a stricken expression but didn't move. The ruby at her throat glowed brightly, shielding her from his energy attacks. She hesitated a split second too long, but she brought the spear

up in defense rather than making a counter-attack. He struck a hard blow that nearly knocked her off her feet again.

“I don’t want to do this!” Carly choked out.

“You don’t want to fight because you are weak! And what you have in your hand is rightfully mine! So, now you die, little girl!”

Before he could strike her down in a final swipe of his sword and take the spear from her, a spirit of pure wrath bore down upon them. “NO! Ulfr, this time you will not kill or harm this child!” Thundering hoof beats struck the earth. “Carly!” a commanding woman’s voice shouted at the girl. “You *MUST* kill him! It is your wyrnd to do so!”

Despite their confrontation, both combatants turned to look. Ulfr stumbled back several steps, his eyes wide in recognition. “YOU!”

Splendidly mounted on a fabulous white winged horse, the shift of reality had finally stripped the Valkyrie of her disguises. Many races and peoples know her by different names, Skuld, Moirae, Aesa, one of the Three Sisters, the Crone, and the Cutter of the Thread. All amounted to a single word, Fate.

Armored in high polished bronze and white leather with a gray blood-stained cloak thrown over her shoulder, the daughter of Odin stared down the child priestess. Skuld/Moira pointed her spear at Carly. “You have a duty, child, the culmination of a thousand-year cycle. No one can escape Fate. You have been taught Magick. You have been taught the Laws. When Ulfr broke those Laws, his fate was written by his own hand. You, child, are part of that cycle that was written in the weave long before you were born into this earthly life.”

Ulfr stood looking at the two, the goddess and girl child, discussing his life, death, and fate. Belatedly, he realized something was amiss and that he should be wondering what was going on. What was it the girl said, that he’d been tricked?

“But, Lady, how can I be responsible for bringing about the end of the world? With this man’s death, the prophecy of Ragnarok will be partly fulfilled! Loki will be free to start the ultimate war,” she sobbed.

By his death? Suddenly Ulfr got it. Wildly, he looked around for an avenue of escape. How could he have been so blind? The girl was right. His trickster god had set him up as a fool!

Jorried, Ulfr held his hands up and trembled as he looked at them. The rune of Loki and the rune of Sacrifice still

burned on his palms. For centuries, he'd suffered a half-death, been tortured, and planned his return only to be required to sacrifice himself after all! Turning, he raised his hands and threw his last weapon, the runes of power. A portal to another realm opened.

"Shaman! Stop him!" Skuld commanded in a voice that brooked no argument. One does not argue with Fate.

Professor John 'Medicine Bear' Holderman was not about to argue with a goddess, that was for sure. He jammed his hand into his leather pouch and came up with a handful of the special blue beads. These, he threw at Ulfr and directly into the mouth of the Gate. Ulfr let out a primal scream as it closed, leaving him with his left hand partly trapped on the other side of the veil. The pain was excruciating.

Ulfr patted the pocket sleeve of his robe as if he was looking for something. His eyes went from showing pain to pure panic.

"Where is Idun's apple?" Ulfr yelled desperately.

Kenneth spoke up. "Oh, you mean the apple that was sitting on the ledge? It was pretty tasty, actually. I was hungry, and it seemed ripe. Sorry!"

"Aghh! You damned fool!" Ulfr shouted at him. "You've no idea what you've done! The golden apple was the key to my final immortality! I will kill you where you stand!"

"It was gold? I'm colorblind, so I wouldn't know. I thought it was green. Wait a minute, you had immortality in your hands, and you didn't use it when you had it?" He wagged his finger at Ulfr and laughed at him. "Who's the fool?" Kenneth hoped to distract Ulfr for long enough to enable Carly to act. Of course, he didn't believe what he was saying, but it seemed to agitate Ulfr and whatever would work was alright with him. "Oh, and it looks like you are stuck for the moment, so I'm not worried, have a nice life... err, what's left of it. Bye-bye." Kenneth waved at him coldly.

"*NOW CHILD!*" Skuld demanded Carly's final compliance.

With tears soaking her cheeks, Carly again transformed into the Eagle. In her totem form, perhaps this act would be less burdensome. She rose high, higher than she'd ever flown. Shaping the environment one last time to that of an open meadow and Ulfr into a three-legged wolf, she templed her wings and plunged the spear into The Wolf's black heart. She mantled her wings and hissed in resignation over the body. Every feather stood on end as the Eagle stepped away. The reign of terror in Rockwood, Tennessee, was officially over. She had done what

she must, but at what cost to mankind, Carly wondered as she changed back to herself.

Lightning hit the fire tower at the top of Rockwood Mountain. It was so loud that every house in Rockwood shook with the impact of the thunder. The storm masked the howling shriek of triumph that the Spear of Chaos gave as it ate the soul of its maker at last. The mountain shifted and trembled, for Loki, chained and tortured, hearing the blessed sound at last violently shook the earth, not in misery this time, but in exultation. The earthquake punctuated his words.

“**A**t last! The spear of chaos is complete! Bring it to me, my faithful servants, so that it may break my god-forged bonds! Release me! That I may seek my revenge on the hall of Valhalla and begin the battle to end all battles. Man and god alike shall feel my fury! I will take my revenge until the worlds run red in rivers of blood!”



All humans left alive in the church picked themselves up off the floor from where they had fallen during the tremor. Although the town of Rockwood is built on an ancient fault in the earth, this was no natural earthquake. Reality was already beginning to shift back into its natural state.

Skuld walked her horse to the altar. Reaching out, she gently picked up a blackened, dry, and moldy-looking thread. Removing a set of shears from her belt pouch, she cut the thread and let both ends hit the floor where she left them. Looking at the girl child, she offered one final explanation and charged her with a last responsibility.

“Ulfr is gone, the spear has absorbed his soul, and with the cutting of his thread of life, he cannot live a mortal life in the flesh, even an evil half-life, any longer. You must discover how to destroy the spear forever, for you understand the danger it poses.”

Icewing leaped into the sky with Skuld firmly on his back. Fate blew a trumpeting call of her hunting horn and flew from sight into the rainbow created by the rain and slanted late afternoon sunlight. The Valkyrie finally returned triumphant to Valhalla.

For the others, there were still a few details they needed to clear up. Carly sat in a corner, still holding the spear. It newly

bore a large rune of berserker blood sacrifice centered in its blade. Tears rolled down her face.

Mary Lou went to the altar and helped Sierra transform back into her human form. She rose dazed, as if from a long sleep, and accepted a clean white robe to cover herself. Whomever it had belonged to wouldn't need it anyway.

Kenneth stood talking to Bryan, Rachel, and the pagan priest as he waited for the girls to pull it together. Everyone else had come to their senses and cleared out of the building. The teens walked or limped out, the six of them together at last.

Mary Lou stopped to join hands with the coven. One by one, in reverse order, they took down the anchoring points and shifted the circle back to full reality. Retrieving her athame from the dirt, Mary Lou finally took down the circle of energy that had marked the boundary. Oddly, the foliage was discolored to white all along that border when the circle came down.

Medicine Bear went to the aid of Officer Stanley, who still waited with the injured coyote. He bent down to examine the animal, who turned his head and whined. Gently, he examined the bullet wound. "He'll be okay with medical attention," he told Diane. He shook his head and went to check on the other officers. He put his hand on Deputy Mulligan's neck. "He's still alive and needs a doctor," he said. "There is no help for that one, though. I am sorry." Medicine Bear indicated Officer Baer.

"I will call for an ambulance," Diane said. "How I'm going to explain this to the boss, I don't know." She headed to her car as Medicine Bear carefully picked up the injured coyote.



KAs the others walked down the trail, Kenneth loitered a bit behind the rest. Bryan stopped to see what he was doing. Kenneth lit a cigarette, and after taking a couple of thoughtful puffs, he threw it into a pile of oily rags in the dry-as-tinder abandoned church building.

"Only thing left now is to cleanse it because nothing can possibly re-consecrate the place after that evil corrupted it. God knows what we did here, and perhaps He will lead men to rebuild His house." Kenneth spoke half to himself. He waited a few moments to be sure he smelled smoke. When a thin curl of smoke wafted out through the open door, he finally knew it was all over. The demon was gone, and between the burning and the cleansing rain, tomorrow would be a brand new day.

Kenneth punched his friend Bryan in the shoulder and threw an arm each around Mary Lou and Carly with an impish smile. Looking up at the clearing sky, he judged the time. Casually, he whistled a tuneless tune. In one hand, Carly still carried the spear. She was practically dragging it in the mud. He took it from her and spun it around like it was a baton, and they were in a festival parade. Rachel shot him a dirty look as he laid it across his shoulders, only slightly contrite. "Hey, Carly, remind me to kiss you later!"

Mary Lou gave him a dirty look. "That's my baby sister, you!"

"Ok, fine, much later! Anyone want to go out for pizza? Kicking a lich's undead ass always makes me hungry!" Kenneth smiled.



EPILOGUE:

Nothing was left of the old abandoned church but a smoldering ruin when the abnormally large bear slowly ambled from out of the forest scrub. He had smelled the smoke and heard the screams. When all went quiet, he came down the mountain to investigate. The bear sniffed around the outside, where there were residues of powerful earth magick alien to him.

Overlays of the same power lay on the rest of the site. He ignored it and looked around for anyone who may still linger nearby. There were only crickets and a songbird that flitted overhead. Nothing else moved.

Heavy dark brown fur rippled when the bear stood on his hind legs and changed to something that looked partly human with Native American features, except for the eyes, which still looked like those of a bear. He wore a bear pelt hanging from his head to his calves.

Shash was intent as he looked painstakingly through the burned debris. With his cousin Nash dead, he'd left off looking for Tracey Wilson and gone on walkabout. He missed being caught with the rest at the church. Which meant, he smiled at the thought; *I am in charge now! I can rebuild with my own people here on this mountain. We'll be safe and wise. Nash was foolish to get mixed up with the foreign magic of the white man.*

Something bone white and untouched by soot shone brightly among the scorched wood. Excited, Shash picked up a

Mary Lou Wells

large bone flute and tied it to his belt. The thighbone of an alpha skinwalker, his own grandfather, whom Nash had killed for revenge. It was his now.

The bear-man continued to search the debris until a familiar-looking knife also turned up. He could feel no remaining power in it and smiled. *Perfect*, he muttered to himself. *An empty blade accustomed to holding power will be easy to refill with what I want to put into it.* With nothing further to interest him, the new Alpha skinwalker shape-shifted and ambled back into the trees.

Unnoticed, an errant breeze gently stirred the layer of fine white ash in the burned-out church. A tiny sapling reached delicate new leaves toward the noonday sun above. Reality blurred, and tendrils of mist spread from the place Ulfr met his end, tiny beads of moisture glittering on the ash tree sapling and its solitary apple bud.

THE END

To Be Continued...

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