

Jennifer's Murderer

by William G. Tedford

*Jennifer's
Murderer*



William G. Tedford

Copyright © 2010
by William G. Tedford
- All rights reserved -

Chapter One

A girl somewhere between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, Jennifer Renee Wessner, sat curled in a recliner running an emery board across her fingernails.

The phone rang. Cathy Weibler lay on the couch amidst her halo of shiny blonde curls and glanced hopefully at Jennifer. Jennifer gave the older woman and her bright blue eyes a stubborn smile, forcing Cathy to snatch the offending instrument from its cradle with a glare of mock anger. "Evelyn Haxx residence. Cathy Weibler speaking."

Cathy sat up quickly. "Oh, hi, Evelyn. No, we haven't gotten any calls." She listened attentively. "Just me and Jennifer. Nothing much going on."

Cathy drew erect with rapt attention. "Dimitri Carvelli..." She reached for a pencil alongside the phone, jotted a number on a scratch pad and repeated it. "You want me to give Dimitri a call, be sweet as a rotting corpse and tell the rich young dude that you're scrogging someone else tonight and to call Miss Piggy for another date."

Cathy winced at the repercussions of her spiteful sarcasm

and sighed with exasperation. "I can, too, be civil. I won't screw around, and I'll send Jennifer home at a decent hour just as you say. Good-bye, Evelyn."

Cathy put the phone down a bit heavily. "Prissy bitch."

Jennifer looked up from her blunted fingernails. "Why doesn't she call that Carvelli dude herself?"

"Caller ID," Cathy said. "Business from business phones only. Stalking protection. Rule number four-hundred and eighty-seven million."

It made sense, and Jennifer committed another of Francis' many rules of the trade to memory, although the four-hundred and eighty-seven million part was just a bit of facetiousness. She already knew that Francis screened new customers, assigned them to one of her stable of courtesans, and expected business to be conducted in a very business-like manner.

Courtesan was Francis Peugeot's choice of words, and she always said it with a smile.

"Dimitri Carvelli isn't an approved customer," Jennifer said.

Cathy frowned, momentarily distracted. "Blacklisted. Evelyn says he's a sicko. Francis will refer him elsewhere."

Jennifer wrinkled her nose. "Elsewhere?"

Cathy laughed at her puzzled innocence. "Scags stupid enough to take the risk, or tough enough to handle it. Francis doesn't do that kind of business."

Jennifer smiled and returned to her nails. "How nice."

Cathy lay back down on the couch and hugged a pillow. "Evelyn gets all the high-class business."

"Elegant Evelyn," Jennifer said, still smiling.

"You know who Dimitri Carvelli is, don't you?" Cathy said in a conspiratorial tone of voice.

"I wouldn't have the slightest idea. It's probably not something for my virgin ears to hear."

"His dad's a big shot in city government, commissioner of

streets and highways, I think. He's old as dirt, and his kid's a spoiled brat, but they're both top rates. I bet I could keep the little turd in line."

Jennifer glanced at woman with a jolt of concern. The old stereotype of the dumb blonde applied with a vengeance to Cathy. Her beauty and abject lack of good judgment were a bad combination that constantly got her into trouble with Francis and the other girls. Jennifer could all but hear the cogs turning in her mischievous brain.

"Evelyn didn't say how I was supposed to deliver the message," Cathy rationalized aloud.

Jennifer felt a little chill of apprehension. "You'll get fired, if you're thinking what I think you're thinking."

"Like Wanda getting fired? We're both the same age, you know. I'm next in line."

"Wanda won't lay off the drugs."

Cathy sat up and sighed heavily. "Yeah, but she's getting too old, we're both tired of working by all the rules anyway, and I'm still next in line."

She stared off into space with a haunted look, then flashed a self-conscious smile. "Why don't you hold down the fort for me. I've got to go to the drug store for some personal stuff. We don't want to let the bed bugs bite, now do we?"

Jennifer set her emery board aside and unraveled her long legs. "You're supposed to stay here and answer the phone." Evelyn's answering machine had bit the dust late in the day and the two had agreed to fill in for the evening.

"You won't snitch on me, will you?" Cathy said, her gaze cold as ice.

"No, but I won't lie for you."

Cathy got up and headed for the bedroom to dress. "You won't have to. It's going to be a quiet one tonight. I can tell."

Jennifer leaped to her feet, fearful of being abandoned in a

strange part of town by the older women. "You just going to leave me here alone?"

"Francis doesn't want you part of the business," Cathy called out from the bedroom, "but you're old enough to answer the phone!"

Jennifer dropped down in front of Evelyn's forty-five inch flat-screen plasma TV, suppressing nagging concern and petty frustration. If nothing else, Evelyn had rented a stack of DVDs, and they'd have to go back in the morning.

Cathy emerged from the bedroom dressed to kill in one of Evelyn's gowns, royal blue and edged in black lace, and a pair of heels. She refitted her own gold choker around her neck and did a quick whirl.

Jennifer shook her head in exasperation. Cathy was an absolute knockout. "But you really shouldn't," she cautioned.

"Just don't rat on me, okay?"

Jennifer nodded reluctantly. She turned back to the TV and reached for the remote. Behind her, the door to the apartment opened and closed and settled the issue with resolute finality.

Jennifer slipped one of the summer's blockbusters into the DVD. She was skipping through coming attractions when the phone rang again. Wrought with tension, Jennifer paused the player and picked up the handset. "Evelyn Haxx residence. How may I help you?"

"Jennifer," Evelyn's soft voice sounded. "Is that you?"

Jennifer's grew rigid with tension. Her heart picked up its beat. It was Evelyn calling back for confirmation that Cathy had made the call, and already Cathy was in trouble. They both should have guessed that Evelyn would check back. "Yeah, it's me, Evelyn."

"Did Cathy make the call?"

Jennifer's mind whirled with indecision. "She left the apartment, Evelyn. She said she was going to the drugstore."

"She left the apartment? She didn't make the call?" Evelyn grew agitated. "She knows Dimitri's trouble. He's drunk, Jennifer. He's really nasty when he's drunk. Do you think you can stop her?"

Jennifer rose to her feet and danced up and down nervously. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Go after her!" Evelyn cried in alarm. "Tell her I'm calling Francis this very minute! She knows better than to pull a stunt like this! Now go!"

Seething with apprehension, Jennifer fought the need to go running out into the night in shorts and halter. With a moan of dismay, Evelyn's crisis took precedent over skimpy attire in a bad part of town. She hung the phone up and ran for the door. Racing down the hall, a door closed on the ground floor.

"Cathy, wait!"

She monitored the deserted hall for a response, then raced down the three flights of stairs rather than wait for the elevator. Pausing at the main entrance to peer out into the darkness, she thought she saw Cathy's old Dodge Monaco turning at the corner.

It wasn't too late. The drug store was only a couple blocks away. Her trusty bicycle awaited in the bushes. Still, she hesitated, thinking that it would be one more nail in her coffin should she let the apartment building door close and lock behind her and then be accosted in the night by undesirable elements of the male persuasion. Again, she had no recourse. She had change in her pocket. She could phone Francis from a booth and arrange for a pickup.

She hurried outside and retrieved her bike from the bushes and shadows alongside the building. Pedaling furiously, she cut through a dark alley, zipped across a deserted thoroughfare, and wove through the traffic in the parking lot of the strip mall. A drunk or two emerged from the shadows,

holding out a hand to her with a feeble croak of dismay that temptation should come and go so quickly.

She dropped the bike alongside the drug store and went inside the brightly lit interior. It was late, and the store all but deserted. Cathy stood in line behind two other customers at the express register.

Cathy caught sight of her. A contest of whispers followed.

"Go home, Jennifer!"

"Evelyn called back! She said she was going to call Francis!"

"You snitched on me!"

"I did not!"

"Did so! Now scoot!"

Unfriendly eyes from behind the service counter were watching. Jennifer went outside and paced alongside the car thinking she should at least follow Cathy and keep an eye on her, except that Cathy wasn't likely to take her along, and pitting a bicycle against a car would only get her left in the old Dodge's smoky exhaust and abandoned in an obstacle course of more drunks lining the streets and alleys.

Cathy came bounding through the automatic doors with her usual air-headed exuberance. Jennifer dived impulsively through an open window of the rusty Monaco and crawled over the front seat. She lay face down on the back floor and put her hands over her head, as if the gesture would render her invisible.

Muttering angrily to herself, Cathy tossed a white paper sack into the front seat, climbed behind the wheel, and slammed the door. She started the car, cranked the radio on a heavy rock station and drove away squealing tires.

Jennifer had committed herself, and lost her bicycle in the process. If she revealed her presence now, Cathy would get nasty. She'd evict her from the car and abandon her on foot ten miles from home. Jennifer had no choice but to remain silent

for the violent twenty-minute drive and the raucous music that accompanied it.

Cathy lurched to a stop at an iron gate. She turned off the radio and pushed the button to an intercom. A muffled voice spoke briefly. Cathy said her name was Evelyn Haxx and the gate opened. She drove up a steep drive lined with trees and went around the back of a dark mansion. She parked, shut off the lights and engine, and was gone in a flash.

As the car door slammed shut, Jennifer pressed her forehead to the musky smelling rug and squeezed her fists in a fit of fearful indecision. She positively hated being left alone in the dark.

She raised her head above the seat and took notice that a back door to the house stood slightly ajar. It creaked open even as she watched, caught like a sail in a summer breeze. That was typical of Cathy, always rushing about like a scatter-brain and not paying attention to what she was doing.

It took fifteen minutes for Jennifer to gather enough courage to venture outside the car and peek inside the house. Beyond, a dim fluorescent light glowed in a kitchen of white enamel and stainless steel. Jennifer crept forward step by step, listening for the reassuring sound of Cathy's voice.

She crept down a hall toward the dining room and finally heard murmuring voices. A basement door stood open. Cathy's voice and the voice of a suave sounding man drifted up from downstairs. Jennifer caught sight of the edge of a pool table and a bottom corner of a rich wall of paneling. As tension sloughed away, she sat on the carpeted top step. Cathy didn't know it, but a guardian angel going to watch over her for the rest of her visit.

Jennifer leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, soothed by the subdued voices and sounds of casual laughter. Dimitri Carvelli didn't sound drunk. He didn't sound at all

dangerous. She ignored the embarrassed giggles and the animal grunts and moans that followed, but when she could hear the tinkling of glass between bouts of love-making, and when Cathy's laughter grew raucous over the course of the next hour, Jennifer knew they were both getting drunk. That, too, was against Francis' rules.

Something went wrong. They began barking angered retorts at one another and Jennifer leaped to her feet, prepared to flee back to the car. Cathy would come storming up the stairs at any moment. She heard the two scuffling and bumping into things. Cathy wasn't one to let her clients get rough with her.

Cathy cried out in sudden pain, an anguished wail cut off in an instant. The hackles along the back of Jennifer's neck crawled. Dimitri snarled in anger. Glass crashed to the floor. Jennifer was frozen in place when a figure backed staggering into view below, a naked man holding a gleaming dueling foil.

Ice crept up Jennifer's spine. The tip of the thin rapier tipped to the ground.

Blood dripped from the end.

The horrible image held her entranced a moment too long. She stood rooted to the spot, not knowing if she should scream, rush down to help, or turn and escape without being seen.

Dimitri Carvelli settled her moment of indecision. Maybe her shuddering breath gave her away. He glanced up at her, his eyes widened in shock, and then he roared with panic and outrage.

He charged up the stairs after her, and it was in that place and at that moment that Jennifer's long nightmare began.

Chapter Two

City Commissioner Bernard Carvelli awakened in the dead of the night to the scream of a dying woman. He bolted upright in bed, taken back to the last time he had heard that very same wail of agony and despair. He had only been a boy then, a caretaker to a mansion near Milan occupied by the Germans. So, so many years ago. Men in black uniforms and death's-head emblems had routed him in the middle of the night to dispose of a pale body thrown upon a cart and covered with canvas. No one would tell him what to do with it. No one had cared. He had dumped it down a steep ravine at the edge of town, keeping his face averted as it slid into the darkness and tumbled down the slope.

Again, he would have to deal with it, and with men no better than those who had ruled his life as a boy. Anguish stabbed at his heart with palpable discomfort. He put a hand to his chest, rose in the darkness, and fumbled for the table lamp on the nightstand. Pudgy fingers popped open a pill box of tiny nitro tablets beneath its warm glow. Most sprayed across the rug at his feet. A precious few stuck to his sweaty palm. One

went beneath his tongue as he snatched his robe from the back of a nearby chair.

"Dimitri!" he roared, knowing the source of his woe. "Goddamn you, Dimitri!"

The robe fell to either side of his fifty inch gut pounding along the upstairs hall. He yanked the rich crimson velvet closed and whipped a knot in the sash storming down the spiraling staircase. His whole body trembled with fear. What had Dimitri done now? The boy knew better than to bring women to the house.

Bernard paused on the balcony overlooking a spacious living room. Below, a single table lamp cast ghostly shadows. He resisted the temptation to call the police and risk ruinous publicity. He would first investigate for himself to see what had happened and give himself time to gather his wits about him. There were others to call for help should the need to be discrete arise.

He went down the stairs and flipped a wall switch. Light from a century-old chandelier commandeered from a bombed cathedral near Milan cast a sparkling light into the living room.

Nothing here.

He rushed down a shadowed hall toward the rear basement entrance. Dimitri would most probably be found in one of the downstairs dens. The sound had been dim, filtered through most of the three stories and thirty rooms of the mansion. If the scream hadn't struck such a note of terror in his soul, its volume alone would never have awakened him.

Dimitri cried out in anger somewhere ahead. The door at the end of the hall flew open. A girl in shorts, hardly more than a child, rushed from the staircase and almost collided with him before dodging to one side with a shriek of terror and ducking by. Dimitri followed, fitting one leg and then another into a pair of trousers. He nervously tossed from hand to hand a three

thousand dollar Spanish dueling foil dating from the thirteenth century, bloodied for the first time in perhaps six hundred years.

"For the love of Mary, Mother of God!"

Startled by Bernard's cry, Dimitri stumbled drunkenly. He lowered his head and glowered at the older man through bloodshot eyes burning with drunken rage. His narrow chest heaved. Sweat on his body gleamed in the bright overhead light. And something darker.

More blood.

Bernard lumbered forward, anger bubbling through his confusion. "How dare you bring your foul sickness into my home! You drunken fool, I warned you!"

Dimitri's eyes widened in surprise. Fear penetrated his alcoholic stupor an instant before Bernard backhanded the much younger and smaller man and sent him careening against the wall. The sword clattered to the tiled floor. Dimitri floundered, muttering obscenities forbidden in the house.

The dark stairs from which the girl and Dimitri had emerged caught and held Bernard's focus of attention. The blood was not Dimitri's, and the fleeing girl had been unharmed. A third presence was in the house. An evil that hadn't touched Bernard's life in half a century had been wrought in the den below.

Bernard retrieved the foil and started down the stairs, holding the thin blade before him as a shield against the unknown. Inwardly, he railed against his cowardice. Cowardice had ruled his life. The self-hatred it engendered would torment him until the day his faltering heart stopped for good.

"Father, no!" Dimitri cried out from the top of the stairs. "Stay away from this! Let me handle it! Goddamn it, I can't let her get away!"

The escaping girl went out through the kitchen. A pot

clattered to the floor, and the back door slammed back against the counter. Bernard felt a tinge of satisfaction at the silence that ensued. The girl had escaped. Dimitri whirled about and launched himself pursuit of her, leaving Bernard alone in the deathly quiet den.

Overtured chairs littered the floor. Bernard eyed emptied liquor bottles at the bar, and empty glasses. The smell of death permeated the room, and Bernard turned aside and vomited in a powerful, subconscious protest of the long forgotten stench of blood and loosened bowels. Slowly, he recovered and continued the search. There was nothing in view from his vantage point. He wanted to see nothing more. He backed away slowly, hoping that nothing at all had happened. His faltering heart could stand only so much excitement.

But he had to know for certain, and every second counted if he hoped to stop Dimitri from compounding the consequence of his madness. Bernard shuffled to the bar and snatched the handset of the extension from its cradle. A pudgy finger quivering with tension paused over the buttons.

Countless phone numbers spilled through his mind, the home and office numbers of every major city official, of contractors and mobsters, of friends and family. Numbers were his stock and trade. If he closed his eyes, he could all but see the scrolling computer screens in the new accounting offices spilling forth the life blood of a city. No mystery there. Numbers, clean and neat. No blood in any but a metaphorical sense. Numbers had no odor. They did not feel sticky upon the hand, nor were they ever so irrevocably spilled into the dust.

His fingers tapped out a number. It surprised him, the evidence of sanity at work beneath his panic. The phone buzzed and clicked. A muffled voice sounded at the other end. "Karl Garko. Who are you and what do you want?"

Bernard's voice broke. He squeezed tears from his eyes.

Self-deprecation seared him. Always this plea for help in times of crisis, always this dependency upon forces in his life that used him as they might a pawn upon a chessboard.

"Bernard?" said the hesitant voice on the other end of the line. "Carvelli, is it you? My friend, you know better than to call me at this number. This is for emergencies only. Is this an emergency, Carvelli?"

Bernard took a shuddering breath of air. "Dimitri. . ."

Karl Garko muttered a profanity, and then an angered sigh. "Dimitri," he spat. "What has he done now?"

"I don't know. Karl, there's blood. Dimitri brought women home!"

Karl's voice went deep and cold. "I've warned you about that boy, Carvelli. He's sick and he's dangerous. Dangerous to all of us. Did he hurt someone, Carvelli? Do you want me to send help, or can this wait until morning?"

Bernard eyes darted about the room. Morbid curiosity and the need to satisfy Karl Garko's question sent Bernard's head bobbing from side to side in search of the inevitable body. He caught sight of white flesh showing from between the pool table and an upholstered chair. His breath caught in his throat.

"Bernard?"

A white breast, a rose aureole and its nipple glowed like lifeless wax in the dim light. A naked woman, not breathing. A tiny wound in her solar plexus leaked blood, and another lower on her belly.

Bernard Carvelli whimpered. Karl snapped at him over the phone, bringing him back into focus.

Bernard's voice went flat. "He killed a girl, Mr. Garko."

Karl groaned. "Stay put. I'm sending men over. Don't call the police. We'll take care of this ourselves. Where's Dimitri now?"

"Mr. Garko, there was a second girl. I think she got away."

Dimitri went after her."

"Christ! Bernard, stay put! I'll get some men over right away!"

The handset clicked and buzzed. Bernard lowered it, his eyes fixed on the cross-section of torso visible through the furniture. He shuffled forward until the cord pulled the handset from his hand and it banged against the side of the bar.

He studied the body long enough to confirm the obvious for certain, and then he turned away. The scream had belonged to this girl. It had been her death he had heard echoing through the empty house. Once again he had witnessed murder. Once again he would be used like a tool to hide sin from the eyes of society. And poor Dimitri. By morning, Dimitri would be sober enough to know that he had sealed his own doom. If only he could be stopped before he hurt anyone else. The girl he pursued had been but a child.

Bernard backed to a stool and sat. He had lost his own flesh and blood, his only begotten son. He did not grieve Dimitri's inevitable death. He grieved for the life that had eluded him all of these lost decades. Garko would clean up the mess he and Dimitri had made and leave no evidence to the sins that had been committed yet again. The only witness was the only one that ultimately counted, the Almighty Himself.

He had known this day would come.

Chapter Three

Jennifer Renee Wessner paused at Cathy's car in a frenzy of panic and indecision. With Dimitri crashing his way through the kitchen, she didn't have time to check the ignition for the keys. Instead, she threw herself over the five-foot, chain-link fence bordering the manicured lawns and raced down the tree-covered hill toward the main gate below.

Her sandaled feet pounded the smooth grass. Wind stirred her hair. For an instant, she thought that she might escape after all, until she caught sight of gleaming black muscle bounding across lawns lit in patches of stark moonlight.

She dropped to her knees rather than be dragged to the ground by the Doberman snarling a liquid sound deep in its chest. She covered her head with her arms and shrieked with despair. The Doberman rushed up to her with lips curled back from teeth like white daggers.

Claws of black ivory dug into the grass and sent dirt spraying in her face. The dog circled her once, dancing in agitation. Twice. It sniffed at her. She cried out her final terror as its wet nose pressed into her crotch. She went rigid with

tension, prepared for the drawn out agony of a horrible death.

The animal whined and dropped to its belly before her. Its stubby tail wagged furiously, and the hot stench of its breath panted against her face. She opened her eyes to a lolling tongue drooling dog goo and a pair of friendly brown eyes on level with her own.

"Oh, thank God!" She held the back of her shaking hand out to the animal and wept profusely for a frantic moment.

Dimitri's mad cry of anger echoed through the night from somewhere behind her, propelling her to her feet. She put her hand absently on the dog's head, kneading behind the ear. "Man's best friend like hell," she muttered defiantly. "Nice doggy."

Dimitri didn't come after her on foot. Instead, he circled the house and vanished into the garage. A car engine whooshed quietly, warning that he was headed down to the gate to block her only escape route.

She doubled back to Cathy's Dodge. A second Doberman joined the first, a female growling in displeasure at her mate's human companion, but no more inclined to violence than he when Jennifer backtracked and went back over the fence.

Cathy had left the keys in the ignition. She should have guessed as much and saved herself the ten years off her lifespan the dogs had taken. She closed and locked the doors behind her and took a shuddering breath of air in the quiet. She resisted the temptation to rush back into the house to help and console Cathy. She twisted the ignition key and eased the car into motion thinking that the police and ambulance paramedics would be far more capable of handling the crisis, including whatever was left of herself and Dimitri when she rammed his car at the base of drive, because one way or another, she was getting the hell away from this place and these monsters.

Chapter Four

Dimitri followed the girl out the back door in time to see her go over the low fence along the drive and across the dark lawn on foot. He cried warning, then silenced himself. The Dobermans would tear the fleeing wraith to shreds of meat, and himself as well, if he got in their way. Instead, he circled around to the garage and drove down to block the gate with his Audi, just in case.

He sat trembling in his car, certain she was trapped within the grounds. The illegal, charged wire at the top of the gate would contain her. He told himself to relax. The dogs would leave him with nothing but the chore of disposing of bloodied remains.

Things had gone wrong. He threw his head back, jammed his eyes closed, and cried out his panic to the night. Clenched fists pounded the steering wheel. He should never have started drinking. The time and the place had been all wrong. Francis had sent the wrong girl. He had been told Evelyn Haxx was a brunette. The blonde had denied it.

"No, honey, I'm Evelyn Haxx! Honest!"

Lying bitch. He had botched it. He couldn't believe the extent of his foul luck. And a little girl sitting at the top of the stairs in the middle of the night to boot, waiting for nothing more than to serve as witness for the death of a whore. Who in Satan's name could she have been?

Dimitri reached for the door handle. The dogs were taking too long. He paused when headlights flickering through the trees above his position set shadows weaving to and fro in the surrounding underbrush. The sudden glare of high beams blinded him. And then he heard it, the roar of the worn engine of the old Dodge gaining momentum down the steep slope by the second.

Dimitri had no time to escape the car. He braced himself the instant a tremendous impact struck from behind, spinning his lighter Audi in a half circle off the driveway. The Dodge rebounded, backed up, and then burned rubber ramming the wrought iron gate. Fractured cast iron cascaded out across the street, ringing like a discordant percussion from hell itself.

A piece of iron banged against Dimitri's hood. Another cracked the passenger door window. The old sedan slid screaming out into the street, then went chugging off into the darkness with broken headlights.

Dimitri resisted the temptation to pursue her. Both vehicles risked attracting the attention of any police cruisers roaming the area. He reached for his car phone instead, braced his hand against the leather console to stop the trembling, and punched out a number.

"Marcelli," a sleepy male voice muttered.

"This is Dimitri Carvelli. I have an emergency. There has been an attempt on my father's life. She's a hooker, one of Peugeot's girls. I need a list of addresses and I need them now."

The voice grunted. Dimitri heard the sound of bed springs creak and a woman's murmur of inquiry. "Dimitri, I need

authorization from either Bernard or Karl Garko for you to use our services."

"My father's ill, but I'm certain he's called Garko by now. If you don't help me and do it in the next goddamn minute or two, we're all in big trouble. I know you've got a file on Peugeot Secretarial Services. My father and his friends do business with them all the time. You cleared them yourself."

A chair creaked. "Give me a moment to fire up the damned machine."

Dimitri heard the beep of a computer booting and the rattle of a keyboard. "Peugeot Secretarial Services. Okay, so I got eight local listings."

"Give them to me."

"Okay. You got a pencil and paper handy?"

"Just give them to me. Now!"

The voice angrily rattled off eight names and addresses. "And there's a note here that Miss Peugeot has a kid with her, some kind of underaged mascot she uses to run errands. I don't have a name or address on that one. The note says Peugeot picked her up in Los Angeles, but we checked and records say she's native to Dubuque County, Iowa."

Dimitri set the phone back in place, calculating the depth of his crisis. He'd get himself in trouble accessing his father's private investigators without authorization, but tracking down the girl was a priority. He'd sure as hell never be forgiven for tainting the name of a politician of strategic importance to the mob. They'd kill him for his transgression, send him straight to hell with a bullet behind the ear.

Eight addresses. In his mind's eye, he could see a map of the city. The addresses were widely scattered. Only three were close by, and one was very close. She'd go there. Even if she phoned Peugeot for help, she'd be steered to the closest place of refuge.

He stood a chance. She had damaged the old Dodge ramming his car and the gate. He'd catch her if he played it smart, hopefully cut her off before she had a chance to talk to anyone.

Dimitri put the Audi in gear. He whipped the car onto the street in a squeal of rubber, grimly determined to salvage the mess he had made of things. There was nothing left to do but try. What better goal for the balance of his precariously short lifespan than simple moment to moment survival?

Chapter Five

Jennifer drove a quarter mile along the four-lane thoroughfare facing the Carvelli estate, then turned down a side street at random. Her headlights hadn't survived the impact with Dimitri's car or the gate. She'd be stopped by the first cop that spotted her. She was lost and had no idea how to find her way back to familiar territory.

She pulled to the curb when oncoming traffic zipped past, then crept forward block by block toward the glow against the sky that advertised the center of the city. Eying a pay phone alongside a convenience store, she pulled to the curb and searched the glove compartment for change. She fed the phone quarters and pecked out a phone number burned forever into her memory.

"Peugeot Secretarial Services," murmured a husky voice struggling from the depths of sleep.

"Francis, this is Jennifer!" Her teeth chattered so that she could hardly talk. "Dimitri Carvelli killed Cathy! Fran, he stabbed her with a sword!"

Francis took a long time to answer. "Jennifer? My God!"

"I've got Cathy's car, but he's chasing me and my headlights are broken!"

"Who's chasing you? Dimitri?"

"Yes!"

"And you're driving Cathy's car?"

"Yes!"

"Address, quick."

Jennifer recited the closest highway junction. Francis would know what to do. Francis would make everything okay again. But poor Cathy. . .

"Jennifer, stop crying this instant. Go to Wanda's apartment. Do you understand? Borrow Wanda's car, but take Wanda with you to the safe house. I'll phone the police and call the other girls now."

It hardly seemed necessary to send everyone into hiding, but Jennifer agreed. Wanda lived nearby. All the main thoroughfares were at least familiar to her. The safe house was a place of refuge in times of crisis, an old, out-of-place Victorian structure on the south side. Ed was caretaker. Ed was an ex-cop, private investigator and body guard, one of Francis' old flames and her only male employee. Ed would take care of her and Wanda until the crisis passed.

She crept through back city streets, pulling to the curb whenever traffic approached from either direction. The radiator began to steam. A red light flashed on the dash and then stayed on. She passed Wanda's apartment building and circled around back.

A car crept up behind her a half block away and turned off its headlights. She watched it in her rear view mirror for a time, but it seemed unlikely that it could be Dimitri Carvelli. It was a miracle Cathy's old Monaco had made it this far, and Dimitri's car had sustained more damage than her own.

Once she shut off the rattling engine, she knew it would

never start again. The sky was overcast and the night heavy with shadow. She felt vulnerable and defenseless sneaking through the alley between the ominous brownstones. She went up three flights of rickety wooden stairs and down a balcony to the end apartment, feeling like a mouse sneaking through a den of sleeping cats.

She tapped on the glass of the door and waited.

And waited.

"Wanda, please!"

The door to the adjacent apartment creaked open. An old man stuck his head out and looked both ways.

Jennifer clenched her fist and pounded the window furiously. "Wanda, let me in!"

The man stepped onto the balcony cackling to himself.

"Wanda!"

The glass broke beneath her pounding fist. Shards rained down and stung the top of her feet. But she had only to slip her hand through the empty window frame to unlatch the chain and slide the deadbolt back. The door swung open. She slipped inside, latched it, and yanked the shade down.

She turned and leaned against the door and waited with her heart pounding in her chest, listening to the creaking of footsteps outside grow close, and then retreat. Only then could she afford to turn her attention to the silent apartment.

The kitchen stank of unwashed dishes and half-eaten meals piled high on the table and sink counter.

"Wanda?"

She crept through the darkened room to the short hall. Dim, flickering light of a television was coming from the living room. Even before she entered the room, she caught sight of the hypodermic needle, spoon and candle on the coffee table.

Wanda was sitting on the floor, leaning against the couch, a rag doll propped up in front of the television. She looked

around sleepily as Jennifer moved into view.

"You know Francis told you that you had to stop doing that," Jennifer said.

Wanda smiled sleepily.

"I need to borrow your car. We have to go to the safe house."

Wanda pointed to the car keys on the television. "There's no sense in bothering Miss Piggy about getting a little high," Wanda murmured soothingly. "I'm not addicted to the shit like I was the last time."

"Wanda, you don't understand!"

Wanda climbed to her feet, moaning in protest. An attractive mix of black and white blood standing a good six feet in height, she wore nothing but a pair of panties and an unbuttoned, oversized flannel shirt draped to either side of her magnificent breasts. Still, she had lost weight in recent weeks. It was the major reason Wanda hadn't been working lately. Francis worked by rules, strict rules and lots of them. Wanda violated most of them, and to top it off, she was getting too old, just as Cathy had said.

"Francis says you gotta come with me," Jennifer reiterated. But she stopped short of telling her that Cathy had been hurt and maybe even killed. She was shaky and on the edge of hysteria herself. Wanda would be uncontrollable if she knew.

Wanda shook her hand loose angrily. "I ain't going nowhere just because that bitch tells me."

Jennifer snatched Wanda's car keys off the television. "I'm going to the safe house. Francis says to take you with me." She blinked back tears. "Please!"

Wanda grimaced. "No way. Take the car and go. Just don't tell Francis I'm high. Promise?"

Jennifer nodded, sniffing back her tears. Ed would give her a hand with Wanda.

Wanda gave a strained smile. "Get the hell out of here and

leave me alone. The car's out front. Put gas in it before you bring it back."

Jennifer left by the front way and fled down dingy halls and a narrow flight of stairs. She paused before exposing herself to the night. Nothing moved in the patterns of light and shadow cast by the streetlights. But the shadows were deep. Anything could be lurking in them.

She shook off her creeping paranoia. Dimitri would ever catch up to her. It was a big city, and the world was not so evil that it allowed killers to roam free for very long. Once rolling down city streets in Wanda's little Toyota, she took what comfort she could in the thought that he would be arrested and jailed for the rest of his life for what he had done. As for the rest of her own life, Jennifer feared that her teeth would be chattering uncontrollably forevermore.

Chapter Six

The invasion of the Carvelli estate began with the arrival of Karl Garko and his men. They swarmed through the house and over the grounds like human roaches. Bernard Carvelli leaned against a wall in the den, too exhausted to climb the stairs and too fearful of bloodying his feet on the soaked carpet to try. His heart palpitated. Pain from his oxygen-starved heart had numbed an arm and sent his lower jaw to aching fiercely.

Karl Garko ignored him during his initial inspection of the den. He and an associate raised the nude corpse of the woman by one arm and coolly discussed the tiny exit wound of the rapier. "Pierced the liver for starters," Garko's friend muttered. "Looks to me like we've got a holed artery. Has the coroner been called in on this yet?"

"The police were called from elsewhere," Garko said. "The girl's business manager, shall we say. They're on their way, but we had a witness and Dimitri went after her, so I think we'll want to handle this one on our own. Get your men down here.

Dispose of the body. Do a thorough job, but don't put a sicko on it. The situation's loathsome enough as it is. Cut up the rug and take it with. Don't leave stains behind."

The two men looked up at Carvelli. "Is he going to be okay?" Garko's associate said. "He doesn't look good."

"His personal physician is on his way," Garko muttered unhappily and rose to his feet. "Get a move on it."

They worked around Bernard until his doctor arrived and gave him an unceremonious injection in the buttock to ease the strain on his heart. Within seconds, tension and pain drained away. Garko and the doctor helped him up the stairs while Garko's men put the girl's body in a plastic bag and then began to cut and carefully roll up the carpet.

The police were waiting upstairs. Garko abandoned him to shake the hand of a police captain and murmur apologies. "Give us a few more minutes."

"You sure you're not overstepping yourself?" the cop grumbled in nervous displeasure.

"We'd like to handle this as an internal affair. If it gets away from us, we'll backtrack and give you anything you need to cover yourself. You have our word."

"Is Dimitri's kid involved in this?"

"I'll have a man on the way to deal with him by morning. He'll be gone before he's a problem to anyone."

The uniformed officer nodded his satisfaction and looked embarrassed when he saw Bernard staring at him. "Evening, Commissioner. Sorry this had to happen."

The situation was out of Bernard's control. Garko had taken over completely. Garko had a way with people. He was a trouble-shooter, a jack-of-all-trades for an underworld government of evil. Bernard had lived with their kind his entire life. When he thought of Garko and his friends and the Nazis of his youth, he thought of lamprey eels sucking on the

underbelly of humanity. Only on rare occasions could they be deemed symbiotic rather than wholly parasitic. Now was such an occasion. An incident that would have otherwise destroyed his career was being glossed over before his eyes.

When the crowds left the house, Garko stayed behind and poured him a small bourbon. Garko was a small, gaunt man, but he had the narrow eyes of a predator.

"This incident will not sit well with my employers," Garko said. "Or yours."

Bernard took a seat with his drink. "I know what has to be done."

"You will resent Dimitri's death."

Bernard shook his head frantically. "I won't. I won't have my life ruined because of this terrible incident. I've warned my son time and time again that this would happen."

"He's a bad seed, Bernard."

Bernard stared into shadows and collapsed inwardly upon himself. "I know what has to be done."

"There will be only one way you can demonstrate to us your full understanding and cooperation. The finger that pulls the trigger will have to be yours."

Bernard clutched the arms of the chair, feeling his heart begin to pound and the pain spread despite the sedative his doctor had administered. He could see the young doctor pacing nervously in the hall. His shadow flowed across wall as he paced.

Bernard gave Garko a firm nod. "I understand what you are saying, Mr. Garko," he said, eager to settle the issue and bring the doctor to his side for more medication. Left unchecked, the horror of what Garko was suggesting would stop his weakened heart and kill him, and he feared death above all.

"You needn't look him in the eye when you do it," Garko said. "He will not have to know that you are present. But his

blood must be upon your hands and not ours. We will come for you when we are ready."

Garko walked away. He paused halfway across the living room and turned. "Was he drunk?"

"Not so drunk that he did not know what he had done," Bernard said. "Not so drunk that he couldn't chase after that unfortunate child."

"I'm having trouble understanding what has happened here tonight, Bernard. The wound inflicted upon the girl was a clean and deliberate thrust. I suppose it could have been an accident. It doesn't seem likely. Why would Dimitri need to murder the girl? He enjoyed inflicting pain. Dead women don't feel pain."

Bernard turned his head aside in shame. God had punished him for his weakness by allowing the evil of the men he associated with to infect even his seed. He had given birth to a monster. His own soul would be as damned as Dimitri's the day he put a gun to Dimitri's head and pulled the trigger. And still he lacked the courage to stand up for himself. He did not even know what it was he wanted from life. He had never known for certain.

"Why one of Francis' Peugeot's girls?" Garko said. "Francis would never have done willing business with Dimitri. Her standards are a bit higher than that. Do you have any answers for me, Bernard?"

Bernard shook his head hard enough to send his jawls flapping against his neck. "I know nothing of such carnal sins."

"Bernard, we don't want unexpected developments rearing their ugly little heads at a later date. The death of the woman in your house this evening remains a mystery to me. As long as the mystery exists, there exists the potential for unexpected problems."

"I know nothing more," Bernard said, his eyes on the doctor

standing in the doorway with his little black bag of magic. "I know nothing except that Dimitri will die for what he has done. Isn't that enough?"

Garko brushed past the doctor on the way out.

"Isn't that enough?" Bernard called out after him.

Chapter Seven

When Jennifer left the apartment and closed the door behind her, Wanda flopped down in front of the television and floated in a warm and serene universe, wishing that she, too, was young and beautiful again. It seemed like only yesterday that she had been seventeen or whatever uncertain age Jennifer was with all the world lying at her doorstep. Year by year, the world had revealed itself to her as a landfill of corrupt human flesh, not fit for anyone's doorstep. Her place within that tainted world had shrunk so much that it barely encompassed the need to find a healthy vein for the needle she had been using for the past week.

She sensed that something terrible had happened to bring Jennifer crashing into her apartment in the middle of the night. She told herself that she would have only burdened the younger girl in her flight to safety, but she had feared separating herself from the only dependable source of the drugs she needed to survive.

She'd be safe enough left behind. Who'd bother with her? At thirty-five years of age, men weren't paying her the attention

they had in earlier years. Not that she minded. The hassle of Miss Peugeot's high-class lifestyle had taken its toll. It was so much easier to dish it out to slower traffic at fifty bucks a pop from her own apartment. Even the candy man made house calls in the hood.

If she was in any danger herself, it hardly mattered. Pain was tolerable. Pain had been an intimate part of her life for as far back as she could remember, the cold of an unheated flat in the winter, or the impact of a fist against the side of her face, delivered by her father, a drunk john, or a pissed cop. She had tolerance for pain, but none for fear, and fear had crept into every corner of her world, the creeping-type horror like in the movies where a fly with a human head shrieks for help, caught in the web of a large black spider. That would be her fate in life the day she became too old and ugly for anyone at all to bother with at all, johns and cops alike, unloved and unworthy of love, or even of pain. She would become that human fly, misshapen and easy prey for anyone out for a cheap thrill. She had already decided to overdose before that happened.

The tap at the door snapped her back from her foggy ruminations. "Hold your horses!" she called out, climbed back to her feet with a groan, and shuffled her way to the front entrance. Important people knocked at her door from time to time. Men with cash and drugs. Miss Piggy would never approve.

This particular visitor had silver hair and dark eyes. He had a nice smile, and with a faint European accent he said hello to her.

"It's late," Wanda said, suspicious of visitors so late at night. "What do you want?"

His smile was infectiously innocent, but he stepped close and forced her to back away from the door. Only when he filled her field of vision did she notice how pale he was, and the

beads of sweat running off his forehead. His eyes were bright with maniacal fury. "Who was the kid?" he said, keeping his voice low. "Where'd she go?"

Wanda knew better than to volunteer information to a stranger, regardless of how high she was. "What kid?" she muttered in reply.

"Evelyn Haxx and I had a date tonight. The young one must have followed her. I caught her snooping inside my house."

"She's just a kid at that," Wanda said cautiously. She understood now that he was speaking of Jennifer. "She's not usually a problem."

"She was a problem tonight. Where did she go?"

"Talk to Francis about it," Wanda said in a monotone, dimly hoping he'd take no for an answer and leave.

The man chuckled. "I'd like to catch up with her tonight, if at all possible. We have a misunderstanding to clear up."

Wanda kept retreating from the advancing man until she backed against the far wall. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue, trying to sort out the nature of the crisis through her warm fuzzies. Evelyn wouldn't have let a client deal with a problem himself, and Wanda had never known Jennifer to cause trouble. Therefore, her visitor spelled serious trouble all by his lonesome.

"If you had a date with Evelyn, call Evelyn," Wanda said, certain that Evelyn would never have dated the likes of this man.

The man's voice hardened. "I haven't got much time. You know what I want. Where's the girl?"

Some of her old discipline came to her rescue. "Francis handles complaints. It ain't my department."

She heard the snick of the switchblade the same instant his right hand caught her across the throat and slammed her head against the wall. She felt the blade sting her skin just below

her navel. "Again," he said through an unwavering smile. "Where'd she go?"

Wanda spat out the address through the pressure choking her, through her mortal terror. Afterward, she thought that she should have lied and fed him useless information, except that he'd come back and hurt her out of spite.

"That was a good girl."

"You bastard," she managed to spit at him through the pressure against her windpipe.

"The only thing I need from you now is for you to keep your mouth shut, and I know just how to arrange that."

He drew the point of the blade higher, pausing just below her sternum. She didn't think that he meant to hurt her, because his expression smoothed over so peacefully.

"If only you understood the pleasure of it all," he whispered, and the knife plunged so deep that she felt the pressure of his fist against her skin and nothing of the blade itself, at least not for an instant.

The universe exploded in a primal fireball of pain and light. It was like the time she had dropped her hair dryer into the bathtub, a moment of violent chaos and then blackness descending like a protective cloak. That time, she had fallen out of the tub and saved herself. This time, nothing stopped the darkness.

She felt momentary concern for poor little Jennifer. Within fractions of a second, she had no surviving memory of Jennifer, none even for her own existence. The cloak of darkness evaporated into nothingness.

Chapter Eight

The turn-of-the-century Victorian mansion had been overrun by a growing city. Now, it squatted on a meager quarter acre of hillside, surrounded by a rotting stone wall and brownstone tenements. Saplings hid its lower windows from view. A single dim light filtering through the trees was the only evidence Jennifer could see that the house hadn't been abandoned altogether.

She hurried up the steps in front, hoping that Francis had called ahead, and that Ed was waiting for her. The house was part of the old way of doing things, a bridge between the brothel it had once been and a way-station for distressed employees of Miss Peugeot's Secretarial Services. Francis had been talking about selling the property as her business evolved and her taste in girls leaned toward the independence and competence it took to survive modern hazards ranging from AIDS to the computer-aided watchfulness of the IRS. But for this terror-ridden night, it fulfilled its original purpose. A knock on the door brought Ed to the door with his old .38 revolver clutched in his right hand.

Ed went with the house. He, too, was a quality product beginning to wear with age. Ed was in his fifties, carrying too much weight about the middle and reluctant to wear the glasses he needed, but still more than an even match for most of the bad guys Francis dealt with from time to time. Jennifer gave the man a fierce hug and received a fatherly pat on the back in return. "Francis called," the man said gruffly. "Girl, I hope you're wrong about Cathy."

Jennifer burst into tears and endured a bout of violent shudders. Ed closed the door and guided her into the living room. Antiques had been Francis' obsession at one time, and a second justification for the safe house. The property itself was worth a fraction of its content.

Jennifer sat on the edge of an ornate couch. Ed poured her a drink despite her tender age and shoved it into her hands. "Force it down. Did it happen like Francis said? Is Cathy dead?"

Jennifer forced the searing liquid down as instructed and felt it settle into a pool of warmth in her stomach. "He had a skinny sword. There was blood on it."

"Dimitri Carvelli had the sword?"

She nodded again.

"You girls should know better that to go out on your own," he admonished. "Francis knows what the hell she's doing. She said you stopped off at Wanda's before you came here. Didn't you bring her along?"

"She wouldn't come. I couldn't tell her about Cathy. She would have freaked."

Ed went to the phone by the door. He dialed and held the receiver to his ear for long minutes. "She was shooting something," Jennifer called out.

"Heroin?"

"I don't know what it was for sure."

Ed slammed the phone back down after several ominously quiet minutes. "How did you get here?"

"I got away with Cathy's car, but the radiator was leaking and it overheated, and the headlights were broken. I borrowed Wanda's car, but she wouldn't come with me. Ed, go get her. Please?"

Ed tucked the gun in his belt. He went to a metal panel against one wall and began flipping switches to the house's security system. "Don't open a window or an outside door without letting me know. Until Francis can get help and have Dimitri stopped, we have to assume he'll try to cover his tracks. Right now, that means you and Wanda. Get your butt upstairs. Take the back bedroom for the night. Stay put. If you're hungry, raid the kitchen on the way up."

She gave Ed another anxious hug.

"Lock your door," Ed said, his anger softening, his hand dwelling on her shoulder. "There's a loaded twenty-two caliber pistol in the nightstand, just like your own. Do you remember how to use it?"

Ed had showed her. At the time, it had seemed like such a crazy thing to have to learn how to do. "I remember."

Jennifer went upstairs. She locked herself in the bedroom, showered and crawled into bed without bothering to search the dresser drawers for a negligee or robe. She curled in the middle of the old goose-down mattress and pulled the heavy quilt comforter over her head. She sobbed quietly to herself, racked with guilt for leaving Wanda behind and unable to exorcise the memory of Cathy's scream.

In time, Ed tapped at the door. "Can I come in?" his muffled voice sounded. "You don't have to get up. I've got a key."

She opened her eyes to the darkness of the room. The door clicked and opened. Dim light from the hall washed across the wall. Ed sat on the edge of the bed and massaged the back of

her neck with one hand. "How are you doing, kid?"

He knew how she was doing. He could feel her body tremble.

"The cops got a call for the Carvelli estate," Ed said. "I don't know how they're going to handle it, except that nobody wants to see anyone get hurt unnecessarily. If Cathy's still alive, they'll get her help. They'll go after Dimitri. It's out of our hands."

"And Wanda?"

"Francis sent one of the girls to check on Wanda. You and I get to hold down the fort here in case there's further trouble."

Jennifer couldn't imagine the shape and form further trouble might take. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the sensation of Ed's calloused hands kneading her back. "You've grown up, Jennifer," he said after a time. "You're hardly a kid anymore, and you're a darn sight prettier than any of the others. Don't you dare tell them that I told you that."

She murmured her thanks and smiled, and with a gentle pat on the behind, Ed tucked in her blankets and left the room. Exhausted by her flight through the night, Jennifer fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

She awoke hours later to the bed shifting beneath her, and to cool air flooding across her body as her comforter was tossed aside. A heavy body straddled her, pinning her to the mattress. Sprawled on her back, naked, her eyes flew open in shock.

A hand slammed against her throat, cutting off both her breath and the scream that had gathered in her lungs. The dark eyes of a stranger burning with desperation hovered inches above her face. She had seen them only once before. How, she wondered, had he ever found her? How had he gotten past Ed?

His smile was the self-satisfied smile of a predator. He brought his right hand into view and a shiny blade snapped

open, gleaming in the light from the table lamp she had left burning. Jennifer went as rigid as stone.

"It was Evelyn wasn't it?" Dimitri growled at her. "The blonde you was with? Was it Evelyn?"

"It was Cathy!" she gasped defiantly through his hand clutching her throat. Her hands were free. She clawed for his eyes, but she couldn't quite reach, and he only renewed his grip on her throat, cutting off her breath until she clutched at the bed-clothing instead.

His smile went away. The tip of the knife went to her face. "It was Evelyn, you lying little bitch. It had to be Evelyn."

The door behind Dimitri creaked open. Ed stepped into view, his face drained of color, his chest wet with his own blood. Jennifer's eyes widened in shock as he raised his revolver and slowly squeezed off a shot.

The bullet was a fraction of an inch off its target. Dimitri's right ear vanished in a stinging spray of blood. His shriek of pain mingled with Jennifer's own scream of panic. They rolled in opposite directions.

Ed's aim followed Dimitri. He fired a second and a third time. Dimitri rolled away bellowing rage and threw his knife end for end, silencing the revolver, but gasping for air as he clutched bullet wounds in his arm and side.

Jennifer leaped to her feet and ran to Ed, smearing blood down the side of her body as she eased him to the floor. She reached down to pull out the knife, but Ed shook his head frantically. He opened his mouth to speak, but it, too, was full of blood. Even as she watched, his eyes rolled up into his skull and he sighed.

But he was still breathing and Jennifer promised herself that she'd not panic and get herself killed. Dimitri was staggering to his feet, bleeding and dazed. She fled into the bathroom and gathered her clothes. She went through the

connecting door into the adjacent bedroom, and only then remembered that she had bypassed the opportunity to fetch the pistol Ed had given her and shoot Dimitri.

It was too late to backtrack. Besides, Ed had already shot him up pretty badly. She paused and listened to the sounds filter through the walls, but heard nothing except the sound of her own shuddering breathing and the roar of her pulse in her ear. She dressed in the dark as fast as her shaking hands would allow.

Jennifer fled the house. She went out the back way through dingy hallways, setting off the alarms as she went. She circled around front to Wanda's car and leaped inside. There was nothing she could do for Ed except to call Francis. She had nowhere to go to make the phone call except to her own apartment. She drove like a maniac, hoping desperately that Ed was okay and that he had put an end to Dimitri's short but horrid reign of terror.

Jennifer parked in the back of her duplex and hurried up the back stairs, turning on lights through her second floor apartment on her way to the phone. Francis was waiting for her at the other end of the line. In a quavering tone of voice, she told Francis what had happened.

"I'll put in a 911 for Ed," Francis said in a curiously calm tone of voice, "But we have to leave the city until this is settled. It would be safer to leave the state entirely. Do you have your plastic with you?"

Jennifer's plastic consisted of an Illinois driver's license that showed her to be eighteen and a VISA card issued in her name. "What do you want me to do?"

"Jennifer, go home. You know what to do once you get there. Do you think you can handle the responsibility?"

It had always shocked her that Francis should treat her as an equal, better even than most of the older girls in her employ,

even though she had said that she never wanted Jennifer to earn a living in the same way. "Yes, I can do that," she said.

Francis hung up gently. Jennifer refused to put the phone down until she went over a mental list of all she had to do. She then set the handset in place and packed necessary clothing. She cleaned the room of anything of personal value and put it all in one suitcase. And she took her chrome-plated twenty-two caliber, six-shot revolver, the one Ed had given her last Christmas.

Lightning flashed in the sky driving west to the interstate. A brief rain came and went. She left the lightning glowering in the huddled thunder clouds in her rear view mirrors, hoping that Wanda wouldn't be too angry for having taken her car. Three hours later, before the sun had cleared the receding bank of storm clouds in the east, she had crossed the Mississippi River into Iowa and rented a motel room for the day.

She had caught some sleep at the safe house, but she needed a few more hours rest to clear her head. For a time, she lay sobbing in a bed too hard for comfort while a hot and misty day brightened outside. It was over now, she tried to tell herself. Ed had shot Dimitri dead. Even if Dimitri was still alive, she had seen him bleeding. How could he ever hope to track her down so badly hurt? She managed to doze thinking that Francis would straighten everything out as she slept. Cathy and Ed would have been taken to the hospital hours ago. They, too, would be sleeping now, healing. And Dimitri Carvelli would be in jail. Only in the nightmares that haunted her in her sleep did Dimitri wander the darkness, looking for her with his knife clutched in his fist, twisting it, and flicking cold, evil light into her eyes.

Chapter Nine

John Cantrell lay on a rotting mattress in a room walled by cracked plaster, alert to the sound of the gray dusk around him. Men snored and muttered and stumbled elsewhere in the cheap hotel. Outside the room's single window, a cleansing rain fell steadily, moistening a corner of the ceiling where water had seeped through four floors and would continue to seep through the deteriorating frame of the hotel to the basement.

When he heard the car doors slam in the street below, he knew his half-hearted ploy to hide himself from the face of the city had failed. Someone had gone to the trouble to track him down. That someone would be Karl Garko. His face was too well known on the streets. If Garko was looking for him, he had been found all too easily.

They tapped quietly at the door. John stood in the shadows. "Yeah," he muttered. "What is it you want?"

The voice drifted through the heavy wood door. "Garko wants to see you, Mr. Cantrell."

John unlocked the door. There were two of them, walking,

talking apes with oversized physiques and underdeveloped mentalities. The wore dark suits and sunglasses in the dim gray light. "Where and when?" he said.

"Sally's bar on forty-third and Rosemere, Mr. Cantrell. At seven this evening. Mr. Garko said you know the place."

"Yeah, I know the place."

The man looked confused. "You'll be there, right?"

"I'll be there."

The spokesman gave him a respectful nod and nudged his surly partner. They turned away. John closed the door and chained it, wondering what he had done to transgress. Or was it business as usual despite the ultimatum he had given Garko after the last contract? Had he ever really believed that Garko would leave him in peace?

The bar was within walking distance. The only world he had ever known was a square of the downtown area roughly a mile or two along each side. He knew every building and back alley within its perimeter, and most of its unfortunate inhabitants.

The back room at Sally's bar was empty at seven, reserved for Garko's exclusive use. Two diamond-studded women in evening gowns sauntered away as John entered. They were slim, young women who eyed him with fear evident in their big brown eyes. If they had never met John in person, they at least knew of his reputation.

Garko grinned and gestured him forward. The smile turned to ice during the instant it took to signal the bar's bouncer that all was well. The door closed quietly, leaving them alone.

John slipped into the chair across from the man and shoved an empty shot glass aside.

"You're not looking well, John."

"You've been persistent," John said.

Garko chuckled casually. He studied John openly. "I

expected you to leave town. Apparently we're indigenous to this city, you and I, attuned to the environment, so to speak. You had enough money to leave. From what I can see, you haven't spent any of it."

John had nothing to say.

"I have an offer, a contract. I can't give it to my own men. I wouldn't dare give it to an outsider. It has to be someone like you. It has to be you, in fact. Specifically."

John shook his head. "No more contracts, Mr. Garko."

Garko gestured helplessness. "Neither of us have a choice in the matter, John. Even I have people I must answer to. Important people. This is not something you or I can back away from. You're too good, too efficient. And too trustworthy. You're the man for this."

John stared at the man, too numbed with despondency to respond. At various times in the past he had hated and feared Karl Garko. Now, he felt nothing but gray apathy.

"I'm not taking advantage of you, John. You've got to get away from this town if you want to live. You have too many enemies here, too many men who fear and hate you. Maybe you feel you couldn't get away on the few grand you have stashed. I'm offering more. We're not going to barter on this, John. Fifty grand, up front. It's not my money."

"What's the job?"

"It starts with a man named Dimitri Carvelli."

"I know the name."

"Then you know Dimitri is a sick punk. He did an unintelligent thing and he's doing stupid things to cover his tracks. He's liable to mess up important business and important men want him silenced. They want it done quietly and neatly, with nothing left over for the good guys to pick over. Do you want something to drink, John?"

"No, thank you. Is that it? Just another job? Your own men

could handle a simple deletion, Mr. Garko."

"My men don't have your smarts. Smarts is what makes you so dangerous. They make a man self-serving and unpredictable. You see, there's an unfortunate complication in this matter. Dimitri killed a girl, a hooker, but she had a friend with her, so there's a witness to deal with. In all honesty, the witness is as big a problem as Dimitri. She's going to have to go too, you see."

John grew quickly agitated. "I don't kill women, Mr. Garko."

"Dimitri will kill the girl, John. Find him. Wait until he does his thing, then return the favor. That's all I'm asking. You told me you weren't going to work for me again, and I respect your decision, but this is important to us, and you're being paid very well. If you do this for us, you needn't come back. Not ever again."

John's guts were knotted with tension. Taking on Dimitri Carvelli would mean leaving the city. Garko didn't seem to understand the problem that posed for him. Or did he?

Dimitri all but read his mind. "You're a sick man, John. They call it agoraphobia. This neighborhood has become a self-made prison. If you don't break free now, you'll be dead within the year."

It hardly seemed to matter. He had died along with Sasha ages ago. Sasha had been his sister, and brothers weren't meant to see their sisters raped and murdered and left sprawled in the bloodied filth of an alley for the rats to gnaw at. Men weren't meant to ravage their own kind as fiercely as he had taken vengeance on the men responsible for her suffering and death.

Garko had taken advantage of the incident. John had been used, blackmailed. He had killed as instructed from time to time, not out of fear of Garko, but because it kept the rent paid and the hits were inevitably the same kind of men who had

killed Sasha.

"John, are you going to talk to me?"

John focused his eyes. "We have nothing to say to one another, Mr. Garko."

The man stared at him with the calculating intensity of a lizard. "Two women have died, John. Dimitri skewered one of them with an old French rapier. He knifed the other in the heart. He thinks he's covering his tracks, which may be the case, but it's his sick bloodlust at work. Stop him and you'll save the lives of other innocent young women, women who would perhaps remind you of your own flesh and blood."

"I'll kill you if you say her name," John said softly.

Karl Garko leaned back in his seat, unaffected by the threat. "Am I too late? Is there nothing left of your life to salvage? Nothing at all?"

John had wondered that himself. He had managed to stop the killing. Would the depression weighing on his soul lift if he escaped the city? "Where do I find him?" he said, mildly curiosity.

"Moving East. We have a bead on Dimitri. He got shot up a bit, but he's still moving, using a VISA card for gas. He'll find the girl and you'll be there when it happens."

John thought about the offer. Only the deaths he could prevent meant anything to him.

Garko's reptilian eyes darted about his face with calculating interest. Beads of sweat had broken out on his furrowed brow.

"I'll do it."

Garko sighed, sat back in his chair, and chuckled softly to himself. "I thought you were going to give me a nervous breakdown, John."

Chapter Ten

The air-conditioner in the motel room window roared and rattled and failed miserably to hold the summer heat at bay. After having chased off a pesky maid twice, Jennifer got up at two in the afternoon and sat cross-legged in bra and panties on the bed, dabbing at rivulets of sweat with a fistful of the already dampened sheets.

She reached for the phone, set it before her, and dialed the number Francis Peugeot had told her to call during emergencies. She got a recording from an answering service.

"Ed didn't make it. I haven't heard from Wanda. I have no word on Cathy. Dimitri may not have been seriously injured, but he shouldn't be able to find you, or any of the rest of us, at least not without help. I can't imagine who would help him, or why. It's more likely he'll be severely dealt with for the trouble he's caused."

Francis sighed despondently. *"Find us a nice quiet, out-of-the-way place, if you can. You know the area better than we do. It's still safer to hide until this is over."*

Jennifer put the phone down and let the tears fall. Ed had

saved her life. He had sacrificed his own to do it. A part of her refused to believe he could be dead, but another part of her, where he had lived in her memory, became an empty and frightening darkness.

She welcomed the opportunity to get out and explore the area. She had been born and raised somewhere nearby. She had visited for the first time earlier in the year in search of a farmhouse to match the one in the only photograph she had of her childhood. It was a black and white Polaroid showing a child who was supposed to be herself, a house, and people who may or may not have been family members. None of the scenery along the river associated with vague memories of childhood. She hadn't found a match to the house in the picture.

Francis had promised to help her pry more information from the Californian foster-care bureaucracy, but Francis had been running from the law herself when they fled the state together last year. Jennifer wouldn't pressure her to fulfill her promise until things settled down, if they ever would.

She dressed in the outfit that made her look older than her adolescence, a black, snug-fitting, single-piece dress and matching high-heels. Maybe she'd pass for twenty. She had no idea of her actual age, anywhere between fifteen and eighteen. Too much of the past had blurred, and someone had destroyed her birth records ten or more years ago.

She put on a flashing gold choker necklace, earrings, and fixed her hair back with a golden barrette. With a touch of pink lipstick and an enthusiastic comb through silken hair that almost reached the small of her back, she thought she looked every bit the role of savvy young businesswoman. She had no memory of ever having thought of herself as a child.

She went out for a newspaper, something to eat, and returned to the slightly cooler motel room to scour the paper

for a suitable refuge for Peugeot's Secretarial Services. She sipped on a Pepsi, munched on a blueberry bagel, and ran a finger down the want ads. She concentrated on furnished houses and phoned three prospects that didn't pan out.

She then went through advertisements for furnished apartments and talked to a man who seemed eager to show her any one of six unoccupied apartments in a newly renovated apartment building. She took note of an apology in the man's tone of voice when he informed her that the apartments were a ten mile drive down the river highway, but its isolation was a plus as far as Jennifer was concerned, and the apartments were equipped with appliances and some furniture.

She made an appointment for six that evening. She abandoned the motel room and drove Wanda's red Toyota to a nearby mall where she raided a money machine and tapped her VISA card for three hundred dollars, the most it would give her in one day. At six that afternoon, she idled ten miles outside town at the base of a hill that looked too steep for Wanda's old Toyota to climb. Along the crest of the hill all but hidden by a line of trees stood an old brown brick building looking for all the world like a stone castle overlooking the nearby Mississippi. This would be her destination, assuming she could reach it.

With clenched teeth and with a sigh of self-commiseration, she slipped the car into gear and tapped the accelerator. The car's suspension bottomed out in an erosion ditch blocking her way. The engine chugged mightily. A glance in her mirror showed a billowing blue-gray cloud of burning oil blocking the lovely river scenery. But the car reached the crest of the hill before both the oil and overheat warning lights blinked on in bright red.

The engine coughed and stalled. Rather than risk a crippled entrance onto the scene, she let the car coast in alongside a beige Cadillac with tinted windows. A thin, weak-chinned man

dressed in an immaculate tennis outfit emerged from behind the wheel followed by a fat woman from the passenger's side wearing too much jewelry and make-up.

The man had introduced himself over the phone as Dr. Leroy Reinhart, a local chiropractor. He greeted her with a sultry smile that clouded his wife's pudgy face with displeasure, a woman he introduced simply as Madge. "And you must be Jennifer."

Jennifer retained a severe expression she hoped would help hide her youth and pass her off as a representative of an employer worth taking seriously. She studied the building with its turret facade on four corners. Close-up, the wear and tear of age was more evident. According to Leroy, there were four downstairs apartments and four upstairs, recently redecorated. The building had no tenants at present. Francis would like the set-up, if she could pull it off.

But it was then that Leroy began rattling off demands for security payments and six-month leases. The apartments would be renting for four hundred apiece per month.

Jennifer had only one counter-offer to make. "Three hundred deposit to hold the entire building until my employer arrives this evening, Mr. Reinhart," Jennifer said in her best poker face. "You and she can negotiate from there."

Leroy's eyes narrowed. "The whole building?"

Jennifer shrugged, feigning disinterest in the details of the negotiation. She removed the cash from her handbag and counted through it with mock boredom. "There will be eight of us. I don't know for how long Francis will be interested in leasing the apartments." Jennifer looked up at the man. "You may want to hear her offer before you dismiss us out of hand."

Leroy eyed the money and grimaced in pain. "I'm not sure what guarantees I can make."

"A nonrefundable deposit," Jennifer said, knowing that

Francis would be pleased with her find. They'd never find a better place of refuge than this.

Madge nudged her husband. "It won't hurt to talk to the lady, Leroy."

Sensing a bit of financial desperation in their behavior, Jennifer studied the property again for evidence of shortcomings. The outside of the house glowed an elegant rose tint in a shaft of sunlight peeking from behind thinning clouds. The exterior was neatly trimmed in aluminum doors and windows, gutters and downspouts. A meticulously mowed side and front lawn gave way to the uncontrolled mass of saplings that held the steep front and side hill in place. From the back drive, the house looked to be surrounded by trees, but she suspected the front, second floor view would overlook the Mississippi.

"Nobody's living here yet?" Jennifer wanted confirmed.

"Just Gabby, the manager and handyman," Leroy assured her. "He has one of the basement apartments.

"Gabby did most of the renovation on the property," Madge added.

Leroy and Madge exchanged pained looks that warned Jennifer of the first potential stumbling block of her acquisition. "Maybe I'd better introduce the two of you and show you around," Leroy said.

Leroy went in search of the man. Madge rounded the car to keep Jennifer company, or to keep her from escaping. Madge wore a heavy tan dress engineered to hide her weight. Diamonds sparkled in the late afternoon sunlight from fingers of both hands and a matching necklace and earrings.

"Is there going to be some problem with Gabby?" Jennifer said.

"Gracious, no! He's a bit rough around the edges, is all. But you can see for yourself how well he's renovated this horrid

place."

Madge offered a strained, apologetic smile. "A poor choice of words, I know. Financially, it's been a nightmare. You can't see it from here, but there's a Catholic convent nearby. This spring, they broke grounds for what was to have been a girl's school, a prestigious girl's school, we heard. We acquired and renovated this property assuming we would have tenants by now."

Madge shrugged in misery. "They dug and poured some foundation, and then the project was stopped. We don't know exactly what happened except that it's going to be dreadfully difficult to find quality tenants so far from town, and we have a frightful mortgage payment to cover."

Two men exited a side entrance of the house, Leroy and a grisly giant of a man dressed in coveralls and paint-splattered boots. Jennifer pegged him to be in his late fifties. His leering grin revealed a mouth of nice teeth. Bright blue eyes glistened with mischievous intelligence.

"Jennifer, this is Gabby," Leroy said as the pair approached. "Gabby, this is the young lady I've told you about. If we're lucky, we'll have us some good tenants after all."

Gabby grunted reluctant acknowledgment, clearly satisfied living in his empty house. But he eyed Jennifer with enthusiastic approval on another, more primal level.

Leroy threw his arm about the old man's shoulders. "Let's show the young lady what we've got, shall we? You run on ahead and make sure everything's unlocked for inspection."

Gabby turned away to do Leroy's bidding. Leroy waited until he had vanished from view. "Gabby doesn't look like much, but he's a genius, I assure you. He masterminded everything you are about to see."

Jennifer sensed something overdone about the cheerful camaraderie between the two. Still, she was duly impressed. The side entrance opened upon a hallway that transversed the

ground floor. There were two front apartments and two rear apartments on each floor, and two floors to the building, not including the basement. The floors were freshly tiled. Original woodwork had been refinished, and the walls painted. The halls were illuminated by fluorescent panels set in suspended ceilings.

Leroy showed Jennifer each of the downstairs apartments. The apartments were sparsely, but adequately furnished. "Everything one needs, but plenty of room for accessories," Leroy said. Madge was bringing up the rear, huffing and puffing to keep up. "Madge was our interior decorator. Considering the tight budget we had to stick with, I think she did a great job."

The apartments were tastefully painted in matching pastels. The windows had lacy curtains and Venetian blinds in place. The kitchens boasted brand new refrigerators and stoves. The living rooms were carpeted and the front apartments looked out over the front lawns through magnificent bay windows. Living rooms had a simple couch and matching chair as decor and the bedroom a double bed and dresser.

"Nice," Jennifer had to admit. Inexpensive, but well executed.

"Wait until you see the upstairs apartments."

The upstairs apartments were the same, except for the view from the two front apartments. From the second floor perspective, Jennifer could see over the trees. The vista of the gray and white city on the horizon and the river stretching out before them appeared to view, all mist-enshrouded by the haze from the early morning shower Jennifer had slept through. A small town lay on the far bank of the river, looking for all the world like an expensive miniature of shiny white, early nineteenth-century village complete with church spires. There

were more than a few colorful sailboats in view on the winding, deep blue waters.

From one of the rear apartments, she could see the distant spire of the Catholic Church and the nunnery Madge had mentioned. Adjacent along the hill facing the river, a number of expensive houses could be seen among the trees.

"It is a bit far from town," Jennifer said to take the smug smile from Leroy's face. "although the price is fair."

Leroy sighed and the smile faded. Madge tugged on her husband's sleeve. "I can make a more attractive package deal on the entire building," he said. "I'll be more than glad to speak with your employer, Miss Wessner."

"Are the phones connected?" Jennifer had a cell phone in her purse, but one reserved for emergencies only.

"Gabby's got one in the basement you can use. All the apartments have their own line, but you'll have to call the phone company to have them hooked up."

"Can I use this apartment for the day? I'll have to leave a message with my employer. She should be in town sometime this evening, as I mentioned."

"We can stop back in the morning," Leroy suggested without missing a beat.

Jennifer rationed a smile. "That would be convenient."

"Will you be okay here alone?" Madge said worriedly.

Leroy frowned his displeasure. "Madge, the young woman will be fine. Gabby will look after her."

Jennifer pegged Leroy with a severe look that warned of her fierce independence. "I'll be fine. Will you accept my deposit now?"

Gabby reappeared in the hall doorway, making it a perfect opportunity to let the men see a flash of sunlight off the chrome barrel of the revolver in her purse. Leroy turned promptly ashen. Gabby glanced at her in alarm.

Leroy recovered and gracefully accepted the folded stack of bills. "Madge, write the young lady a receipt."

Leroy scratched a number on it when Madge finished. "Our phone number. If it's not too late this evening, give us a call. Otherwise, will noon tomorrow do for a deadline?"

Hopefully. "That should do fine," Jennifer said. She tucked the receipt in her purse and snapped it closed.

Leroy turned to his wife. "Well, we've got places to go and people to see."

Madge smiled feebly. "I hope everything works out. This room has such a wonderful view."

When the couple left, she could hear Gabby moving things about in the basement. Jennifer verified that the lights and water were turned on and inspected the apartment a bit more carefully. She frowned at the full-length mirror set against the wall backing the bathtub. It seemed an odd feature, but she shrugged it off as a peculiar taste in décor and went in search of the gnarled old man named Gabby and his telephone.

She walking up behind him in the gloom of the basement and managed to startle him. "I'd like to use the phone, please."

Gabby grunted acknowledgment and avoided eye contact on the way through the clutter. His apartment had a ceiling low enough to force him to dip his head on the way through the door. Otherwise, the one large room was compact and neat. An air-conditioner hummed high up one wall, tucked in a former basement window.

Gabby handed her a cordless. Jennifer sat on the edge of a couch and punched out the number Francis had given her. A recorder clicked in. *"This is Francis, Jennifer. Leave your message and a number and I'll get back to you within the hour. Emily and I are ready to fly out the moment I receive your call. You'll have to pick us up at the Moline International airport."*

Jennifer gave the address of the apartment building and

the number on the phone in her hand. "We have eight furnished apartments, pretty much ready to go, if you can swing a deal. We're ten minutes from the Quad Cities. I'll pick you up when you call."

She hung up and handed the phone back. Gabby grinned nervously. "If there's anything I can help you with, Miss, just let me know."

Jennifer smiled at the man. "I'll be getting an important phone call soon..."

Gabby raised a finger, sidestepped, and reached for a second handset. "Got a spare, both on the same line. Works anywhere in the house or yard. Battery should be okay for the night."

Jennifer laughed. "Great. Just what the doctor ordered."

"I'll let you answer the phone if it rings. If it's for me, just yell out. I'll hear you through the heater ducts."

"Am I going to be calling you Gabby? Would you prefer something more formal?"

He grimaced. "Gunther Wernhauten is the name, Miss. Wanna call me Mr. Wernhauten?"

"I see. Gabby it is, then." She gestured with the phone and brushed past the man. "I'll bring it back as soon as I get my call."

"You'll be needing keys to the apartments," his low voice rumbled at her. "I'll fetch a set for each and have them ready for you."

She could feel his eyes on her wending her way back through a basement littered with tools and supplies that had gone into the renovation of the building. Jennifer wondered if he had worked entirely alone, and how long it had taken. Getting old, she thought to herself, but physically fit and still captivated by a nice perfume and the sway of a woman's hip. She'd draw a bit of conversation from him later, drop a

compliment or two, and he'd be putty in her fingers for the duration of their stay.

She went outside to the car, tucked the telephone in a suitcase, and carried the two suitcases and an overnight bag to the upstairs apartment. She'd have to shop for a few groceries and supplies before she could settle in. Francis would make that call. She sat at the window overlooking the river and made out a shopping list on the back of an envelope should Francis approve.

The phone rang. She fetched it from the suitcase and had it to her ear in an instant. "This is Jennifer."

"Moline International, nine forty-five this evening."

Jennifer repeated the time.

"Jennifer, I have terrible news. And I must warn you. Wanda is dead."

Jennifer put her free hand to her forehead and took a deep breath. "Francis, this line is not secure."

"No matter. I've got to warn you. It's you he's trying to stop before you can talk about what happened. Do you have the means to defend yourself?"

Francis was referring to the gun. "Yes."

"He may have followed you."

"He's hurt," Jennifer said, thinking that she could have shot him herself, just to be sure he was dead, if she could have been so cold-blooded.

"His life is on the line," Francis said. "He'll move as fast as he can. He caught Cathy and Wanda off guard. And Ed. Don't let the same thing happen to you."

"I won't."

"But you do have a safe place to stay?"

"You'll like it, I promise."

"Until this evening, then."

Jennifer's arm turned to lead. The phone clattered to the

floor. Her breath kept catching in her throat, and a sharp stab of panic jangled her nerves.

Jennifer had the chrome-plated pistol clutched in her right hand when Gabby tapped at her door an hour or so later. She kept it hidden behind her back when she handed the cordless back to him.

He had eavesdropped. She could tell by his shaken expression. He handed her a ring of keys and gave her a curt nod. "I'll be downstairs. You'll be safe up here, Miss."

Jennifer listened to him go down the stairs before she closed and locked her door.

Chapter Eleven

Jennifer left the apartment an hour before her nine forty-five appointment to pick up Francis at the airport. With the sun on its way below the horizon, she stopped at the first filling station along the way and enlisted the aid of a counter clerk to help her check the fluid levels of Wanda's abused Toyota. Both were low, but the eager young mechanic offered to take personal care of her fluid levels, and with a crooked grin at his clever little entendre, checked her windshield washer and transmission fluid level to boot. Everything was low.

"Bring her back and we'll do plugs and a new PCV valve," he offered and happily processed her VISA. Francis advised silence and a coy smile as the best way to handle hormone-smitten young males, but when she drove away into the darkening evening, she admitted the car did run better with its fluid levels attended to. Sooner or later, despite Francis' admonishments, she'd have to have her own attended as well. Horny young men tended to stir her own untried passions more and more frequently and with increasing intensity.

Emily Pike and Francis were waiting for her at the entrance to the airport terminal, one figure tall and slender and the other short and stout, both clearly upset as they hurried to the car pulling to the curb and tossed their luggage in the rear of the hatchback.

"You don't dare drive this car again," Francis murmured as she climbed huffing and puffing into the front seat and filled the interior with the powerful stench of perfume. "Rent one in the morning. Park this in an out of the way place and remove the plates."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Emily gracefully maneuvered her long legs into the back seat and slammed the door behind her.

In addition to the perfume, Francis wore too much make-up when upset. Her skin looked like porcelain, her painted eyebrows a bit crooked, and her lips a ghastly crimson slash in a chubby face, although Jennifer had long since learned to see beyond superficial appearances. She drove away in silence, confident that Francis had the situation under control.

"I don't understand what's happening," Francis said, dashing her hopes in the next instant. "I have friends in the police department. They tell me their hands are tied. They tell me Dimitri will be taken care of, but I get no guarantee of safety for my girls. How dare they."

Francis simmered in anger, already scheming her vengeance for men who could not be trusted.

"Have you done any shopping, child?"

"No," Jennifer said, "but I did a shopping list."

Two miles from the terminal, Jennifer pulled into a twenty-four hour drug and supermarket and parked near the entrance. Francis turned in her seat and spoke to Emily. "I must talk with Jennifer alone."

Jennifer handed Emily the shopping list. "You'll need help."

We need sheets, blankets, towels and stuff. You can't carry it all by yourself."

Emily gave a cool smile. "Are you that certain we're ready to set up housekeeping?"

Jennifer looked to Francis. "The caretaker may have overheard our conversation."

"How did he react?"

"He was nice to me. Protective."

Francis mulled over the problem. "If he causes a problem later, we'll deny his interpretation of what was said and leave. We're using false identities and I have my own attorneys on hand should we need them. We should be able to keep one step ahead of trouble. Emily?"

Emily gave the woman a sober nod. "We'll evaluate the location and circumstance when we see it. We're good to go for now."

Emily left the car to do her shopping. Francis lay her hand on Jennifer's arm and scanned the nearly empty parking lot until Emily was safely inside the store. "Child, I'm so sorry this had to happen. Tell me everything that happened in as much detail as you can remember."

Jennifer sniffed back a few tears that tried to escape and went back over the events of the previous evening. Francis had a thousand questions, and Jennifer suffered through the interrogation patiently.

"On the surface, it is what I would have suspected," Francis said. "If only the girls would listen to me. I know the men best for them and for the business."

"Did he mean to do it?" Jennifer said, hoping Francis would tell her that it had been nothing but an accident and that Dimitri would sober and come to his senses.

Francis stared into the night, unsettled and preoccupied. "Child, I'm not sure what has happened. Ed had friends, a few

still in the force. I'll hear more in the days to come. Please understand that the Carvellies have connections with organized crime. The mob is trying to cover up this incident, and they have some control over the police. That means if Dimitri is stopped, it will not be the police who will stop him. What I fear is that they will allow him to try to cover his own tracks. I know they have a dossier on us. They can help him to dig his own grave, and ours right along side it."

Jennifer began to tremble as the implications of Francis' fears billowed like storm clouds in her thoughts. She sucked in her breath rather than burst into sobs. Francis had no patience for tears. "Are they going to try to kill me?"

"Dimitri may have already missed the opportunity," Francis said. "He has three deaths on his head already. But Cathy, Ed, and Wanda had no forewarning. If he dares try again, then he is indeed a fool to think us helpless."

"I'll shoot him myself," Jennifer said bitterly.

"We wield more weight than that, child. The Carvellies know that I have files of my own on important people. I can use them as a weapon of self-defense, or vengeance." Francis smiled grimly. "A man's testicle is like a nose-ring. The fools are vulnerable in that respect, my dear. They come to me because my girls are discrete and clean, but they pull their pants down in the metaphorical and well as the physical sense of the word when they indulge themselves. They tend to hobble themselves doing so."

Jennifer burst into tears despite herself, and Francis reached for her, and cradled her for a time. "You are too young for this. Your childhood was stolen from you, and I don't know how to return it to you."

Jennifer pulled back. "I'm okay. Honest, Francis. I don't want to be no stupid kid."

"Yes, but we should watch our grammar, even when upset."

Within the hour, Emily pulled up alongside the car with a shopping cart heaped with household supplies and some groceries. Francis helped Emily load the sacks into the back of the cramped car, and Jennifer could no longer see through the rear-view mirror when they pulled back onto the highway and began the long drive to the apartment.

The silence gathered, and Jennifer felt Emily's cold stare as she drove. They were both thinking the same thought in that moment, she was certain, that Francis' relationship with their teen-age mascot was entirely personal, and her relationship with her working girls was, for the most part, strictly business and largely impersonal. None of the girls appreciated the arrangement, although they had never mistreated or resented Jennifer because of it.

Another related issue was on all of their minds now, Jennifer was willing to bet, the wisdom of entrusting a child with the task Francis had put upon her. But Francis beamed a smile when Jennifer pulled up the hill to the mock castle, and Emily murmured. "Oh, yes, this will do just fine."

Dark turrets loomed overhead against the stars.

"Is the entire building empty?" Francis said in disbelief.

"I gave the owner three hundred dollars deposit for the whole thing," Jennifer said. "He says he wants four hundred for each apartment and a six month lease, but I think he needs money pretty bad."

"We'll work something out," Francis purred and clasped her hands in her lap in prim satisfaction.

Jennifer pulled into the narrow parking lot behind the apartment building. The Toyota had made it up the hill with three people in the car-- with its fluid levels properly topped off.

Leaving their groceries and supplies for the moment, Francis and Emily followed Jennifer around the side of the

house, through dimly lit halls and up the central staircase. Jennifer turned on the lights in her apartment.

Francis and Emily made a cursory examination of the three rooms and wound up at the window overlooking the river and the scattering of lights on the far side that glowed out over the water. "What could be more ideal?" Francis murmured.

Emily turned away. "I'll get the stuff."

Jennifer followed her, and then Francis, rather than being left behind alone. At the base of the staircase, they paused as Gabby pounded up the stairs from the basement to check out the sound of multiple footsteps in the upstairs corridors. He looked up at the women on the staircase in mild alarm, the hall lights casting deep shadows across his unshaven face and rendering him a terrifying figure emerging from the darkness.

Jennifer noticed Emily's hand slip into her purse, and she hurried ahead to defuse the confrontation. "This is Gabby," she said, putting her hand on the man's arm. "He's the manager and caretaker, and I'll bet he'll give us a hand carrying up our things."

Gabby flashed a nervous smile at Jennifer's gracious introduction and followed in silence out to the car. He flipped a switch at the back door and floodlights came on outside, illuminating the entire circumference of the house.

"Excellent," Francis said.

"They got motion detectors," Gabby said. "Cats and coons keep them going on and off all night. Want me to leave them on anyhow?"

"If you would," Francis said.

Gabby kept close by Jennifer's side and looked to her for directions when they reached the upstairs apartment, each with both arms filled with the handles of burgeoning plastic bags. "Just put it down anywhere," Jennifer told the man.

Francis watched the man amble away. "He's enamored of

you, child."

Jennifer managed a broad grin. "Yep, he sure is."

"We'll leave the man to your care. Is there more than one apartment for us to use?"

Jennifer showed her the rear apartment directly behind her own. "Four up and four down. Gabby should have keys."

Francis turned on all the lights and nodded satisfaction. "We'll sleep here tonight, Emily. Jennifer, please ensure that our host has all the downstairs windows and doors locked for the night."

Gabby was nowhere to be seen on the ground floor, forcing her through the obstacle course of the dark basement. She tapped at the door to the basement apartment. Gabby opened the door, a dark and silent silhouette exuding an odd nervousness that Jennifer attributed to having strangers in the house, especially young women tracking him down in the middle of the night. Despite his age, Jennifer could tell that he was affected by her presence in that special way. "Francis says to please make sure all the downstairs doors and windows are locked," she said with a smile.

"We're snug as bugs in a rug." He handed her rings of keys bound by a nylon tie. "Is there anything else you'll be needing, miss?"

"No, I think we'll be fine."

"Tell your friends that I make a good watchdog. I'll keep a special eye on things tonight."

"Thanks for everything, Gabby. I really appreciate having you around."

Jennifer returned to her room to find her share of the supplies on the floor, including sheets, a thin blanket, pillow and pillow case. Jennifer passed the keys to Francis, carried a sack of toiletry articles to the bathroom, and put them away. Attention to detail was typical of Francis' expectations for her

girls. If Cathy and Wendy had obeyed the rules, both would still be alive.

Francis tapped at her door while she was undressing. In bra and panties, she cracked the door.

"Emily's going to stay up most of the night and sleep during the morning," Francis said. "I've set the alarm for eight. You'll phone our host at that time and make arrangements for me to meet with him. And then attend to the cars. I'll have new identification for you to use, child. Cut up the Visa card now. I've made several transactions with it by phone in Des Moines and Sioux City." She flashed a smile at her cleverness. "If it's traced, they'll think we're on the move."

Jennifer snipped the plastic card into pieces and flushed it down the toilet. She stripped in front of the mirror while the water ran in the bathtub, eager for a hot, soapy bath. The size of the mirror made her feel tiny and vulnerable, like some naked little mouse surrounded by a dark night infested with claws, fangs, and eagle-like beaks.

The other girls would love the mirrors, the vain bitches. Jennifer smiled to herself, knowing herself to be as beautiful as any of them, not that she'd ever be tempted to follow in their footsteps. Francis wanted her to finish school and had offered to pay for college.

After her bath, she lay in bed in the darkened bedroom thinking she'd find a man in college, a doctor, or engineer, who wouldn't be able to resist all the things she'd been taught by her friends about how to please a man, although she hadn't as yet tried any of them. She wouldn't be like Francis, a man hater, or Emily and Sally, who liked each other more than any of the men in their lives. Francis had trashed her collection of romance novels, claiming them to be unrealistic and harboring dangerous attitudes about men, but not before Jennifer had sampled ideas of romance and passion based entirely on

unselfish love. Her own private feelings told her that idealism was at least something to reach for, even if the nice things in life sometimes didn't last forever, and sometimes ended so tragically.

Chapter Twelve

Jennifer awoke to Francis' tap at the door at eight o'clock the next morning. Groggily, she dressed, went to the basement, and asked Gabby through a closed door to call Larry Reinhart.

Emily had purchased a coffee maker the previous evening, providing Jennifer with a hot cup of coffee before leaving on her mission to replace the Toyota. Francis gave her a new credit card and admonishments to rent at least a midsize car with a V-six engine. "Keep your gun in your purse, your eyes open, and don't you dare risk a single traffic violation."

Jennifer rented a shed in a storage facility for six months, gave a passing teenage boy ten dollars cash to remove the plates to the car, and locked the Toyota away. She dropped the plates in a trash barrel, phoned for a cab and rented a full-sized sedan with a V-eight engine. She shopped for a few more useful items, and returned to the apartment in time to watch Leroy pull up in his white Caddy.

Jennifer called from the side door for Francis to come down, a call that brought Gabby from the bowels of his

basement as well. Leroy and Gabby exchanged a low volume, rapid-fire exchange of words before Francis waddled into view.

"Gabby might snitch on us about what Gabby heard over the phone when you called me last night," Jennifer said quietly to Francis. "But Mr. Reinhardt's a bit on the greedy side, and there's something's fishy between those two. They've got something up their sleeve."

Francis continued on with a thoughtful nod, extending her hand as she reached Leroy waiting in the shaded yard along the west side of the building. She introduced herself in her most refined manner and offered no explanation at all as to why she and a growing number of lovely young women wanted to rent the out-of-the-way apartment building. "Or stay will be limited," Francis concluded, "but I will be willing to lease the entire apartment for a one month minimum, cash in advance. We have business in town that will last at least that long. Jennifer said you mentioned a four hundred dollar price her month on each of the apartments."

Leroy sighed unhappily. "Make it thirty-eight hundred for the month in advance, and I'll include utilities and Gabby's services for any problems that might creep up. We can forget about the security deposit. I'm not sure I'd want to take a check."

"I'm sure my bank has a local branch. We can do a cash or electronic transfer."

Jennifer went upstairs to put supplies away. Francis joined her fifteen minutes later. "Bertha and Sally will be here soon. Valerie's taking a flight in. She'll take a cab to a motel and we'll pick her up sometime this evening or tomorrow morning. I want to keep Emily here at the apartments for security. I've sent the out-of-town girls on vacations in Europe and South America until this is over."

Jennifer nodded acknowledgment.

"Wanda's body is being shipped to her parents in Oregon for burial. Ed's will specified cremation. I've heard that there was no body found at the Carvelli mansion. Cathy is listed as missing, but I have no reason to doubt your story about what happened to her. They'll pay for it, I promise."

Jennifer locked herself in her bathroom, knelt before the toilet, and spent the next half hour being sick.

Early in the afternoon, Gabby came out to her as she wandered the perimeter of the trees for a breath of fresh air. "Are you feeling better, Miss?"

For a fraction of a second, his concern was as innocent as it was genuine. The incongruity struck a moment later.

How did he know that she had not been well?

Jennifer suppressed any visible reaction and thanked him for his concern. She touched his arm and asked about his family to divert his train of thought away from his gaffe. She wanted Gabby on her side regardless of his nefarious secrets.

He dipped his head. "Long time ago, wife and kid. Long time before that, a brother and sister. Dead. Accidents, cancer, a suicide. I outlived them all."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged off her concern. "Happens all the time."

"That doesn't make it easier."

He glanced at her, surprised by the bite in tone of voice. "No, it sure don't make it easier."

"How long have you been working for Mr. Reinhart?"

Gabby wrinkled his nose. "Two years. Leroy always has something going, some scheme to make more money, as if he needs more. He's like a kid sometimes. He likes to screw around just for something to do."

"What was the deal with the Catholic school?"

The subject brought Gabby to life. "Spanish girls from Mexico and South America. Orphans. We heard about fifty. Me

and Leroy figured maybe they were trying to import prospective nuns, bring them up north and educate them."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"Well, it never got off the ground. Chickens got counted before they were hatched, maybe before the hen got screwed by the rooster."

"Leroy's count, I gather."

Gabby shrugged. "Maybe he heard it wrong. He thought we'd make a killing. Now we've got a white elephant on our hands. You guys are buying us the time we need to find long-term renters."

Cries of greeting sounded from the parking lot. Sally and Bertha had arrived, and Sally and Emily were sharing tears for their fallen comrades.

Gabby went back inside as if alarmed by the newcomers. Jennifer rounded the corner to see Emily and Sally embracing one another with more than just a friendly greeting. The two had never managed to hide the nature of their relationship from anyone but themselves. After a time, they looked guiltily around to see who was watching, ignoring tiny Bertha gathering their bags from the trunk of an old car. Another car to ditch, Jennifer supposed.

Bertha spotted Jennifer and joined her. Together, they watched Emily regain her usual sobriety. Sally, too, returned to being her usual aloft, ethereal beauty capable of bringing in over a thousand dollars a night from some of the world's richest men, just as Emily could rack in almost as much from men who like to be whipped and spanked and didn't feel deserving of softer, more beautiful women.

Francis hustled everyone upstairs and filled the two newcomers in on the fate of Cathy, Ed, and Wanda. Emily and Sally went off together talking in hushed tones. Jennifer showed Bertha her apartment.

Bertha flopped face down onto the couch and buried her face in the cushions. Wearing jeans and a white blouse, she looked more the part of a local tomboy than one of Francis' girls. Bertha would be the one to feel out Gabby for his naughty secrets. At five-two in height, Bertha weighed in at about one hundred pounds and had a cute face and perky, high breasts, the kind of unspoiled youth that older men preferred. Bertha was the closest a paying customer could come to statutory rape and incest without crossing those hazardous boundaries.

"I'm bushed," Bertha said.

"Take a nap."

Bertha glanced up at her. "I heard what Cathy did. I feel so bad for her. Was Wanda high?"

Jennifer nodded.

"Francis slipped up," Bertha said. "She got too sentimental about poor Ed. He was getting too old to deal with serious trouble."

"Ed was like a father to me," Jennifer said in protest.

Bertha shrugged in self defense. "Me, too, but I don't want to have to feel too sad about him getting killed the way he did. He would have thought it a fit ending, dying to protect us girls. Men age more gracefully than women, up to a certain point. After that point, they don't seem to enjoy life very much."

"I guess."

Bertha bounced to her feet. "So, what's to eat? And who's the old fart I saw go in the side way?"

Jennifer went through the meager groceries purchased the night before. She held up packages of Chinese noodles and breaded pork chops that could be served in under fifteen minutes. Bertha gave a shrug of borderline approval.

"That was Gabby," Jennifer said. She dumped the noodles in a pan with some water and threw the pork chops in the oven. She filled Bertha in on her suspicions about Gabby,

Leroy, and the house. "They were expecting to rent the apartments to a bunch of girls. I've got a bad feeling about it. I like Gabby, but you can probably get more out of him than me. Francis doesn't want me touching."

"I'll wring him out for you and hang him up to dry," Bertha said cheerfully. "Squeeze every godblessed dirty secret from his tarnished old soul."

"Don't hurt him," Jennifer scolded.

"I won't hurt him. If I like him, I'll make him feel twenty years-old again. After all, I've got to keep my skills honed while we're out here in the boonies, and he's all I got to work with. The rest of you can play with your vibrators. Emily can play with Sally, of course."

Jennifer gritted her teeth and sighed. "God, if they heard you say that, Emily would shoot you."

"What the hell, we all talk about you behind your back, you prissy little virgin."

Jennifer looked around in mock horror. Bertha shrieked laughter, enticing Jennifer to chase her into the bathroom where the door slammed in her face and locked a split second none too soon.

"I'll pepper your noodles, you horrible little girl!"

Francis' shrill voice sounded from the apartment door as the older woman walked by. "You two girls behave yourselves! We will have a meeting in one hour!"

Within the hour, they gathered in the living room of the third upstairs apartment Francis had chosen for herself. "Valerie hasn't called yet," she announced. "When she does, I'll will expect each of you to decide whether you wish to remain together here as a group or take a vacation overseas as the other girls have done.

"Emily, I would prefer that you remain with me. Jennifer, I cannot absolutely guarantee your safety. I don't know who to

turn to for help. With Ed gone, I feel so terribly helpless. I hate being threatened by men and then depending on men to defend us against their brutish nature."

Francis paced the room, thinking out loud. "Valerie is the least stable emotionally. I'll send her away."

"Sally will stay with me," Emily said bluntly. "I don't think the situation is serious, Francis. Dimitri Carvelli was injured."

"We cannot afford to be optimistic," Francis said severely. "If the mob wants the witness to Cathy's murder silenced, they may send someone to finish what Dimitri started."

All eyes turned to Jennifer.

"I'll stay with Jennifer," Bertha said casually.

"It's quiet in Chicago," Francis said. "I can't get a word on what is happening from my usual sources. If you see strangers lurking about, they may prove as dangerous as Dimitri, or our only salvation, depending on how the mob decides to call the shots. If you see suspicious men following you, or watching, pretend not to see them, but defend your lives with deadly force if the need arises."

"If it comes down to that," Emily said grimly, "shoot to kill. Remember to make it a head shot. If you shoot to wound a man, you're liable to feed your bullet to Kevlar, and they'll be laughing at you when he shoots back.

"I've tried to teach you all a few basic street fighting moves," Emily added. "Keep your hat pins on your person, and your pepper spray clipped to your purse strap. And whatever you do, do not attract the attention of the police. Look and behave ordinary."

"Ordinary?" Bertha said. They all looked around at one another and laughed nervously.

Chapter Thirteen

Older men required special handling. Gone were the days when they could hope to attract a younger woman with a cute butt, a flashy smile of real teeth, or their athletic prowess. Money and power were all they had to offer, which was fine with Bertha Ruse. Older men tended to have more money and power than young men, and what else was the business of sex for hire all about?

Francis had a hiring policy, qualifications prospective employees of her agency had to meet. One had to enjoy the profession. Therefore, elegant Evelyn Haxx liked her rich johns and their expensive dinner parties. Soft and vulnerable Valerie Dean enjoyed being the helpless victim of the rough and tumble type, although simple bondage with soft nylon weave rope was the kinkiest Francis allowed. Emily could get a bit rougher with her customers, although Francis drew the line at drawing blood. Beautiful green-eyed, red-haired Sally ran the straight and narrow, as had Cathy and Wanda, albeit with a bit less sophistication.

Bertha had never tried to hide her preference for older men.

She took too much pleasure in their appreciation of her, although she had always kept her deeper reasons secret, even from her own too-careful scrutiny.

Gabby was a particularly interesting specimen, a blue-collar primitive who, except for his broad physique and shaven beard, could have made a seasonal living as Santa Claus. He struck her as an odd blend of boyish immaturity and a real, live teddy bear.

She went after him mercilessly in his dreary basement. Pretending idle curiosity, she found him cleaning tools in a back corner. Gabby came on to her like gangbusters, although he faltered when it became apparent that he would have to put up or shut up. Older men were like that. They'd come on by habit established in their younger years, then remember their dentures, or their impotency, and wonder if they'd meet the expectations of a girl young enough to be a daughter.

Older men tended to fondle. They like to touch. For the most part, their self-esteem in the area of their sexuality was depleted, or gone entirely. In Bertha's eyes, it was a very sad state of the human condition. Women, in Bertha's view, could live without physical sex, but what was to be done with the male ego?

Gabby touched her on the arm when given the opportunity. When he saw the accepting look in her eye, he touched her hair. And then he panicked. He mumbled an excuse, went inside his basement apartment, and locked the door.

Bertha tapped persistently at the door.

"Can I come in?"

Reluctantly, after a time, he unlocked the door. Bertha closed the door behind her and sat on the couch with her legs tucked beneath her. She was wearing ordinary slacks and a blouse, nothing to tip her hand too quickly. Gabby pretended to pick up the apartment.

"Where do you come from originally," Bertha said.

Gabby answered her question, providing fuel for more questions, but when he failed to warm to the subject, Bertha switched instead to the house. It was closer to the information she wanted anyhow. "You did all the work on this place yourself," she said.

"Oh, I had to hire some local kids when we were putting up the sheet rock. Pretty much by myself though."

"The plumbing and electrical work, too?"

He glanced around with a twinkle in his eye. "That, too."

"From what I hear, you were going to have your hands full of foxy young ladies."

The comment jarred him. The mystery and the conspiracy Jennifer had picked up on dwelled with Gabby's and Leroy's expectations of a building full of young women. That spelled an ominous kind of trouble, more than just a few simple peepholes here and there. Gabby was oozing guilt from every pore of his gnarled body.

"Are you a Catholic, Gabby?"

"I'm nothing much," he muttered.

"Me neither. Everybody seems to believe pretty much what they want to anyhow. Hardly any sense in trying to hang tags on it. What would you call someone who believes in Tinker Bell?"

Gabby looked at her again with renewed interest.

Bertha decided to go for the jugular. "What's your boss like? Leroy. Jennifer says he looks kind of sneaky and crooked. Does he take advantage of you, minimum wage and all that? You oughta be getting big bucks for what you've done here."

"Ah, I get what I want out of it. What the hell would I need with a Caddy and all the aggravation."

"And a fat, jealous wife?"

Gabby laughed. "That, too."

"Do you suppose he really sleeps with her? Isn't that an awful thought?"

Gabby laughter lightened. He shook his head and said nothing.

"Wouldn't she make a great Playboy centerfold with all that jewelry? Can you picture it?"

Gabby shook his head emphatically. "No, Miss, I'd rather not try to picture that in my head. We all gotta draw the line somewhere."

"A girl's gotta watch a guy that like. He's not happy with what he's got. He always wants more. Would the church have let any of the girls live here without some kind of supervision?"

Gabby shrugged off her comment, but was again avoiding eye contact. "We heard they were planning to let a few stay in town. We would have gotten those, cause we're closer. They would've had lots of supervision, Miss. I got my place down here in the basement. I would've stayed out from under foot."

Thunder rumbled outside. The warmth of the summer evening cooled as rain began to fall. She could hear it patter against the air-conditioner in the basement window.

Bertha laid her head back on the couch. She sighed and closed her eyes. After a time, she let her lips part slightly, as if she had fallen asleep, and she shamelessly watched him through half-closed eyes.

He wiped his hands on his coveralls and licked his lips. And he watched her. Unlike a younger man driven by his gonads and willing to act first and think about it later, he studied her without daring to make a move. After a time, he brushed a tear from his eye. When he could no longer resist the temptation, he sat on the edge of the couch and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Miss, you probably shouldn't fall asleep here."

She clasped the back of his hand. Without opening her

eyes, she smiled and put the palm of his hand to her cheek. "It's quiet here. Why don't I move down here with you, Gabby. You can keep me warm at night."

"What would you want with an old man like me?" he said from the depths of his self-pity.

Bertha opened one eye and looked up at him smiling. "Would it be so bad?"

His lips puckered and the tears came in earnest. Just as she had thought. Guilt and innocence mixed about as readily as oil and water, and Gabby was filled with both.

"I think you ought to go now, Miss. I'll get fired if your boss lady complains to mine about you being down here."

Bertha leaped to her feet, faked a healthy yawn and ruffled Gabby's hair. "Invite me down for a cold beer some time. You can tell me what the world was like before I was born."

"A better place, I'll tell you," he murmured as she went out the door.

Bertha went back upstairs. Jennifer was seated in a window, watching the rain fall over the river. "I think you're right about Gabby. Do you think we should tell Francis? He's liable to overhear things he shouldn't."

Jennifer stared up into the gray sky, thinking. "He already has. It's more about what he might do about what he hears. I don't think he'll do anything as long as he has you and me about. I don't think by now he'll do anything to risk losing us."

"Poor old bastard. Give me a day or two to snoop." Bertha giggled. "We know all the tricks, don't we? Remember that peephole we found in that motel room last fall?"

Jennifer laughed lightly. They had put on enough of a show to hold their audience captive, then sprayed mace through the hole and into the cramped room beyond. By the time the cops and the ambulances had arrived, they had been parked a mile away, watching the commotion and laughing hysterically.

"We'll give it a day," Jennifer said. "That's how Francis would work it anyhow."

A tap sounded at the door. Francis stuck her overly painted face through, like a Halloween lantern thrust through a dark crack. "Valerie called, Jennifer. Fetch, girl, and be quick about it. You know how Valerie gets when she's left alone too long."

Bertha watched Jennifer bounce out the door, snatching the car keys from the table on her way past. She watched from the window as the white Ford backed from the parking space. Headlights and windshield wipers came on.

Bertha wondered if Jennifer had the least suspicion of what Francis was doing by heaping so much responsibility upon her shoulders. Bertha was glad for her, regardless what the other girls thought about having someone so young take Francis' place in the organization. Jennifer had the body to be a working girl, but, as Francis would say, "The most important sex organ is the one tucked away between your ears."

Jennifer was so smart that it was sometimes spooky to watch her in action. It gave Bertha the willies to think that Jennifer's life was in danger. To think that she had escaped the clutches of a homicidal maniac by a hair's breadth.

"Go get 'em, Jennifer," she whispered as the car pulled out of sight. "I'm with you all the way."

Chapter Fourteen

Valerie Dean sat against the headboard of the motel room bed with her knees drawn to her chin. Outside, the rain fell in opaque sheets. The roar of the storm's violence filtered into the room's deathly silence. Wind moaned and whistled through a crack in the tiny bathroom window, sounding for all the world like a creature enduring torture. Lightning flashed, white and sudden, followed a breathtaking moment later by a crackling explosion of imploding air and a boom that rattled the windows.

Valerie did not like being alone. She did not like being in danger, not this kind of danger, surrounded by strangers unapproved by Francis and her knowledge of the dark side of the male psyche. Footsteps creaked through the walls from the room adjacent to her own. The yellow parking lights of a car flashed outside. Nagging anxiety in her gut sent her to shuddering with dread.

Francis shouldn't have sent Jennifer Wessner to pick her up. Valerie hated the precocious kid always sticking her nose where it didn't belong. Wanda and Ed would never have been

killed if Jennifer hadn't tagged along with Cathy. She had heard what had happened. Cathy had taken Evelyn's call, and Dimitri Carvelli must have especially dangerous, because Dimitri's sick passions were her forte, although Francis had always forbidden her to service Dimitri. The other girls had teased her, saying she'd be too much temptation for Dimitri, that he'd eat her raw for breakfast when he was finished with her.

Very funny. How would they know what it was like, the dikes and man-hating bitches? They could never understand the passion of fully surrendering to a man, of allowing him complete power over one's body, even the power of life and death itself. They could never understand the special rush, the extra pleasure that the element of danger provided, that special, delicious danger.

Emily understood from the other end of the spectrum, from the position of lording over her subs the power of pain and pleasure, and even life and death. She had seen that special hunger in Emily's eyes for her, except that Emily assiduously avoided her, careful not to give her beloved Sally the slightest reason to believe that she'd enjoy doing to a woman what she professed to do to her customers out of disdain for the male sex. Emily could lie to the others, but not to her, not when they communicated in silence at those deepest levels of persistent desires.

Except that some fantasies and reality were never meant to meet. What would she do if Dimitri Carvelli came crashing through her door? He had used a knife on Cathy and Wanda both, and Valerie was more frightened of knives than anything else she could imagine. She feared Jennifer Wessner would lead him to her, and that Carvelli would want to focus his special attention upon her and not a bubbling young tomboy who carried a chrome plated pistol. Francis had asked her if she

had her gun with her when she had phoned for pick-up, and she had lied. She had tossed the dreadful little gun into the water alongside Lakeshore Drive months ago.

A shadow passed her window. A tap sounded at the door. Valerie bounced out of bed, pulled her robe tight about her and parted the curtains to see who was at her door.

It was a man with an overcoat pulled up about his neck, carrying a bouquet of white and red roses. This, she decided, was not supposed to be happening.

Valerie opened the door and sized the man up with a frown. He had brown eyes and silver hair, and a bandage over one ear. "Francis sent me," he said with a nervous smile. "She said you'd probably be able to squeeze me in."

The red and white roses was Francis' special cue that she had cleared and sent this man to her. "Here and now?" she said, confused that Francis would be doing business on such short notice so far from their own turf.

The man glanced along the face of the motel, first one way, then another. "Francis and I are old friends. We happened to run into one another at the airport. I heard about your problems. Francis was a bit strapped for cash, so I advanced her a major loan, and she said she had someone who would reward me in a special way. You're a real knockout, Valerie, just like she said you would be."

Valerie didn't want company. She didn't want to get involved in whatever games this man was expecting with Jennifer on her way. "I'm sorry. . ."

He looked heart-broken. "A bad time, huh? I didn't mean to impose."

The man glanced at an idling car with its turn signals flashing just down the way, as if fearful of being seen. Valerie stared at it, too, for a moment, then shook off her creeping paranoia. That was common enough with the guilt-ridden men

she dealt with.

She stared at the flowers, thinking of the financial burden Francis had endured. She threw the door open. "Please, come in. We may be a bit pressed for time, is all."

The man shook off his wet coat, handed her the bouquet, and closed the door behind him. The flowers were wrapped in colored foil, and the foil was wrapped around a coil of nylon rope. He grinned at her. "Francis' specifications."

She trusted him explicitly. No outsider could know so much about their way of doing business. Seeing the surrender in her eyes, he pulled the sheets and blankets from the bare mattress. "Pressed for time, do you say?"

Laughing, Valerie shucked her robe, proud of the body she was leasing for his own personal use for the next hour or so. "You know the rules," she said.

"No cuts or bruises," he said, reaching for her.

She had no inkling of anything amiss until it was far too late. He snugged the rope about her wrists and ankles a bit too tight. After he had tied her wrists and ankles to the corner handles of the mattress, the gag was out definitely of bounds, although she had not seen it coming in time to protest. It smelled of expensive cologne, though, and the pleasant aroma and the mounting passion born of her helplessness relaxed her concerns.

Her heart rate picked up its beat as his hands roamed her naked body, and then his tongue. He was taking things slow and easy. If only more of her customers were as considerate. Without removing his clothing, he straddled her.

He held something to view in his right hand. With a click, and a jolt that went through her body like a high-voltage electric current, a switchblade snapped open in a flash of reflected light from the nightstand lamp.

He was suddenly pale and sweaty in the dim lighting, and

not smiling at all. "Blame Rosie," he murmured. "There's really is a devil, you know."

A drop of blood flowed from beneath his bandaged ear. His grimace was an expression of pain and not the smile of pleasure she thought it to be when he rested the point of the blade at her throat.

It was a moot point. Valerie's sanity deserted her at that instant. She really did have a thing against knives, and she had no other way to defend herself from what was to follow.

"If you've been a reasonably good girl," he murmured, "you'll go to heaven and we'll never meet again. But first, there is purgatory, and you probably won't like it very much."

The tip of the knife punctured her flesh to the depth of a one-quarter inch and slowly parted flesh down the length of her writhing body.

Chapter Fifteen

John Cantrell idled in the motel court with his parking lights flashing. At times, to be conspicuous was to be invisible. Dimitri had glanced his way with a worried expression, but idling traffic in a motel court was far too par for the course to spark concern.

John had done as had been expected of him. He had followed Dimitri to his prey, although not in time to stop him from harming another innocent victim. She'd be dead by now, by John's estimation, murdered by a wounded, desperate and sick man, one with very little time of his own left to live. John had been able to read the state of the man's soul by his posture, his walk, and the twisted expression on what had once been a handsome face. Dimitri Carvelli had been pushed over the edge, not by the world around him, but by his own pathological appetites.

John opened the manila folder on the seat at his side and glanced again at the only girl who absolutely had to die. She was getting to him already, a beautiful child, jail-bait, some father and mother's long-lost baby girl, a child in a woman's

body, legs like a Barbie doll, and an oval face with pouting, heart-shaped lips. Her dark eyes touched the depths of his soul. He had no other information on her, just the picture and the need for her death.

"Bullshit."

He smacked the steering wheel with his fist, increasingly agitated and frightened by his plight. He was further from home turf than he had been in twenty years. He felt like an illegal alien in an otherwise harmless place called Iowa. A week ago, he would have defined Iowa as a place filled with pigs and dull-witted farmers wearing bib-coveralls, but the people around him were, if anything, a consistently more impressive bunch than he would have found about the hood.

He sighed heavily and stared at the motel door through the rain streaming down the side window of his rented car. He'd wait another few seconds. By then, Dimitri would finish what he had started. Jennifer Wessner would be coming for her soon, and Dimitri would be ready for her. John couldn't see beyond that extrapolation. Jennifer had stayed out of reach up until now. She'd not go down without a fight. He didn't want to watch it happen.

The full-sized white Ford all but brushed the side of his car and stopped blocking his view of the door. A girl got out, oblivious to the downpour. He caught only a moment's glance.

"Son of a bitch!"

It was her, Jennifer Renee Wessner, pounding at the motel room door with her car blocking his view and his line of fire. John started the engine and backed away as Jennifer called out impatiently.

Whatever she heard, or didn't hear, from the other side of the door put her on alert. She backed from the door and brought her right hand up to the purse slung over her left shoulder, almost as if she reached for a gun.

"Way to go," John murmured, impressed by survival instincts to match his own despite sex and age. She held her ground and waited. And waited.

Dimitri Carvelli burst through the door, awash with the blood of his victim and bellowing laughter at the horrified expression of the girl standing in his way. Dimitri thought he was dealing with still another helpless victim, and John thought himself fated to watch her die. With his own life at stake, she *had* to die.

But this would-be victim ignored the lunging knife. The speed and decisiveness with which she sensed trouble and reacted startled both men. Trained mercenaries seldom moved with such crisp precision. She made a half turn like a karate expert to evade the swing of the knife, whipped a small pistol from her purse, and opened fire at point blank range as he stumbled by. Dimitri was hit at least once. He threw himself to one side, fell, and tried to roll clear.

John's hand was twisting the door handle when stroboscopic red, blue, and white lights exploded directly behind him. He glanced at his rear view mirror and cried out in exasperation. He hadn't seen the highway patrol car pull into the drive.

A halogen spotlight pinned Jennifer and her drawn gun in a beam of white light. "Freeze!" an officer bellowed from alongside John's door. "Drop the weapon and lie face down on the ground! Do it now!"

John saw the shocked expression on her face, and then Dimitri rose into sudden view. Jennifer dived to one side to avoid him, but when he came up shooting, he had a new priority target. A bullet ticked its way through John's windshield on the passenger's side of the car, ricocheted off the sheet metal roof overhead, and went out the back way. The front windshield remained intact. The back window turned

opaque. Dimitri's gunfire took out a tire of the patrol car. Its windshield exploded and rained across the inside dash.

Maybe Dimitri would have had the foresight to save his last bullet for the girl, but she ducked through the cover of the downpour and circled around to her car like a wraith. With a whine of tires sliding on the slick pavement, the white Ford vanished into the rain.

Dimitri went after her in a darker foreign sedan, leaving the officers pinned down by the shock of the unexpected exchange of gunfire and a disabled vehicle. John put his car in gear and followed in pursuit of the two, leaving his headlights off in the dimming light. The two cars ahead of him were but two sets of red tail lights in the gray downpour on the open road. The Ford was the faster of the two, easily outpacing Dimitri until traffic slowed her to the speed limit.

Maybe Dimitri took a pot shot at her. That or some other consideration caused her to slew off the road and bounce across a roadside ditch. She spewed mud and gravel accelerating down an unpaved lane leading into an empty pasture. Dimitri did a quick u-turn and followed without hesitation.

John turned in behind them, still in stealth mode, confident that neither Dimitri nor Jennifer had noticed his presence. The dirt lane quickly deteriorated into a quagmire. Rather than risk getting bogged down behind the two, John pulled out of sight into a grove of trees. He shut off the lights and engine, dropped the keys onto the floor, and abandoned the car.

John raced through the downpour until he saw the two cars stopped ahead and Dimitri limping his way after the girl across an open expanse of terrain. She could easily outdistance the both of them with her long legs and soon managed to do so. John was beginning to hope she'd make a clean escape when

he spotted the gray hulk of the barn dead ahead. She be a fool to trap herself, unless...

Dimitri made a bee-line toward it. John picked up his pace, alarmed by the prospect of the spunky girl turning the tables on the wanton killer. Dimitri's untimely death would be an unfortunate turn of events. Garko would order him to kill the girl himself, and he would refuse, regardless of consequence. Killing the girl was beyond his capability now. Dimitri's premature death could too easily spell his own as well.

Dimitri was bellowing his rage into the storm. "Satan will feed upon your souls!" he was yelling above the roar of the rain. "Rosie, you bitch! You think you know everything!"

Delirium, or vital information to commit to memory? There was something strange about Dimitri's maniacal pursuit of Jennifer Wessner, more to the man's madness than met the eye.

John arrived at the barn in the nick of time to witness the trap a child had set for a madman. There was just enough daylight left to see Dimitri staggered down the central isle of the barn between empty stalls. Jennifer Wessner stood overhead on the precipice of the loft with a pitchfork balanced in her right hand, about to send it plunging into Dimitri's back.

"What the hell are you doing on my property!" John called out, and then ducked out of sight when Dimitri whipped about and fired a wild shot.

"I'm calling the police!" John cried at the top of his lungs.

The threat of a witness turned Dimitri away from his prey-turned-predator. He fled back toward his car, slipping and sliding along the way and roared off back toward the highway. John went headfirst into bushes alongside the barn and stayed out of sight until Jennifer's Ford crept cautiously toward the highway a few minutes later.

Lightning laced the sky overhead in delicate tendrils of

white hot light. John ran for his car, caught up to her, and kept her in view five miles down the road. He followed at a safe distance until her turn signals came on. She turned off the road and pulled into the drive of the first house on the side street.

John went on by, laughing uproariously. She was watching to see if he would slow as he passed, or turn in after her.

"Smart girl."

She waited until he went by. John watched in his rear view mirror as her headlights came back on. Judging him as harmless, some idiot with poor judgment to be driving without lights, she drove another three miles several car-lengths behind him before turning up a steep hill.

John made a u-turn at his first opportunity. As he passed the drive on his way back to town, he glanced up at the apartment building on the crest of the hill overlooking the river. He was home free now. The rest would be, at worst, a matter of waiting for the madman to close on his uncooperative victim a second time. Dimitri had made himself scarce for the moment, but John was willing to bet that Jennifer's turn into the driveway had been witnessed by more than just himself. No matter how clever the girl, she was far out of her league crossing swords with the likes of Dimitri Carvelli.

Chapter Sixteen

Dimitri Carvelli took note of the driveway up which his prey vanished, then groaned with mounting pain and turned down the first road to the river and lay his head against the steering wheel. He had been shot a number of times. His body harbored a bullet or two. But he would need only a moment's rest before taking the pleasure of ridding himself of the girl. At that point, he lost consciousness.

He awoke to the warmth of a morning sun with his chest a mass of breath-catching pain and his mouth dried parchment. Unable to suck enough air with which to cry out in agony, he reached out with trembling hands and pushed against the dash of the car. Slowly, he lifted his bruised chest from the steering wheel and fell back against his seat.

He barked laughter and choked on the effort. How incredible that he should still be alive. A vision of nubile loveliness had put a bullet in his gut. He had ignored the injury during the chase as he had ignored being winged twice upon his first attempt at the girl's life. Now, he was suffering loss of blood, probable infection, maybe a touch of pneumonia. It sure

as hell hurt to breath, and he felt hot and weak. He still felt reasonably alert, if a bit woozy, but he doubted he could go another day without seeking medical help. Once he did that, of course, the mob would find him for sure and turn his lights out. Without a doubt, they were keeping an eye on the local clinics and hospitals. Private doctors would report a bullet wound and roll out a red carpet to his father's henchmen.

Where the hell was he at? He blinked away the sleep in his eyes and determined that the car was nosed against a tree on a slope. Railroad tracks ran past a few yards ahead. A few hundreds yard beyond stretched the mist-enshrouded expanse of the Mississippi River.

Memory snapped back into place. He had been driving in the rain, looking for a place to park and watch for the girl. He had been unconscious most of the cold and rainy night.

He shivered in the morning chill seeping through a broken side window. He clothes were still damp. He had probably cracked a rib against the steering wheel, making it difficult to take a deep breath of air.

What a fool he had become, a killer clown whose membership in the human race had been revoked, but it hardly mattered how badly he had been hurt, or when he had last eaten. He was working by other rules now. He had become another kind of being entirely, an agent of Satan on a one-track mission of destruction. That which did not kill him would only made him stronger, if only for that one mission. With the pretty little witness gone, the world would never know about the death in the basement of his father's house. The mob would overlook his indiscretion rather than risk a killing associated with a top public official. He would be redeemed in every way that counted for anything.

He opened his buckled door and used the door and the roof to support the weight of his injured and aching body. He lifted

his face to the warm morning sun and closed his eyes. When the dizziness passed, he salvaged the discarded half of a submarine sandwich from the back seat and discovered a couple inches of soda and melted ice in a covered paper cup he had tossed on the back floor the day before. Thus nourished and with his thirst partially quenched, he climbed the hill to the highway and determined that his car couldn't be seen by passing traffic. He'd use it as a base of operations for the rest of the day.

His fate was in the hands of his new god. Now would be the time to put his demonic allegiance to the test. Either he would die within hobbling distance of this isolated spot along an unknown highway, or he would rise like the Phoenix from its own ashes stronger than before. For now, he backed into the shade of a nearby tree before anyone took notice. His first foray for food and fresh clothing would begin at nightfall. Like in the legend of the blood-feeding vampires, daylight was a time of rest and recuperation.

Chapter Seventeen

Bertha Ruse listened to the news of Valerie Dean's death on an early morning news program just hours after Jennifer's return and the horror story Jennifer had told of Dimitri Carvelli's nearly successful attempt on her life. She and Sally watched the sketchy details reported by a local TV station on Emily's portable. Francis had put Emily on armed guard and had left with Jennifer to go into town and call home for what Francis referred to as professional help. Sally then locked herself in her room and trembled on the verge of hysteria. Emily paced the upstairs hall looking pale and shaken, with her .357 dangling in her right hand.

After a time, Bertha took it upon herself to check out Gabby. If Gabby had eavesdropped, he knew by now that his tenants were not secretaries. He'd know by now they were in hiding and that one or more of their number had been murdered. And maybe he'd call either Leroy or the police for help.

Bertha went to the basement, eased through the musty shadows and stood alongside the door to Gabby's apartment.

She heard him rummaging around inside. After a time, he fell silent. She tapped at his door. "Gabby? It's Bertha. I need to talk with you."

She tapped again, tried the doorknob, and found it locked. She tapped a bit louder. "Gabby? Better answer me, or I'll huff and I'll puff..."

Nothing stirred on the far side of the barrier. What now? She had heard distinct noises. The basement apartment had only this one entrance.

She backtracked, rummaged along a work bench, and located a set of small tools used for electronic repair. Selecting a skinny flat-blade and a piece of wire, she picked at the cheap lock on the door until it creaked obediently open.

She scanned the interior of the apartment from where she stood, half expecting Gabby to come roaring out of his bathroom in protest.

Nothing.

"I heard you in here, Gabby," she called out. "Where did you go, please?"

She entered then, and inspected the walls for trap doors, the only means of escape she could imagine. She saw nothing amiss and looked up at the vents, wondering if she had heard a sound conducted from elsewhere in the building. Shaking her head, she thought not.

Gabby's absence provided the much needed opportunity to snoop. She rummaged through drawers of all kinds and could have held her breath during the time it took to hit pay dirt. A desk drawer contained a stack of eight by ten glossies, images of unidentified nude women in a bathroom, one in a tub, another in a shower.

Growing increasingly antsy by the moment, she searched further and discovered unmarked video cassettes on a shelf. Pausing momentarily to decide her next move, she put the

photographs back and retreated, closing the shimmied door behind her with a cassette clutched in one hand.

Upstairs, she tapped at Emily's door and interrupted Sally's quiet panic attack long enough to borrow their old portable television with the built-in VCR. Locking herself in the apartment she shared with Jennifer, she set the television alongside a wall socket, plugged it in, and then dropped cross-legged in front of it to shove the cassette into place.

Within seconds, the stolen video showed a scene of a woman taking a shower. In five minutes or so, the woman retreated, dried herself with a towel and left the bathroom.

The scene changed. Another bathroom. Another shower. In the last sequence, a young man joined an even younger girl. The tape became mildly interesting until the two retreated to the bedroom to finish their business in a horizontal position.

Amateur stuff. Stiflingly boring. But porno just the same, nicely edited and compacted into a twenty-minute display of simple nudity and love-making. The multiple stars of the video had no idea someone had been recording their showers and love life. The apartments differed, some in older buildings, some in newer constructions. Bertha was willing to bet they had all been instigated by Leroy Reinhart and recorded by his cohort, Gabby Wernhauten.

In the face of Valerie's death, Bertha pegged the voyeur-style pornography childishly innocent. Men who hurt women did so for other, far less innocent reasons. Bertha shook her head absently, dismissing Gabby as a threat of that nature.

Regardless, Gabby and his crafty boss posed a threat of another kind. Francis would have to know. Gabby would have to be dealt with in some manner. If Gabby had shared any of his discoveries with his boss, it was probably already too late to try for damage control. They would have to pick up and run.

What to do until Francis returned? Feeling jittery and light-

headed, with her heart pounding in her chest like a tiny fist, fate had tossed their next move into her lap. She sat on the couch and began her indeterminate wait for Gabby's return.

Chapter Eighteen

Francis instructed Jennifer to drive to a mall twenty-five miles from the apartment. They idled out front until the doors were unlocked at ten. "I'll make my calls from pay phones and phone you on your cell for a ride home," Francis said. "It may take me an hour or so. It would probably be best if you returned to the apartment to wait."

Jennifer watched Francis enter the mall, then drove away with an agenda of her own in mind.

A few miles away, John Cantrell sat on the edge of his bed in his motel room and punched at numbers on the desk phone. Garko carried a cell phone and answered on the first ring.

"This is John."

"Please hold," Garko said.

A moment later, the hum of background noise was gone. "How's it going?"

"Dimitri's not going to make it," John said. "The girl is more than an even match."

"Then you know what has to be done."

"And you know better than to ask."

"I have no one else I can trust to do a clean job," Garko said. "The situation is getting out of hand."

"I'm not killing the girl."

"You need to do what has to be done. You have no option in the matter."

Garko terminated the connection as abruptly as he'd terminate the lives that crossed him.

John set the phone down. What now? He had let Garko call the shots for too long to be changing the rules of the game, but it had to end. Sasha was dead, but he had learned by now that there were other Sasha's in the world. Jennifer Wessner was one of them. He couldn't take revenge for every innocent killed and neither could he stand by and continue to watch them die.

He had brought his gym clothes with him. He badly needed to get out and burn off steam. He changed and left the motel room, jogging in the warming sun along the highway to the county park entrance a half mile away. There, he ran trails like green tunnels cut through a woods so intensely and preternaturally alive that he knew with startling clarity, for the first time in his life that he had lived in a deprived world of narrow horizons where no aspect of life could have flourished like it did here out in the open where things were meant to live. He headed back to the motel thinking that if the opportunity arose to change the rules of the game, he would take it.

He barged into his air-conditioned room having assumed his anonymity in this irrelevant and alien corner of the world. Jennifer Wessner was waiting for him, sitting cross-legged in the middle of his bed with a small revolver cradled idly in one hand.

John stood transfixed by the intruding angel, the inhabitant of a world he had never visited, one in which he imagined he would be seen as ugly flotsam. She was ethereal, cloaked in shadow, her full lips parted as if caught in a trance

of some distant passion. When she moved, her body moved like a snake. She unfolded her legs, eased herself off the bed, and put the gun to his face.

"Who the fuck are you?" she said.

John adored the child in an instant. "My name is John. I was sent to kill Dimitri Carvelli. How did you find me?"

"I saw your car. You followed me last night. I figured you'd be holed up in this part of town, so I came looking." She lowered the gun slightly. "You're not helping Dimitri. You're not helping me. What are you waiting for?"

He decided not to try to lie. "I was told to wait until Dimitri killed you. I was then to kill Dimitri."

The information startled her. He saw her twinge with the impact of his uncaring bluntness.

"You witnessed a murder," John said. "The publicity would have reflected poorly upon important people."

"Bastards," she spat quietly. "So what were you going to do if Dimitri couldn't kill me? He can't, you know. He's too slow and stupid. Especially stupid."

"If Dimitri failed," John said, "I was ordered to kill you both myself."

Her eyes widened just enough to notice. She stepped back and brought the revolver back up on target, knowing that she held a very precarious upper hand.

"You've got reason to be upset," John growled softly at her, "but I drew a line from the beginning. I have no intention of crossing it. You have nothing to fear from me."

Tears glittered in her eyes. "Yeah, right. How can you expect me to believe you?"

"It wouldn't be wise to believe anything I tell you."

"Then I guess I'll just have to shoot you."

John glanced out the window at the sunny day outside, feeling an odd detachment from it all.

"I'll go to the police!" she cried, trying to elicit a reaction by which to judge his character and intent.

John shook his head. "Don't go to the police. Kill Dimitri. Kill Dimitri and you've soiled your hands. The mob will ignore you knowing you won't be likely to lock yourself in a prison cell."

Jennifer brushed tears from her face and fought to calm herself. "Then that's what I'll do. And it's still what I should do with you, too."

John stared at her without expression. "You picked the wrong time and place to kill a man. It's not something you had planned. From your point of view, it's probably the safest route, but you'll get nailed if you go that way. If you hadn't planned a hit, you probably haven't given any thought to the bullet you'll leave behind, prints of the front door, your car parked out front, possible witnesses, tread patterns. That doesn't mean I like the idea of being shot, so I'll just make it clear that you'd make yourself an easy target killing the only person on the face of the Earth who could protect you."

It took her time to think over the bait he set before her. "Why would you protect me?"

"Because you look to be about my sister's age when she was raped and murdered and I got myself into this profession nixing the scum that hurt her. There's no way I'm going to let the same happen to you. I don't kill children."

Her aim faltered.

"You don't need to lower your guard," John warned softly.

"I'm not lowering my guard, mister. I'd be dead if you wanted me dead. You had a chance last night, don't you think? Don't you think I know that?"

A cell phone rang. She took it from her purse and answered it without taking her eyes from him. "I'm on my way," she said, and put both it and the gun away.

She moved around him, just out of reach. "I'll be back," she said softly. "Wait for me."

She paused at the door, gazing back at him in utter fascination. And then she slipped away, closing the door so softly he heard nothing but the gentle snick of the tumbler.

John hoped that she would not be back. Her intrusion into his life stirred unpleasant turmoil to life. If she came back, she would only bring more pain back with her, more than he could hope to bear.

But he felt curiously helpless watching her drive away in the white Ford. John sat back down on the edge of the bed. He had been dealt a strange hand and had no option but to let it play itself out.

Chapter Nineteen

Dimitri sat in his car nosed against the tree below the highway and stared out over the river. The canopy of rustling leaves overhead protected him from the ferocity of the afternoon sun. Consciousness ebbed and flowed, but cleared by late afternoon.

He could still think clearly enough to know that he was being punished by Satan Himself for his failure. He would heal and feel better when he had attended the task Rosie had given him to prove himself. He remained indestructible and invincible, he felt certain. He would not falter until his task was complete, or until he had failed beyond any hope of redemption. If that happened, he would be dragged screaming to the deepest bowels of hell.

Now was the time to act. Dimitri climbed from the car. He moved slowly so as not to send his head spinning, or break open any scabs on his wounds. He had been watching an elderly fisherman along the bank of the river during the course of the morning. Surely a well-outfitted sportsman would have a quality fillet knife he could use, or a hunting knife, perhaps. He

had lost his during the excitement. Even a gun maybe. He still had his own, although a gun without bullets wasn't much of a weapon. The old van parked nearby looked chock full of goodies.

Dimitri moved from cover to cover to the river's edge. He waited alongside a tree until the white-haired gent finally moved within reach, then simply gave the old man a shove and sent him plunging backward into the river. He waited until he felt certain the old man's floundering hadn't attracted any attention, then hurried to the van.

He found what he needed most in a tackle box, a foot long generic Bowie knife and sheath. No guns, but a knife. The Western motif was a far cry from the ruby encrusted dagger Rosie had provided for his sacrificial kills. He would have preferred the symbolism of something more European and medieval, but it was at least an improvement over the irreverence of his switchblade, a weapon of hateful children. He exchanged his bloodied shirt for a clean flannel shirt, then climbed behind the wheel of the van and searched for the keys.

No keys.

Blood encrusted skin made his faint smile sting. Within his view of the river, he could see the fisherman's drowned body drifting back to shore. The fisherman would have the keys he needed. He chuckled at the hand of fate working in his favor, knowing full well the power behind it. Ten minutes later, he was driving north along the river highway in the van, knowing that the girl had come this way, certain that she was holed up somewhere close by.

He stopped on the shoulder of the road and eyed two ranch style homes overlooking the river. One had a wheelchair folded up against the wall in an attached garage, and the other a child's tricycle in the drive. He drove on and almost missed the castle on the hill. From a distance, it almost looked medieval,

and he took it as an omen and parked again on the shoulder of the road.

He left the car and climbed the hill through thick underbrush and countless oak saplings. When he stepped into the open, he eyed a figure moving in an upstairs window.

Bingo. Maybe. If Francis had taken refuge here, she'd have someone reasonably competent standing guard. An armed guard. The sight of a battered pickup alongside the apartment building warned of a caretaker. If they were ready for him, he'd be dead in a heartbeat blundering into their defenses. Despite the risk, he needed a closer look.

With the knife sheathed on his belt, Dimitri hurried across the yard, the bullet wounds in his hip joint, gut and shoulder shooting pain like bolts of lightning lancing up and down his body. He suspected a kidney harbored one of his little witness' bullets and would kill sooner than later. Sooner than that, he would pay her back, trade her tick for tack, life for life.

He went in through a side entrance, breathing through parted lips to hear more clearly the sounds of his environment. He paused in the hall and heard movement in the basement. Someone paced the hall upstairs.

He used a narrow, rear staircase to investigate and cracked open the door at the top. A woman in slacks and blouse paced the hall here, a .357 Magnum clutched in her right hand.

Bingo for sure.

Smiling grimly, trembling, sweating profusely, Dimitri saw four doors along the hall, two on each side. When the woman stepped into one of the apartments at the far end, he heard voices and guessed that there were at least two women there. He inspected the first apartment at his end and thought it showed no signs of occupation. He eased the door closed behind him.

And then he heard the sound of water splashing, and the

humming of a woman's voice. From the bathroom, no less. How convenient, he thought to himself, and his thin, bloodless lips pursed into a bloodless smile.

Dimitri drew the hunting knife from its whispering sheath. He sidestepped to the open bathroom door and peeked around the corner.

A naked girl with pink skin was bathing, small, but very mature. She lifted one bare leg into the air from the depth of the big white tub, wiggled her toes, and then she raised the other, singing to herself as she played in the clear water. Odd that she'd not have soap in her bathwater. Dimitri had a startling clear view of her nudity through the mirror towering alongside the tub.

When her face slipped momentarily beneath the water, Dimitri rushed into the room. He grabbed a bare ankle and hoisted her into the air with all of his remaining power, prepared to deliver a clean thrust of the blade into the lower abdominal cavity, an incapacitating wound, one to allow his victim to remain conscious of the other and far more devastating sweeps of the blade that would follow. He felt certain he could butcher her alive before she could make a sound.

"Nooooo!"

The voice roared as if from a distance, and yet it was nearby and filled with a primal desperation that raised the hackles on Dimitri's neck. He looked up in shock at his own image in the mirror. As maniacal and ghoulish as his own reflection was, another glowing face appeared, superimposed upon his own, the face of an old man with a shock of white hair, the face of God Himself.

And then God again roared his thunderous anger.

Dimitri reeled backward, knowing he had lost too much blood to think clearly. Hallucinating, maybe. Letting the girl

slip from his grasp, he turned about on wobbling legs and staggered back through the apartment and out into the hall. Pounding his way down the stairs, ignoring the mass of pain in his body and the fresh flow of blood from his wounds, he heard the girl in the bathtub finally recover and scream.

If only a reverberation of short term memory, he heard again the terrible roar of the awful face in the mirror. And with a pitiful squeak from his own larynx, Dimitri Carvelli went out the side door and into the refuge of the nearby trees.

Chapter Twenty

Bertha thrashed in the water in a panic, not certain of up or down, but convinced of imminent death. She had seen the knife. She had caught a glimpse of the cold flash of reflected light when he grabbed her ankle. Opening her eyes beneath the clear bathwater, she had seen Dimitri's disheveled, blood-smearred face.

And then came the howling that could only have come from Gabby standing behind the mirror, because as surely as her name was Bertha Ruse, her bath in a tub of clear water had been a ruse of another kind.

In response to Gabby's bellow of anguish, the hand on her ankle opened spastically, sending her sliding back along the bottom of the tub and banging her head painfully against the chromed faucets.

Anger rather than fear got the best of her. Once she had regained her footing and escaped the tub, she backed to the sink, grabbed the glass bottle of bubble bath with its plastic rose inside, and hurtled it into the mirror with all the force she could muster.

She needed Gabby on her side of the mirror.

The mirror fractured, imploded, cascading into the water in deadly shards of glass half the size of her body. The gaping hole revealed a dark passage beyond, and Gabby staggering back against the onslaught, already cut and bleeding on his arms and face.

Bertha sucked a lungful of air.

"Emily, help me!"

Emily had been enroute. It took a fraction of the second for the taller woman to come bounding into the bathroom with her Magnum clutched in both hands and pointed at Gabby's head.

"Not Gabby!" Bertha shrieked. "Dimitri! Dimitri was here!"

Emily's face drained of color. She looked back at the trail of blood on the hardwood floor, guessing now the sequence of strange events. She whirled about and followed the trail at a dead run. Sally screamed a terrified protest of confusion from the hallway. Emily's retreating footsteps could be heard on the stairs and in the downstairs hall.

Bertha stood shaking, chilled and frightened, barefoot and surrounded by broken glass. Gabby crunched his way through the glass, scooped her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom. He set her down gently, and stood weeping, his eyes filling with blood from cuts on his face, unable to see well enough to flee.

Bertha rose to her knees and tugged at his arm until he seated himself on the edge of the bed. She forced his hands away from his eyes in search in serious injury. Glass fragments glittered in his hair and on his shirt. If he had cut his eyes, she'd call 911 regardless of consequence.

He looked up at her like a terrified child, mercifully uninjured. She brushed a sliver of glass from his face, then inspected his hands.

"Off with the shirt," she ordered, and unbuttoned the blue

denim shirt, amused by the thought of having to strip this helpless, albino grizzly bear in retaliation for his voyeurism. When his mouth dropped open and Bertha took notice of where his eyes were roaming, she sidestepped to the bathroom entrance, tossed his glass-contaminated shirt aside, fetched a bath towel, and whipped and secured it about her hips with a half knot and a tuck. He had been staring at her breasts. So be it. Her bare breasts would serve as an effective leash on the man.

Gabby stuffed his hands in his lap and stared at the floor in front of her, at least now and then.

"Have you told Leroy about us?" Bertha said.

He shook his head emphatically. "I said nothing to no one yet."

Bertha sighed with relief. "What's with the mirrors, Gabby?"

He looked up at her in abject misery. "I'm sorry!" he wailed. "I was just looking!"

"So I figured."

"You were doing that on purpose!" he accused. "I know you were!"

"Sex isn't a spectator sport, Gabby. If you can't touch, you only torment yourself by looking."

"You already knew!" he cried, his accusation confirmed.

"I found out quick enough. I've got one of your video tapes in my VCR."

Gabby adolescent petulance turned again to bald-faced fear. "They were Leroy's idea! Honest!"

"Maybe I'll believe you if you tell me the story in a nutshell, but make it a really short story."

Gabby forced himself to relax enough to collect his thoughts. "I told you. He's always scheming and horse trading. He buys apartments. He's got about fifteen of them. He's got girlfriends, too."

"He's into pornography, I take it."

Gabby nodded enthusiastically. "Maybe it ain't that bad. He tapes the girls. He found somebody who buys them. He's got peepholes in some of the old apartments. . ."

"And you went along with it?"

Gabby looked up at her, drowning in the depths of his guilt. "I've been with Leroy twenty years, not two. I don't know what else I'd do for a living. He couldn't make it on the apartments alone."

"You were spying on me."

Tears gushed from his eyes. He made no effort to stop the flow. "You're so pretty. I didn't mean no harm."

You could have asked, Bertha was tempted to say. What kind of girl would say a thing like that? "Gabby, you adolescent shit, you'll go to prison if you get caught."

Gabby stared hollow-eyed at the floor. "He gave me fifteen thousand dollars to redo this place like he wanted. I've got to retire soon. I can't go on like I used to."

"Every business proposition has its risks. Is that it?"

"Yeah," Gabby said. "I guess so."

Emily came rushing back into the apartment, radiating panic.

"You sure it was Dimitri?" she said with her eyes on Gabby and an intense frown of displeasure on her face.

"I'm real sure," Bertha said. "He was a mess, and he had a big knife, and he was going to use it on me. Gabby scared him off."

"He's out in the trees somewhere. I flattened the tires on a van parked down along the highway. Without a hospital, he's going to bleed to death pretty quick. What do you want to do with this old coot?"

"I'll take care of him," Bertha said. "If Leroy finds out about us, we'll have the cops on our ass, so be nice to him."

Emily shrugged. "Well, then take especially good care of *him*."

Gabby risked a glance at Emily as she went out the door. Then he looked back up at Bertha, his expression filled with longing and sorrow.

"Miserable old bastard," she murmured at him. She let the towel fall away. "Is this what you want?"

Gabby gawked at her in confusion.

"Go ahead and take it," Bertha said gently. "You saved my life. I owe you one."

Gabby reached out for her, more to console than to grope, hardly with the greed or passion of a young man. He dropped to his knees, embraced her about the hips, put his face to her bare stomach, and burst into tears.

"So I figured," Bertha said, running her fingers through his shock of thinning white hair. "You're a real menace to society, aren't you, Mr. Gunther Wernhauten?"

Chapter Twenty-one

Jennifer and Francis returned to the castle to a scene of chaos. Outraged and shaken, Emily told a story of Dimitri Carvelli attacking Bertha, and of the caretaker spying from behind a bathroom mirror. Sally was curled up in the bed she shared with Emily with her arms crisscrossed over her head, refusing to participate in the onslaught of events.

Jennifer went in search of Bertha and found the girl, Gabby, and a shattered mirror in their apartment.

"Awesome," she murmured and stepped through the broken glass and the shattered wall of glass to the cubicle beyond. The tiny room of bare wall studs and lathing with rafters slanting down from overhead was the length of the bathroom and no more than a yard and a half deep. At one end, a narrow and crudely built staircase went down to a similar space behind the mirror of the apartment directly beneath.

Jennifer went down to investigate and stood staring into the dimly lit bathroom of the unused apartment. A reflection in the medicine cabinet directly across from her showed its own

reflection and no evidence of her presence behind the larger mirror overlooking the bathtub.

"Cool," she said, but she shook her head with nervous exasperation.

She went back up to a half-dressed Bertha who paced the bedroom a few steps at a time, her arms tightly criss-crossed against her body. Gabby sat on the edge of the bed looking dazed and confused.

"You okay?" Jennifer said, amazed that Bertha could have escaped an attempt upon her life in a manner so bizarre as this.

Emily stuck her head through the door, looking pale, but acting calm and collected. "Francis wants to talk to everybody. Bertha, you're supposed to make sure Gabby doesn't run off."

Bertha knelt before the old man, whispered to him, and caressed the side of his face. Gabby smiled at the girl in abject adoration. In her own unique fashion, Bertha had the situation well in hand.

Bertha stood, gave a curt nod and hurried from the room with Jennifer in tow. Stationed guard outside of the apartment she and Francis shared, Emily confronted Bertha. "What's with you and that old man? He's was spying on us, and you were deliberately enticing him."

"I didn't know for sure he was."

"It's not your place to be thinking for yourself," Emily said.

Bertha shook her head in denial of Emily's logic. "You would have scared Gabby off from the get-go. Gabby would have confided in Leroy and we'd be trying to answer questions at a police station, so I really didn't have anyone else to do my thinking for me taking that all into consideration."

Emily wasn't about to deny the possibility that things had worked out for the best. "Yeah, but I just still don't understand how you can be so soft on the old bastard. If he's got any

pictures of me and Sally, I damned well want them back."

Francis paced her apartment like a robotic, too-heavily painted manikin wound up way too tight. Sally and Emily sat together on the couch. Bertha perched herself on a window sill, still dressed in nothing but a towel. Sally hung back in the shadows as if trying to hide herself from the world.

Jennifer pulled a chair around, feeling like a schoolgirl about to be scolded by her teacher. Francis was not going to appreciate her run-in with the man who had been sent to make sure that she died.

"I talked to people who will send a mercenary to help us," Francis said in a clipped tone of voice. "I don't know how far we could trust a man like that, or how well he'd do against experienced gunmen. I don't know what else to do.

"Evelyn Haxx will be in tomorrow," Francis continued. "She says she wants to be here with us. Everyone else has gotten off safely. Hopefully, this will have been the last attempt upon our lives. Dimitri is badly injured. When he's dead, his father and friends will have no further quarrel with us."

Jennifer shot to her feet. "That may not be entirely true, Francis."

Francis reeled back, startled by the challenge. "Child?"

"When Dimitri chased me last night," Jennifer said, "I saw a car parked in the trees, the same one I saw earlier at the motel when I went to pick up Valerie. I went looking for the car after I dropped you off at the mall. I found it."

Francis blanched. Emily's mouth dropped open.

"He was sent here to kill Dimitri after Dimitri killed me. Now that they think Dimitri is going to fail, they ordered him to kill us both. He said he refused, and I believe him, but I'm thinking they might send someone else to take his place. I need to talk to him about that. I think he's got himself in trouble because of me. He might be willing to help us."

Francis found herself a seat, looking thoroughly terrified.

"I think we should capture Dimitri while he's still alive and try to make a deal with the mob," Jennifer said. "We have to capture him before he dies, and keep him from dying. Don't you see? Bad things happen only *after* he dies."

Francis' voice was a harsh whisper. "How could you put yourself in such danger?"

"I'm not the one who put myself in danger," Jennifer said. "Dimitri did that. He's a complete fruitcake. Maybe he'll try one last time to kill me, if he has the chance. We should give him that one last chance. Just me and Dimitri in this big empty mousetrap."

"Those horrible mirrors," Emily said in amazement.

Jennifer ventured a wane smile. "He didn't see what was behind the mirror. He didn't see what scared him off. He doesn't know about the spaces behind the mirror, and I don't think he's thinking too clearly. We have to at least try."

"And do what with him?" Emily wanted to know.

"Threaten to give him to the press, or the cops, whatever it takes to make a deal."

Emily shook her head. "He's bleeding like a stuck pig. He's probably already dead, or at least unconscious."

"He's a maniac," Bertha said. "He lifted me in the air by my ankle with one hand. With one hand, and he's supposed to be hurt. He's not dead. He's a monster."

"Once he's dead," Jennifer reminded the group, "he'll be replaced by someone worse, worse than the man who was waiting for me to die."

Chapter Twenty-two

Francis caught her alone in a ground floor apartment while Gabby showed the rest of the girls through the secret passages he had built behind false walls.

"Child, this is terribly dangerous."

Jennifer embraced the older woman. "We're not doing so bad."

"Why would a man sent to ensure your death cooperate with us? Why did you take such a terrible risk confronting him?"

"Because it was already too late to defend myself against him. He could have hurt me by now if he had wanted to."

"You're not telling me the entire truth."

The accusation caught her off guard. "I don't know what you mean."

"Your fascination with this man is transparent, at least to me."

Jennifer decided it to be the truth and shrugged her lack of concern. She stepped back and sat on the couch. "Yes, but so?"

"He'll hurt you in ways you know nothing about as yet."

Sparks, Jennifer, between man and woman. Have you thought of anything else but this man since you got back?"

Francis' insight startled her.

"Knowing human nature is how I keep myself fed, child. I know the type of man who would catch your eye. He would be a terrible rogue."

Jennifer begrudgingly surrendered to the analysis. "So?"

"You're at the right age to fall in love. I'm not blind. I've noticed your restlessness of late. This stranger is the kind of man to appeal to your passion, but he is a murderer, a paid assassin."

"He's not like Dimitri," Jennifer said, hating the childish way her defiance sounded.

"He is a professional killer, and violent men are never at peace with themselves. Do you understand the danger?"

Jennifer had seen Francis' girls fall in love and do stupid things from time to time. Evelyn had told her about a client who had fallen in love with her and committed suicide when she stopped seeing him. "I don't know. Maybe."

"I would forbid you to see him again, if I thought you would obey me. I try so hard to make you over in my own image, child, except that you must learn by your own experience."

"And survive," Jennifer said, knowing Francis wanted to add that particular qualifier. She usually did.

"Yes, child. And survive. Especially in these circumstances."

"I'll be careful."

Francis chuckled. "Whatever you do, you will frighten me witless and take me completely by surprise. I am so terribly envious of your youth and your beauty and your cunning. If only the bright years of our lives could last longer than they do."

Francis turned and hurried from the room rather than risk letting her see a tear fall. Jennifer turned back to the window

and watched the others gather in the yard outside so that they couldn't help but be seen by Dimitri. Bertha and Gabby, Emily and Sally. Francis joined them. Together, they all climbed into the white Ford and drove away.

Jennifer fetched her gun from her purse and put it on a dresser nearby. If Dimitri was watching, unless his obsession had drained away along with his life's blood, he would have one final opportunity to murder the only witness to the death of Cathy Weibler. He would know the empty house a trap. It was all too convenient. No one expected that to stop him.

Jennifer turned on the lights in the increasing gloom and paced in front of the windows. She thought about Francis' warning and her initial feelings toward John. He was not a young man, and he was most certainly a dangerous man. She had seen that, too, in his pale eyes. But he was rugged and good-looking and he was sheer mystery. And his desire for her had been so strong that he had been in pain. How could either of them hope to resist the lure of the other?

It was time to explore that part of herself. Her own hormones were pushing, and pushing hard. Francis was right about the danger, but Francis had once said that she didn't expect Jennifer to ever take up with someone her own age. "Everything you do is in excess," Francis had said, although in secret pride. "I expect your first love affair to cause us all considerable trouble."

Jennifer never moved more than leaping distance away from her handgun, but it was still uncomfortably far away when Dimitri made an unexpected appearance in the doorway to the apartment. He had crept closer than any of them had anticipated.

Dimitri Carvelli was covered with a crusty brown of mud and dried blood from head to foot. The stench of him was breath-taking. The only sign of life in the ghoulish figure was

the maniacal fury still burning in his eyes. He stood weaving precariously in the door frame, clutching a massive hunting knife. His labored breathing caught in his throat from time to time. He licked his lips, gathered all that was length of his strength, and took another, shuffling step forward.

He had exhausted himself. He had no energy left to strike the lethal blow. With a sigh, his pupils rolled into his head. He fell and hit the floor a boneless sack of meat.

A faint cloud of dust rose from his clothing with the impact. Dried flakes of blood and mud settled about him, and a rivulet of blood ran from an opened wound somewhere on his body across the hardwood floor.

"Emily?"

But Emily had yet to reach her position behind the mirror. Even at death's doorstep, Dimitri had outsmarted them one final time.

Jennifer walked over to the unconscious man and kicked the knife away, and then stepped out of reach, remembering a thousand horror movies where the dying body always manages one last lunge for an ankle, or a throat.

Dimitri Carvelli sighed, but it was not quite his last breath. He continued to breath. Not for much longer, though, she guessed. He had lost so much blood that his lips had turned blue. She squatted before him and watched his eyelids quiver, wanting to see him die, not out of revenge, but out of a simple need for assurance that the danger was passed, that he would never again walk her sleeping or waking nightmares.

Chapter Twenty-three

John was waiting for her dressed in a T-shirt and slacks when she tapped at his motel room door at midnight. He opened the door, but blocked her way in.

"We've got Dimitri," Jennifer said. "He just sort of dropped in on our doorstep."

"Alive?"

"Francis fed him some chicken soup and he's doing just fine. Tell your boss we'll trade him for some assurances of our safety. I wrote up an account of everything that's happened to me during the past few days on Francis' portable computer and Francis ran into town and made copies of my print-out. We'll mail them to all the local television stations and newspapers, e-mail them to the FBI and anyone else we can think of, and turn Dimitri over to the first reporter who promises a story. The only thing I left out is you."

John stared at her in astonishment, but took her ultimatum in stride. "I'll relay the message," he said. "The response should be interesting."

He started to close the door. Jennifer put her foot in the

way. "I want to stay here with you."

"I'll give you a call."

"No. This is too important, and nobody else knows how to deal with you. Besides, Francis hired a mercenary to protect us. If you don't deal with me, you'll have to deal with him."

"That wasn't smart," John said. "Her mercenary could as easily be my replacement. There's no way she can know his loyalties."

"Then maybe you'll want to get this thing settled before he gets here."

"I'll do that," John said, "but I can do without the distraction."

"I'd feel safer here with you."

"Kid, you won't be safe with me."

"There's nothing you can do to hurt me if you're not going to kill me. I'm sorry about the distraction thing, but I thought men like that kind of distraction, seeing as we happen to be of the opposite sex."

John sighed in self-contained misery. "You're just a kid."

"I'm a precocious kid, okay?"

She took her foot away. He shook his head with exasperation and started again to close the door.

"Please?"

She said it without making a move to stop him. Her tone of voice was enough.

"Kid, I operate alone," John said. "You're nothing but trouble and we both know it."

"Big deal. Since when are you a law-abiding citizen that can't handle a little trouble?"

"I wouldn't be the one risking the trouble," John said evenly.

"I've done okay so far, and the kind of trouble you're talking about is a long way from being unnatural or unhealthy."

He sighed heavily. "Don't you have family, kid, someone to teach you right from wrong?"

"You teach me. I was orphaned in California. I came from around here somewhere, but I'm not sure where. Please, I don't have anyone else but you."

He could sense that she had one last comment to add, and he waited for it patiently.

"And you don't have anyone but me."

"Shit," he murmured to himself, and he said it as if she had shot him with her gun, but he opened the door and let her in.

Chapter Twenty-four

John phoned Garko. Garko seemed surprised to hear from him again. "Is this something I want to hear?"

"Not on your life. Peugeot and her girls have Dimitri. They want the pressure off, or they'll go to the press."

Garko remained silent long enough to absorb the shock and contemplate the ramifications of the news. "How in all the labyrinths of hell did you manage contact with Peugeot, John?"

"Through the child you wanted me to kill, Mr. Garko. She's with me now. She was sent with the offer."

Garko muttered a profanity and again took a moment to compose himself. "John, why are you doing this to me?"

"You've got it wrong, Mr. Garko. I told you Dimitri was outclassed by this kid and her friends. He never stood a chance. As for the terms of our agreement, I drew the line before you sent me."

"I'll have to get back to you. I've got your number. Stay put."

John put the phone back in place. Sitting cross-legged in the middle of his bed, Jennifer rose to her knees with the alert posture of a wild animal and waited to be briefed on the

conversation. With her head tilted back with unconscious pride, and her lips parted with rapt attention, she looked like a model posing for a camera.

Her brown eyes drove him wild, and her nubile beauty all but brought tears to his eyes. He wanted badly to touch, to ravage her innocence in punishment for her trusting vulnerability, except that she wasn't the least vulnerable.

She had him pegged for exactly what he was, hungry and defenseless. He only hoped the girl could handle the genie she was unleashing with such tenacious determination. He simply didn't have it in him to stop her.

Jennifer said softly. "What did he say?"

"He said he'd get back to me."

"Will he try something sneaky?"

"I don't think he'd risk it. Not with me. Sure as hell not with you."

"Then we'll just have to wait."

Except that she was asking more than he could take. The thought of spending the rest of the night so close to this feral creature without being able to touch turned him into a single mass of hurt. He could not even breathe.

"Don't do that to yourself," Jennifer said, sounding suddenly unsettled herself. "Let's just get it over with. I've been waiting for ages anyhow. It can't be all that big of a deal, can it?"

John couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You're not for real, kid. How old are you?"

"Old enough. Seriously, I don't know how old I am in years, but I might be eighteen." She raised an inquisitive eyebrow. "You don't think I know how considering what my friends do for a living?"

She didn't, really, no matter how many times she might have eavesdropped on the activities of Francis Peugeot's

working girls. It would be a first time for her. It would be something new for him as well. She sensed that, no matter how many women he had known in the past. He had never known anyone so innocent or trusting.

Jennifer thought him to be a lot like Gabby. It wasn't an act of sex he wanted. He wanted her in some indefinable way, her entire being, physical and emotional. He didn't alarm her at all when he sat at her side and embraced her.

Too soon after that, he was out of control. Jennifer lay passive across the bed as he undressed her, caught in the throes of her own budding passion, but not knowing what to do with herself.

She hadn't planned clearly for this at all. For a time, she kept whispering in his ear the need for protection, and then it was too late.

She could not hope to stop him. It was too soon for her, although it was over within seconds, and it hurt like hell. She lay quietly, as if in shock, as he finished undressing them both, tearing seams and popping buttons in the process.

He tried to be more considerate the second, somewhat less desperate time around, sensing the experience had not been what Jennifer had expected and fearful she'd not respond to him. But within seconds of his more cautious stimulation, she came alive beneath him, and her next cry was one of shock at the unexpected intensity of the pleasure he managed to stir to life within her.

She clutched at him in astonishment, raking bloody furrows in his back. She found herself convulsing in his arms for a time, lost in a universe of sharp physical pleasure. She collapsed when it was over for at least the immediate moment, and she lay staring at the ceiling in astonishment.

"Oh, God, Francis is going to be so pissed at me!"

John couldn't keep his hands off her. The perfection of her

body captivated him utterly. He assumed his behavior would offend her and that at any moment, she'd roll away and cut her visit short. He had tried to warn her.

Instead, she threw her hands around his neck and sighed. "I figured it would be something like this," she whispered breathlessly. "The girls kept warning me that my first time wouldn't be much fun. Should have known they've got their brains screwed around backwards."

John did not know what to say, or how to react to her. He had no idea of what she expected of him, whether he was to be some kind of father-figure to the girl, or mentor. They were far too badly mismatched to be lovers, a child he had not been able to resist and a man who had lived on the outskirts of hell his entire life and who sullied everything he touched.

She was more than he had bargained for, but he expected a self-centered child with a short attention span regardless. He expected her to turn moody, or to begin making unreasonable demands and walk out when he refused. He expected her to talk too much. Now that he had awakened his own long-neglected appetite, it was going to plague him long after the girl was gone.

It didn't happen that way as the hours quietly passed. Jennifer smiled at him now and then. She sighed a lot. She had little to say and no inclination to make a run for the shower and wash the stink of their sweat away. After a time, she stirred restlessly against him and whispered, "do it again."

The phone rang hours later, at dusk. John untangled himself and got up to answer it.

"We will all need to meet and resolve the problem together," Garko said. "One word of warning, John. Dimitri seems to have been tricked into killing one of Francis' girls. I don't know the details of the contract. I don't know who put him up to it or why. It's not anyone in our organization, and I've checked

around. I have no idea why he would have involved himself in something so completely off the wall. Apparently, he got the wrong girl and has been trying to cover his tracks."

John stared into space, confused, but already lost in contemplative thought.

"Our association, yours and mine, is terminated without prejudice," Garko said. "This is more than either one of us bargained for. You needn't be on hand when we collect Dimitri. I'll negotiate directly. I know the reputation of the Peugeot woman. We should be able to make a clean break with this situation."

"I'll field for them on this, if you don't mind," John heard himself say.

Garko gave a cold-sounding chuckle. "This is not like you, John. From an old friend, one word of advise. I can't protect you. Whatever agency is at work here goes over our heads. Personally, I wouldn't care to involve myself."

"How do we handle the meeting?"

"I'll send a runner with a mobile phone and instructions."

There was nothing more to be said. John put the motel phone back in its cradle.

A nymph arose from the rumpled pile of bedsheets and waited patiently for him to recount the conversation. "You were the only eyewitness to the killing," he said. "You have to watch Dimitri die. Complicity is the only way to satisfy everyone involved and ensure your silence and the silence of your friends. Can you do it?"

Jennifer took less time to respond than he would have thought. "It would be harder if he wasn't already all shot up, but I don't think he's going to make it anyhow. They won't just kill the rest of us, too, will they?"

"Not with the offer coming from Garko," John said. "Not with me there to back you up."

"Then I should speak with Francis."

John felt a sudden tightening in his gut. She was leaving. The chances of ever replicating their hours of intimacy would not likely repeat itself.

"I'll be back," Jennifer said unexpectedly. "When Evelyn arrives, Francis will pair her with Bertha and I'll get paired with Francis. I'd rather be with you until this is over with, if you don't mind. Francis snores. So do you, but I like your smell better."

John let a deep sigh escape him. "I don't mind."

Jennifer dipped her head and peered at him through dark hair tumbled about her shoulders and breasts. "Have I made a pest of myself?"

"Knock yourself out, kid."

Jennifer shook her head in bemused exasperation. "Francis is really going to be pissed at me."

Chapter Twenty-five

Bertha snapped awake just after dawn. She raised her head from the twin bed with its too hard mattress. "How long have I been out?" she asked of Gabby sitting at the kitchen table with his hands folded in front of him.

Gabby glanced at the clock. "About a half hour."

"Oh. Damn. I guess I can't sleep."

Until they heard back from Jennifer, nobody would be doing much sleeping. The apartment building was awfully quiet, which at least meant that Dimitri was still alive. Francis was watching over him, anxious to make the trade with Jennifer's would-be murderer and get them all out of danger. Emily was no longer pacing upstairs, but Sally hadn't been taking the excitement well, so the two were probably together.

Gabby looked around at her from his seat at the table. "What's going on around here? Who are you girls anyhow? And that man upstairs. He's been shot."

"What's your best guess, Gabby?"

"You're whores. You're them prostitutes that sell yourselves for money, and you're in some kind of serious trouble."

"Do you think of me as a whore, Gabby? Haven't you got a better word to use?"

"Ladies of the night," Gabby murmured self-consciously.

"Vampires, maybe?"

Gabby was not amused. "I don't know no other words."

"So what are you so upset about? Don't you think I've got myself a legitimate career? It pays well."

"You're just a baby. How did you ever manage to get yourself involved in stuff like this?"

"I started out as a waitress," Bertha said. "A couple bucks an hour part time and tips. I was so little and cute that the truckers wanted to eat me up with their donuts for breakfast. At least that's what they kept telling me.

"The cook owned the cafe, a fat man we called Porky, like in the movie. The two had a lot in common. Porky had a hard time taking no for an answer, and one afternoon when we didn't have any customers, he didn't hear me saying no at all. There wasn't much I could do about it, because in the little redneck community where I was brought up, they think rape is a joke. You gotta have broken bones to go crying to the sheriff, so on the way out, after Porky was finished with me, I just helped myself to the cash register. He had one hundred and thirty six dollars and forty-two cents in it.

"A week later I decided it wasn't enough, so I went back in during busy hour and emptied it again, except that this time Porky said that if I wanted money twice, I had to put out twice. I doubled the price and he said he'd triple it, and then the truckers got in on it, and I was a rich girl by the end of the month. I bought a brand new car and drove to California and thought I'd pay my way through school, except I'm lazy and not as smart as Jennifer, so I met up with Francis when I flunked out, and the rest is history."

Gabby gawked at her for a time, but managed to switch

gears. "What's with the bastard upstairs? Why did he try to hurt you?"

"Oh, he's just trying to cover up the other three girls he murdered. And Ed, a friend of ours. He killed him, too."

Gabby looked stricken by horror. "You should go to the police, Bertha!"

"Dimitri's father is way too important to get blamed for having a son who killed a whore. They'd rather just shut us up and let it go at that."

"Holy shit."

Bertha shrugged her helplessness. "You gotta watch who you play games with in this world, Gabby. If you don't get a hand making the rules, there's no sense in playing by them."

"It still ain't right what you do. I'm not saying I've been any better, but that still don't make what you do right."

Bertha disagreed with his reasoning with another little shrug of her shoulders. "People have a rough time agreeing on what's right and wrong, or haven't you noticed?"

"Yeah, well, what about what's right and wrong like in the Bible? Or don't you girls believe in God?"

Bertha smiled. "Whose god, Gabby? Whose bible? My own definition says that wrong is hurting people, and people who think they own the world and can make the rules. Most rules are made by men like that, don't you think? Men who think they're better than anyone else?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"So, are we bad people?" she said with a smile. "Have we hurt anyone in any way that counts?"

"You don't scare me no more," Gabby said with a note of childlike pride.

"That's good, because I'm nobody to be afraid of."

"Well, I don't know about that. You're worse than a badger ripping the balls off an old bull moose when you get riled. I

thought you was a baby, an innocent. You're not."

Bertha rolled to her feet and yawned. "Well, while we're on the subject of right and wrong, I want to go have another look-see at the backside of your mirrors."

Gabby grimaced.

"I'm not going to do any moralizing, Gabby. You and your mirrors saved my ass. I'm just curious. And fascinated. It all goes to show the mischief little boys can get into when they put their minds to it."

Gabby watched her pass through the hidden door in the back wall with a pained look, and then followed her through.

All eight bathrooms had been built back to back, four pairs of two. Bertha went up the narrow stairs to the ground floor and looked through the back side of the one-way mirror of one of the empty apartments. She then went up a narrow staircase to the second floor.

Daylight filtered through from the broken mirror in the apartment she and Jennifer had shared. If Gabby hadn't taken her bait and spied on her, Dimitri would have field dressed her like a deer. The horror of it crawled through her mind like a nightmare that couldn't find a way out. It insulted her that she had come so close to dying in so awful a manner. It haunted her knowing it would happen anyhow, someday, even if it happened in a hospital bed with tubes sticking out of her, and that the universe would carry on without her without missing a beat.

Knowing perfectly well what Gabby meant about right and wrong, Bertha felt guilty squeezing through the narrow entrance to the space between the two back apartments. Voyeurism had a powerful lure to it, the power of the soap opera, the power of fiction of all kinds, because the lure was simple human curiosity into other human lives.

Through one of the remaining mirrors, she could see

Francis Peugeot pacing in the bedroom. Dimitri lay upon the bed like a corpse at visitation, overly ripe and long overdue for burial. And yet he continued to breath.

Through one of the other mirrors, she found herself only inches from Emily and Sally sharing a stream of water pouring from the overhead shower head. Sally's deep, auburn hair was plastered against skin the color of ivory. Emily was embracing her, and Sally wept gently, staring seemingly directly at Bertha, except that she was seeing nothing but a reflection of herself.

Bertha had always suspected that there was more to the relationship between the two women than anyone suspected. They weren't open about it. If either of them had been thinking straight, they would have remembered the danger of the two-way mirrors, but Sally was scared silly, and Emily was thinking of nothing but the need to comfort her.

Bertha went back down to the basement apartment with Gabby trailing in silence and dropped to the couch feeling despondent. "I can't believe you bastards had the gall. That's major league rotten watching people in private moments."

"What's Miss Peugeot going to do about everything?" Gabby asked meekly.

"Right now," Bertha said, "we're waiting to hear from Jennifer on whether we're going to live or die."

Chapter Twenty-six

Jennifer returned in the morning to let Francis Peugeot know of the deal John had made with his boss. "He says it's the only way out. I've gotta do it. So do you."

Francis gazed at her in silent agony.

Jennifer had noticed a new car parked in the drive on the way in. "Evelyn's here?"

Francis nodded absently.

Racing up the stairs to the second floor of the castle, Jennifer was confronted by a dark specter of a woman, a skinny Elvira in black with a bit too much makeup about her eyes. She wore one of her glittery gowns that brushed the floor, and Jennifer could see that she had been crying.

Jennifer felt like a schoolgirl in her presence. "I guess you've heard about everything that's happened?"

"Tell me what happened the night Cathy died," Evelyn said. "I need to hear it from you."

She listened in silence until Jennifer had gone back over the events of that evening in detail. Evelyn asked a few more questions, then stared into space, lost in thought.

"Did you know Dimitri?" Jennifer asked meekly.

Evelyn shook her head. "I never dated him. I knew him by name and reputation. I don't know why he would have asked for me. Do you really think Dimitri thought Cathy was me?"

Jennifer shrugged, reluctant to be pinned down for a definite answer. "I think so. I heard Cathy insisting that she was you when they were in that basement den. It seemed to be important to him." Jennifer had no graceful way of asking Evelyn if there was some reason that Dimitri would have wanted her dead.

Jennifer went with Evelyn to look in on Dimitri. She was shocked to find him conscious. He froze her to the spot when he turned his head and his pale eyes fell upon her. It was like having a meat-eating predator size her up for a meal. And then he looked at Evelyn.

"You're the bitch," he murmured in growing agitation. "Hardly matters. I'll see you in hell."

"Why?" Evelyn asked as calm as ice. "Why me?"

Dimitri rolled his head away. "Because Rosie said so. Because Satan wants you."

His eyes unfocused and closed.

Evelyn wandered off lost in thought. She knew nothing about the attempt on her life, Jennifer decided. John was their only avenue of investigation left open to them, the only way they'd know for certain they'd be safe when Dimitri died.

Jennifer went back down to Francis, knowing better than to make demands of the woman, but needing to do things her own way. "I'm going back to John this evening. Can I use the car, or shall I take a cab?"

"You're too young for this, child," Francis said severely. "You're far too inexperienced to be dealing with a man like that."

"Give me some elbow room, Francis. It's not just for me.

He's important to all of us."

Francis softened to her plea. "You've been like a daughter to me, Jennifer. I've never allowed myself to get close to the girls."

"You could be a bit more friendly to the others," Jennifer said, finally able to broach a subject that had been a thorn in her side for ages. "They're so jealous of me because of the special treatment I get."

Francis looked quickly away. "Business and pleasure do not mix. The girls are of use to me only when they are at the height of their beauty, and it pains me terribly to have to let them go. They leave in anger. I never see them again. To know them like I know you, Jennifer, would be like having to send my own children away. I'm tired of being hurt. I thought it would be different with you."

"I'm not gone yet," Jennifer said. "I can't imagine what life would be without you."

Francis smiled. "You're a bright, aggressive and inquisitive young woman. The world lies at your feet. I suggest you choose what it has to offer with the utmost care."

"Choices don't have to be forever," Jennifer said. "You said so yourself."

"Some are inevitable. I've dreaded this moment, Jennifer. I was hoping to break you into the business. I'm planning on retiring soon, you know. I was hoping you would take my place someday."

Jennifer had suspected. The other girls had warned her. "I'm not leaving you, Francis, but there's room in my life for more than you and the girls."

"Room for romance and a man in your life?" Francis said with a strained smile. "Like in those romance novels I used to take away from you?"

"I read a lot faster than you thought I did, Francis. I only left out the ones I had already read for you to take."

Francis burst into laughter. "God protect that man you've taken up with. He's going to need it."

"I'm not taking up with anyone quite yet," Jennifer assured her, "and I'll never leave you in anger. I promise."

Francis turned petulant. "You haven't fallen in love with him? You're not hoping that it'll last forever, that he will marry you and father your children?"

Francis was being sarcastic, and it hurt. "Things don't always turn out for the best," Jennifer said, "but it's no reason to be bitter about it. You said that, too."

Jennifer started to turn away.

"Sincerely, Jennifer, can you watch Dimitri die?"

Jennifer had already given it some thought. "The police and the courts are supposed to protect people. They had their chance to protect me when I was a kid, and they blew it. I don't live in their world anymore. I'd rather do it John's way now."

"We have Evelyn's car to use," Francis said stoically. "Take the rental and do what you must. Please don't let anything I've said make you unhappy with yourself, or angry with me."

Do what makes you happy, Francis used to say, but don't be angry. Look ahead as far as you can, but let happiness be your guide in life.

It was a strange philosophy for a woman like Francis.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The runner tapped at the motel room door after dawn and handed John a cell phone and an envelope. After the man was gone, John read the instructions contained in the envelope, showered, and got dressed. Jennifer hustled in silence behind him to keep pace. Together, they left in his car and drove north along the river. Once clear of the city, John began exploring side roads.

"What are we looking for?" Jennifer wanted to know.

"Privacy," John said.

John inspected a deserted clearing behind a public rest area along the highway and grunted his approval. He punched out a number on the cell phone. A voice he did not recognize answered and asked for directions.

"North along the river from the city," John said. "Watch for a quarry. Turn east at the gravel road. I'm just around the corner at a marked public rest area."

"We'll be there within the hour."

John handed the phone to Jennifer. "Tell Peugeot where we are. We need Dimitri here as soon as possible."

He watched Jennifer make her call in hushed tones. She paced like a cat waiting for the group to make their short journey. She looked worried, and she had reason to be. If Dimitri had died during the night, he had no way to protect Francis and her girls against Garko. And even if they settled their differences with the mob, the girl they called Evelyn had apparently been marked for death by another, unknown party.

John sat on a picnic bench, watching Jennifer, amazed at how events had unfolded since her arrival. She had been so utterly unexpected and magical. The soft body and voice of an angel had replaced the gloom in his life, although she could as easily be an angel of death. The magic couldn't last forever.

He wasn't behaving like his normal self. How long would it be before he made a fatal error and brought his little paradise crashing down upon them both?

A car arrived filled with five women and Dimitri. Two of the women supported a dazed and critically weakened Dimitri Carvelli, bare-chested and dressed only in an oversized pair of coveralls stained with his own blood. John pointed to the shaded side of the clearing. The women escorted Carvelli in that direction, and then let him slump to the ground.

Francis came over and stared up at John soberly, waiting for further instruction.

"When this is over," John said in a tone of voice that matched her grim expression, "do nothing to cause further complications. Did you ask Dimitri why he killed that girl?"

Francis gave a careless shrug. "He said he thought she was Evelyn. He said Rosie wanted her death. He hasn't been clear-headed enough to explain how he knew Evelyn, or who Rosie might be. I was hoping you'd know."

"It will remain an unresolved issue for here and now," John said. "The men you will meet today are not concerned with reasons for Dimitri's behavior, only in resolving consequences

to their bottom line. Do you understand?"

"I understand bottom lines perfectly well," Francis said softly, her eyes now on Jennifer and filling with tears.

"John is helping us," Jennifer told her. "He didn't have to be here. He doesn't have to do this."

"But he does, my dear," Francis said gently. "What choice have you given him?"

She turned away and returned to her huddled group near one of the picnic tables.

Two limousines pulled into the clearing within minutes. Four men in suits were first to emerge. They jogged to the four corners of the clearing to stand guard.

Garko led the procession that followed. The fat man partially supported by two of Garko's henchmen John recognized as Bernard Carvelli. The one carrying the black leather bag would be his personal physician. The fourth man was Garko's personal body-guard, openly carrying a small semi-automatic pistol.

Garko wasted no time. He glanced at John, at the group of women, and then gestured for them to follow. The two groups converged upon Dimitri Carvelli and formed a semi-circle.

Dimitri managed to rise to his knees, but his eyes focused on no one in particular, clearly too injured to know with any clarity what was happening. Bernard Carvelli broke down at the sight of his son, weeping and wailing in Italian. The old man would have agreed to the need for his own son's death. John didn't know whether the display warranted pity in the eyes of the spectators. In the face of death, he himself felt nothing. Nobody died in his presence who did not deserve to die.

Garko pulled his own handgun from a shoulder holster, casually screwed a silencer in place, and offered it butt first to the old man. Garko muttered a few words when his patience

ran thin, and Bernard snatched the weapon petulantly and turned to his son.

Francis and the girls averted their eyes. Jennifer, John noticed, watched in horrified fascination, and Garko's eyes were on Jennifer, making sure she was a witness and a participant to murder.

Bernard Carvelli collected himself. With a dramatic flair, he drew himself erect and positioned himself directly behind his kneeling son. Muttering unheard words of derision, he simply lowered the gun and pulled the trigger.

And missed.

Dimitri staggered to his feet, brought instantly alert by the sound of the pistol exploding inches from his head. Bernard cried out in dismay, forced now to put the barrel of the gun to his son's face.

"Rosie, no!"

Bernard fired again with even less hesitation, this time into the expression of utter astonishment. Dimitri's head flew back and he dropped lifeless to the ground.

The rest was a strange ritual typical of Garko. He knelt, picked up a handful of loose dirt, and tossed it upon Dimitri's body. John repeated the gesture and glanced at Jennifer as an indication that she should do the same.

The guards converged on the scene, casually unrolling a heavy plastic tarp. Garko gestured for John to join him on his walk back to the car. "No more must come of this. Do you understand?"

"I'm concerned," John said.

"I understand. Someone was pulling Dimitri's strings. But this mysterious Rosie is not our business. If it becomes our business, we deal with it in the usual way, our way."

Garko turned to him at the car. "Take care, John. I wish you well."

John watched the limousine back from the clearing and drive away with half the group. Dimitri's body went in the trunk of the second vehicle. It, too, pulled quietly away, leaving no visible evidence of a disturbance in the quiet morning air.

Francis came to him, looking pale and shaken. "What now?"

"Jennifer said you hired protection. It may be wise to have someone keep an eye on your back for a time, and to keep a low profile, but I'd like to meet the man before I leave, and I'd appreciate it if you'd abide by my evaluation of his credentials and abilities."

"And your personal plans, sir?"

John gazed off into the distance. "I have no plans."

"Plans in regard to Jennifer?"

Jennifer stood nearby, watching.

"The kid doesn't take no for an answer. I don't speak for her."

"The child indeed has a will of her own," Francis said. "I don't want to see her hurt."

"I won't hurt her," John said bluntly, pegging the angry woman with a hard look. "I won't see her hurt. You have my word on that, ma'am."

"How often is the hurt we cause intentional, sir?"

"Point well taken." John turned away and hurried to his car. By the time he had opened his door, Jennifer had opened the opposing passenger door, slipped inside, and shut it behind her with a decisive slam. She pulled her safety belt across her body and latched it before he had settled behind the wheel.

An angel made of Kevlar, John decided. An angel with fangs, but still a kid who had watched a man shot in the face by his own father.

Once back at the motel, Jennifer leaped into his arms and held tight, trembling for hour on end during the course of the

quiet afternoon. John held her in silence, offering the security of his embrace, basking in her warmth, for as long as she wanted it, and for as long as she would allow it.

Chapter Twenty-eight

"**W**hy did he want to hurt Evelyn?" Jennifer asked of John, lying at his side in the night. "Who is Rosie?"

John eyed her unhappily and had no answer. He had a question of his own. "The girl in the motel. Did you see what he did to her?"

Jennifer looked away in sudden panic. She tried hard to keep the image buried where she wouldn't have to see it again, even in her mind's eye.

"I was afraid of that," John said. "Dimitri was the spoiled kid of a rich politician. A bad seed. A kid like that leads a sheltered life for the most part. If he runs with the wrong crowd, he's putty in their hands, arrogant and naïve. What did they do to him? What do they want? I have no idea."

"Rosie?" Jennifer said in a whisper.

"Don't know." John didn't like the haunted tone to her voice. "You going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine."

"You're just a kid. You're not all that tough."

"I'm not a stupid kid. I know what's happening."

John stared at her for a time, then looked away.

"Why are you so nice to me?" she said. "I wasn't expecting you to be so..."

"Soft?"

"Considerate."

He gave her a cold grin, what passed as his sense of humor.

"What can I say? I'm a nice guy."

"You're not a nice guy, John, but I saw the way you looked at me that first time, like I was someone you knew. You told me about your sister."

Jennifer was the one person in the world he could tell. Garko had known, but no one else. "Sasha, my kid sister. She ran with a rough crowd. She got hurt."

"I'm not Sasha."

John looked at her more carefully. "Yeah, you are. Deep down, you're like her."

"I'm sorry if I took advantage of you. I didn't know about your sister. It wasn't a nice thing for me to do."

"Well, it cuts both ways. I'm not your father, or your big brother, or whoever you think I am."

She smiled faintly. "Yeah, you are. Deep down."

"Tell me about yourself, kid," he asked after a long bout of silence. "If you're going to cause me problems, I need to know about them ahead of time."

"I won't cause you problems,. And I wish you'd stop calling me kid."

"You said you were from somewhere around here."

"Francis found me in Los Angeles. I was orphaned at age four or five. Some relatives took me to California, but I wound up in foster homes. I had a good one toward the end, but my foster dad died, and his wife couldn't handle me by herself, so she was going to give me back to the state. I ran away the day

they were going to pick me up."

"You should have stayed put. Maybe it would have worked out."

Jennifer wrinkled her nose. "My case worker was taking me home with him. The first stoplight we came to, I bailed out and ran. I lived on the streets after that and mugged guys who hit on me, at least the ones who weren't nice about it. They'd follow me into dark places and I'd pepper spray the bastards, stun their asses with a stun gun that had a real wack to it, and take their money."

"Not good," John said. "What happened?"

"I met one of Francis' girls. Me and Francis hit it off really well. I was the daughter she never had. She's been like my fairy godmother. She wants to put me through college. I know I have to learn to do something to pay my own way in life, but I don't want to take over Francis' business like she expects me to. I'd probably get bossy, fat, and wind up wearing too much make-up."

With her eyes closed, his voice was like gentle thunder. "You should be able to get pretty much anything you want from the world."

"All I want right now is you."

"We won't get away with it."

"Then maybe I'm just a stupid kid after all."

"It's not something we have to address until we finish with Dimitri."

Jennifer opened her eyes in surprise and stared into the darkness. "Dimitri's dead."

"He's still our only link to Rosie, and Rosie is our only link to the person who wanted Evelyn Haxx murdered. They'll try again. That involves you, if you're not with me, if I'm not protecting you. So, you and I, we're okay until we get all of that settled. I'm not saying we won't get hurt along the way. I'm not

operating in familiar territory these days."

John's analysis of the situation startled her like cold water to the face. "I don't understand. Are you going to find Rosie to keep Evelyn from getting hurt just because I might get caught in the middle again?"

"You're missing the point, kid. Why would anyone work with the likes of Dimitri Carvelli to begin with? He was way too loud and messy."

Jennifer was confused. "So?"

"So, pitting Dimitri against Evelyn Haxx may have been a diversion, a way to set up someone *other* than Evelyn Haxx. Maybe they don't want anyone to know which girl is being hit, or why her death is necessary. So they set events in motion that they knew damn well would involve Garko. If things had gone as they should have, you'd all be dead."

"Was that fat man Bernard Carvelli worth all of our lives?"

"Don't get your dander up, kid. Think of that fat man as an intravenous needle in the vein of the public pocketbook. He's worth millions to organized crime. But Garko must have looked into Dimitri's affairs to find out who might have put Dimitri up to killing your friend. If he didn't find anything, I can guarantee that it's making him damned nervous."

"Does he want you to figure it out?"

"Maybe he's hoping I will. Whoever wanted Evelyn Haxx or any one of her associates dead they struck out with Dimitri. No big deal. They bring in another pitcher and try again, or maybe there's already one lurking in the woodwork. More killings now will implicate Garko. Everyone who knows of Garko will wonder what he's up to, and Garko's not safe when those people are looking his way and wondering. Sooner or later, they get paranoid."

John's unrelenting train of logic stunned her. "Then none of us are safe yet."

"I wouldn't count on it. No matter. We'll get it straightened out, you and I."

His determination caught her attention. "But why? You don't owe Garko anything, and Francis would just quit her business and disband if she thought her girls were still in danger."

He understood the question. Why his commitment? "I was a dead man when you pointed that gun in my face," he told her. "I'll be back where I started when I have to send you away. The only life I have left begins with you. It ends with you."

Tears poured from Jennifer's eyes. She didn't want things to be this way between them.

"It cuts both ways," he reminded her. "In your eyes, I destroy evil for a living. Without it, I'm a bad-tempered old man with an eighth-grade education. I can't trust the children I father at my age will be healthy. We've got it made in the here and now, kid, but it can only last as long as I destroy evil for a living, only for so long as I'm tragic and dangerous."

Jennifer stared into the darkness, horrified.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Jennifer returned the next morning to her upstairs apartment and found Francis and Emily packing to leave. Evelyn was sitting on the broad window sill overlooking the river. Bertha was standing in the door to the bathroom supervising Gabby who was sweeping up broken glass with a glum lack of enthusiasm.

"We're leaving this afternoon," Francis said, summing up the situation in a nutshell.

"You can't go yet," Jennifer replied.

Francis turned from the kitchen cupboard she had emptied. "I beg your pardon?"

"John says there's still danger. It might not be over yet."

Sally came through the door behind her. Everybody paused to listen to the exchange.

"It's over," Francis said curtly. "Dimitri's dead. May his soul burn in hell."

Jennifer glanced at Evelyn. Evelyn stared her down for a moment, and then looked away as if fearing that Jennifer knew something she shouldn't. "John says we need to know who put

Dimitri up to it before we know for sure they won't try again."

"We'll find that out for ourselves," Francis said. "Aside from the mercenary I've hired to protect us, I'll have private investigators look into the situation."

"John said the mob should have known who hired Dimitri, but they don't. If they don't, whose going to do better?"

Francis paused, unsettled by both the disclosure and its cold logic. "Why would the mob care one way or another?"

"Because someone screwed with a Carvelli and left them hanging. They care."

"*John* says," Emily growled. "You're quite taken with this *John* of yours. Maybe *John* boy hasn't had quite enough of your adolescent ass to suit him."

"John says that mercenary you hired might himself be dangerous," Jennifer added quietly. "He might be incompetent. He might be working for the bad guys."

The room remained deathly silent for the time it took Francis to mull her way through Jennifer's advice. "What does John want from us?"

"Nothing, really. He's trying to protect me. Emily's right. I got a nice ass. But I care about you guys. I wish you would listen to what he has to say about things."

"And if we elect to return to Chicago?" Francis said. "Will you be coming with us?"

"I'll stay with John."

"I see."

"But John says he'll check out the mercenary before you leave. If you let him."

Francis looked defeated. "I'll visit with your friend this afternoon, child. I want to hear what he has to say about our situation. I mean like that would know the extent of the danger."

Jennifer returned to the motel and paced. John had taken to the afternoon soap operas, watching what Jennifer thought

of as insipid dramas with a frown on his face, as if he did not understand what was going on, or disapproved. When Francis knocked at the door, he looked around without rising to answer it. Jennifer opened the door and Francis waddled in huffing and puffing. She stopped in the middle of the room to confront the man on the bed. "Jennifer says that some danger remains despite Dimitri's death. I need confirmation that you believe this may be the case."

"Something's not right," John said and slowly rose to his feet.

"If you had Jennifer's welfare at heart, you would send her back with me."

"If I wanted her dead, I'd send her back with you."

"You're taking sexual advantage of a child and you know it."

John sighed. "The exploitation is mutual, believe me."

"Please, Francis," Jennifer pleaded. "That's not important now."

Francis whirled to face her. "Child, I forbid you to allow this man to indulge his vile appetites at your expense! I absolutely forbid it!"

Jennifer resisted the temptation to be hurtful. "John says that Dimitri was just a pawn, and pawns are expendable."

Francis shifted her gaze to John as if expecting the man to speak for himself.

"John doesn't care what happens," Jennifer said softly. "He doesn't care who lives or dies, himself included. He's only doing it because of me. It's not just sex and you know it. He could buy all the sex he wanted."

"I told you I didn't want you part of the business," Francis said in a tone like ice.

"I'm not part of the business. I'm part of those romance novels you threw away. Francis, none of this has anything to do with business, yours or John's. Someone else is going to get

hurt. It's that simple. We can't stop it from happening until we know *why* it's happening."

Francis looked crest-fallen. "What are you going to do?"

"We're going back to Chicago to look into it. John says that nobody's going to have their guard up over a kid my age. I can help. You should stay here and wait."

Jennifer couldn't resist Francis' expression of shock. "John says he's going to dangle me over their heads like raw meat over a school of piranhas. John says he's never had a chance to go fishing with friends until now."

John chuckled, the first time Jennifer had heard him laugh aloud..

Francis looked like she might be sick. "But it involves Satanism, child. You heard the way Dimitri was talking! He spoke of Satan."

"Dimitri was a fool," John said gently, "although I've known men who would put Satan to shame."

Francis mocked anger. "I'll not be party to this insidious liaison between the two of you."

"Will you remain at the castle long enough for us to look into the matter?" John said politely.

Francis stared at the floor.

Jennifer inched closer. "Francis? Please?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "I'll do as you ask."

"Will you let John evaluate your mercenary?" Jennifer said. "He says it's best to send him away if he's not qualified, or if his loyalties are questionable."

Francis looked up at John.

John gave a curt nod of his head. "Arrange a meeting at the place Dimitri died. Tell him what happened there. I want to see how badly he can be rattled. It won't take long."

Francis clutched the handbag she was carrying. "Okay. It's settled then. He should arrive before dark. When will the two of

you be leaving?"

Jennifer looked to John for an answer. "Tomorrow," John said.

Jennifer turned to Francis with a mischievous smile. "John says tomorrow."

"Oh, my God." Francis scurried from the room wrought with anxiety.

Jennifer turned to John and gave him a wane smile. "She likes you. I can tell."

Chapter Thirty

Francis gathered everyone together in her upstairs apartment later in the afternoon, Bertha, Emily, Sally, and Evelyn. "We must stick together until this is over. The other girls must keep their distance. I thought it was over. Jennifer and that awful man she's taken up with have convinced me otherwise. Bertha, I want you to talk to Gabby. He must cooperate with us fully. Blackmail him if necessary."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Bertha said. "He doesn't want us to leave." She shrugged. "He likes the excitement."

Emily and Sally and Evelyn had been treating Gabby like a resident cockroach. Francis' attitude had been cavalier, and maybe Gabby deserved a cold shoulder considering the nature of his crimes. But Bertha had spent an innocent night or two curled up at his side. He'd do nothing to hasten her departure from his life.

The phone call from the airport came at about seven that evening. Francis then phoned Jennifer. "I'll pick up the man and we'll go directly to that place."

Jennifer hung up with a murmur of acknowledgment.

"Evelyn, you'll come with me," Francis said. "The rest of you stay here. We won't be long."

When they reached the airport, the mercenary was waiting for them at the curb in front of the terminal. He was a trim man in his forties, tall and muscular with shaggy blonde hair and blue eyes. He wore tailored military fatigues and tossed a duffel bag in the trunk of Evelyn's car. Before he climbed in, he studied the two women, Francis behind the wheel of the car and Evelyn seated in back. He slipped into the passenger seat up front.

The man introduced himself as Craig Netherman. He frowned when Francis drove away without speaking and started back toward the interstate bridge spanning the Mississippi. Evelyn introduced herself from the back seat and explained the change of plans.

"I told you my qualifications," he said after a time. "I know nothing of this man you're talking about."

"I don't know specifically what he has in mind," Francis said. "I know he's a professional, employed by dangerous people, but we've been given adequate reason to trust him. I would suggest that you do a little evaluating of your own and not be offended. A total of five people have died, Mr. Netherman. It must end here and now."

Jennifer and John Cantrell were waiting at the rest area. The two approached as Evelyn's car emptied itself of passengers.

"Mr. Netherman," Francis said quietly, "meet John Cantrell, the man who was supposed to have been Jennifer's murderer."

John and Jennifer stood side by side, tall and slender. They moved with unconscious grace, like father and daughter, except that they had become lovers.

Craig Netherman stepped from between his two hosts to

confront his adversary, hostile and self-confident. "I know you from somewhere."

"And you need to show some qualifications for taking the ladies money," John said. "Something more than a pretense at being tough."

Craig took a sudden swing at John. John blocked the blow and delivered a fist karate-style to Craig's chest with lightning speed. Craig staggered back and took a moment to regain his breath, then danced forward boxing style and tried a few more swings.

Francis gasped. "Oh, my God."

Emily gave a nervous giggle.

Jennifer could guess what was happening. John was a martial arts expert. So was Craig Netherman, for that matter, but badly outclassed. He landed a blow or two on John's shoulder, but she suspected John allowed it to stay in close and deliver a succession of crippling blows to Craig's body.

It wasn't like in the movies. Craig bled profusely from the very first strike to his face. Blind rage alone finally drove John back a few steps, and it seemed to be Craig's persistence that satisfied John. He stopped the fight, patted Craig on the shoulder and gestured for Jennifer to bring over the small first-aid kit she was carrying. Bertha hadn't noticed it earlier. John had come well prepared.

Craig surrendered gracefully. The two men talked on the way back to the cars. Craig rode back with Jennifer and John. Jennifer drove. Once back at the castle, the two men toured the grounds. Francis gathered the girls together in the upstairs apartments.

"We do what they tell us," she said nervously. "We let them call the shots and hope that John and Jennifer's investigation allows us to return home in peace."

Francis opened her arms to Jennifer. Jennifer gave her a

fierce hug. "If you need to reach me in an emergency," Francis said, "call direct from the cell phone."

John brought Craig inside. Craig's face was bruised and a cut lip still leaked blood. He ignored his wounds, his eyes taking in the collection of women and their surroundings in a professional manner.

"Jennifer and I will be leaving now," John said to Francis. "Craig knows the score. You can trust him."

"How long will you be gone?" Francis said.

John glanced at her with his pale eyes. "We'll work as fast as we can. They caught us off balance. We'll try to return the favor."

"Take care of the child. Don't let her get hurt."

John glanced at Jennifer, but he shook his head. "It doesn't work that way. Nobody's invincible. They'd have to kill me to get to her, but that's not saying much."

They watched John and Jennifer leave from the upstairs window. "I've noticed something strange about that man," Evelyn said. "He doesn't carry a gun. He's a killer and I've never seen a gun."

"He doesn't need one," Francis spat in anger tinged with fear. "That man is pure evil. I'm so frightened for Jennifer."

"I'm not," Evelyn said bluntly. "No need to be. He'd kill for her, just like he says. Wouldn't hesitate a second. And he'd die for her, Francis. Have you or I had anyone who cared so much for us?"

"God, I wish you wouldn't yank the rug out from beneath me like that," Francis said. "You don't even like the man."

"No, but he's useful."

Francis showed Craig the apartments. He rattled off a shopping list of things he'd need to settle in. He touched his split lip with a forefinger. "Bastard," he murmured from time to time.

"Have you and John met before?" Francis queried. "Do you know who he is?"

"I don't deal with scum," Craig muttered.

"But you know him," Francis said.

"By reputation. He's John Cantrell. John, the Iranian. Ma'am, he's a cold-blooded killer. You'd be smart to get rid of him, and get that girl away from him. Where'd you ever pick up the likes of him anyhow?"

"He was sent here to kill us," Francis said.

Craig looked promptly horrified. "Jesus H. Christ," he muttered, wiping blood from his chin with a shaking hand.

Bertha went to the basement. Gabby was pretending to straighten up. He turned as Bertha approached, looking thoroughly scared. She stepped into his waiting arms and sighed as they closed protectively upon her.

"You girls leaving?" Gabby said anxiously.

"Not for a while."

Gabby escorted her into his cool and quiet apartment and locked the door behind him. He resisted the temptation to touch her again, turning instead to the refrigerator for a beer.

Bertha stepped between him and the refrigerator. "No drinking. You were going to mess with me. Why did you change your mind."

Gabby shook his head. "I ain't got no right to be doing that."

"I gave you the right. Jennifer's got John. Francis has her newbie. They don't make perfect couples, so what's wrong with you and me?"

She took comfort in the embrace that followed and felt of worth to someone in the world regardless of Gabby's tremble. He was afraid. So were they all.

Chapter Thirty-one

John forced Jennifer to drive the car. "My driver's license isn't valid," he confessed.

She laughed because he knew full well she didn't have one either. "Expired?"

"Can't drive if you're dead. John Cantrell died ten years ago."

"You should have told me that last night. I probably wouldn't have slept with you. How did you die?"

"I got confused for someone else during a fire," John said. "I tried to straighten it out, but they wanted identification, so I let it slide. Being anonymous proved to be a safety factor in my profession."

"Nobody knows who you are for real?"

"I'm not even sure who I am. I haven't had ties with anyone for years. All I have are memories, and I wonder at times how many of those I can trust."

"I heard Craig Netherman mutter something about the Iranian. Is that you?"

John chuckled. "I got Thai and Arab on my mother's side of

the family, American Indian and French on my father's side. My grandmother was the Iranian. I've got an international heritage, you could say."

"I want to meet them!" Jennifer said with a burst of enthusiasm.

He looked at her with his sad, pale eyes. "They're all gone. I came along late in life. They got old and died when I was a kid."

John's aloneness saddened her. "I'm sorry," she said.

"No need to be. You're not much a blueblood yourself, or do you think maybe you are?"

She flashed him a smile. "I have no way of knowing, just like you. My social worker, the one that tried to hit on me, told me my mother died of cancer. She was only thirty years old. I think I had an uncle, maybe, or an older brother from another marriage. I got this photograph in my things, and he looks like my mother's picture. I don't know who my father was. If he's still alive, he might not even know he had a kid. When my mother died, my uncle or whoever it was took me to California. Something must have happened to him, which I suppose is how I got dumped in the welfare system."

"You don't need the establishment, kid. You do the mainstream scene and the government controls your life and soaks you for forty percent to boot. That's no way to live."

Jennifer laughed, knowing he wasn't being entirely serious. "What are you going to do without social security when you get old, wack pensioners for greedy widows?"

"There's no way I'll make it that far. I've got both ends of the candle burning."

"Yeah. Me, too, I guess."

John smiled at her. It was a strange, benevolent, all-knowing smile, unlike anything she had ever seen before. John was not at peace with a world to which he had never belonged, but on the inside, he was like a dark and deep ocean, cold and

tranquil. To see him smile was to see a current of warmth stir in that terrible depth.

She was proud to have put it there.

Chicago finally loomed on the horizon, a dome of dirty light against the darkening night sky. A few miles ahead lay Lake Shore Drive and the skyscrapers overlooking Lake Michigan. Jennifer knew they were headed for a far less attractive part of the city.

"Just ahead," John said. "We'll pull off here."

"Do you know where we're going?"

"I've got a good idea of where to start."

John guided her through a series of turn-offs, each road deteriorating from the wide, clean expanse of the interstate to a brick side street walled by dingy buildings. "This is a bad part of town," John said. "If I run into trouble, keep your head down and stay put. We don't want to get separated."

Jennifer didn't like the way he understated the potential nightmare. "We sure as hell don't want to get separated."

They parked the car in an alley behind a tavern, weaving in and out of a yard-high accumulation of stinking trash on foot. "I know the place," John said. "Nobody will mess with the car here."

"That's because nobody in their right mind would wallow through all the shit to get to it, right?"

Rats darted into the refuse like quick brown serpents. John took her hand and guided her through a rusty steel door and down a corridor reeking of unmentionable odors. The tavern was the usual scene of dim lights, neon signs in bright colors and sparkling bottles lining a mirror behind the bar.

John spoke briefly to the bearded, disheveled-looking bartender. He passed over two twenty-dollar bills and was tossed a key. "Home, sweet home," he said, and led the way up a creaking staircase in back and down a hall so narrow that

Jennifer was forced to follow single-file.

John unlocked the end door to a room of gray wallpaper, torn linoleum of an indeterminate pattern, and one neatly made bed. He clicked on a table lamp on the nightstand, snapped on the bathroom light and dropped wearily to the bed.

"We left our things in the car," Jennifer reminded him.

"We have to go back out. We'll catch something to eat, and I'll ask around for information."

"How are we going to work this? I don't mind being used for bait, but I didn't think we were going fishing in a sewer."

John eyed her as if unsure how she was going to react to the situation. "Dimitri ran with a fancy crowd, but it's my guess they've recruited bottoms in this area from time to time. A girl in this neighborhood can fall through the cracks and nobody would ever notice. Or care."

Jennifer knew what a bottom was, a willing partner to being hurt. She flopped down on the bed at his side. "Can't we start tomorrow?"

John reached for her as a thirsty man might reach for a cold beer, then thought better of it. "We're after the night life. We can sleep over in the morning."

"Night life as in vampires, or ghouls?"

"Just whores and pimps," John said. "The only advantage Francis and her girls have over the locals is their looks and smarts, and you can't take personal credit for that. Nobody asks to be born."

"There but for the grace of God?"

John gazed at her for a moment, as if mulling over an unfamiliar idea. "You could say that for the roaches in the walls."

"Nice thought."

They locked their room up and went out to eat. John selected a nearby bar that served a steak dinner. Jennifer ate

in silence, quickly acclimatizing herself to the atmosphere. A jukebox roared out through the colorful darkness, and a few couples spun about on the dance floor.

John ordered a beer from the waitress and excused himself. Jennifer watched him walk to the bar and talk to two women who were keeping one another company.

"What are you doing?" Jennifer said when he returned to the table. The two women were staring at her in peculiar fashion.

"I'm trying to sell your ass," John said. "Dimitri was a sadistic bastard, and the only bottom who'd risk a man like that is a mostly unwilling one. You're going to be just that sort of bottom, the unmasked variety, and it's my guess they pay a hefty price for ignorant young runaways someone can pass their way from time to time. If I find buyers, they might know our Rosie."

"You're posing as a talent scout," Jennifer said with mock sarcasm.

John studied her. "Yeah, and it's my studied opinion that you look too healthy to be the right kind of girl."

Jennifer sighed in dismay. "I know the scene," she said. "I can do wonders with a little bit of mascara and some looser clothing."

They stopped at a drugstore for supplies on the way back to their room. Jennifer cleaned off the bathroom mirror and made creative use of the mascara. Using her fingertip, she put dark circles under her eyes and convincing looking bruises and needle tracks on the inner surface of her forearms with ink and rouge. She stomped one of John's large shirts into the dirty floor before donning it to complete the image.

"Christ," John murmured when she made a reappearance. "You look like shit."

"Thank you. Now what?"

"I gave those ladies our address. Word gets around. We'll have potential buyers paying a visit. Look spaced-out and let me do the talking."

The two women had apparently paired off in the bar for reasons not related to business. They came to John alone to do business, one after the other. The first of the two was a hefty, vicious looking woman in her early forties. She took the money John offered for her time and glanced at the Jennifer fearfully. "What is it you want, mister?"

"I'm looking for Rosie."

"Don't know no Rosie."

"Ask around. Get back to me with useful information and we'll do business again. Big business. She'll want the girl."

The woman nodded and eyed Jennifer again. She wet her lips and glanced guiltily at John. "I'll take her. I'll give you a thousand bucks for the little bitch."

John gave her a bored look and said nothing. The woman spun about and hurried from the room.

"What would she have wanted with me?" Jennifer said.

"You don't want to even think about it."

Jennifer shuddered at the possibilities that came to mind. "I hope this isn't going to take long."

"I don't expect it to."

Their second visitor was the younger of the two women John had talked to at the bar, a more alert and concerned looking woman in her early thirties. Again, John handed her some money and repeated his request. "I'm looking for Rosie."

The woman stared at him for a time. "You fucking bastard. She's just a child."

"I'll double that for an address."

The woman glanced again at Jennifer. Angrily, she shook her head and backed away. "Fuck you, you sick bastard."

"Triple."

There was anguish in her eyes when she glanced one final time at Jennifer.

"I need an address."

"I've got an address, but do you know this Rosie, mister? Do you know what she's into?"

"I know about her."

"Do you know that nobody will ever see that kid again?"

John counted more bills from his wallet.

The woman visibly shrunk in stature, defeated by whatever need she had that was greater than the life of another human being. "Club Paradise, you dumb-ass. Where the hell else would she be?"

John paid her and she left in silence. And in tears. They listened to the creaking of her weight on the stairs.

"That was really sad," Jennifer said. "What's Club Paradise?"

"Club Paradise would have been among my top ten guesses. You'd be amazed at what passes for paradise among some people. It would make a great Halloween haunted house for Girl Scouts, say about your own age."

"With real vampires and ghouls, I suppose."

"We're going to have to pull up roots and move a bit closer. Words going to get around about us. No telling how this is going to go down."

Jennifer couldn't sleep for the balance of the night, feeling lost in this strange world of poverty, sickness, and despair. Sirens wailed in the tepid darkness. She wondered why people bothered with their fantasies of heaven and hell in a world that contained its own extremes, sometimes contained within a heartbeat and a city block of one another.

John stirred restlessly in his sleep during the night. He reached for her whispering another girl's name.

Chapter Thirty-two

Bertha lounged in the dark in Gabby's dreary basement apartment just before midnight, feeling vaguely betrayed by the recent turn of events. Gabby had found himself an unexpected new friend in Craig Netherman. She could hear the sound of their hammers and drills as they installed infrared sensors around the house. Craig had announced the intention of turning the castle into the real thing, to defend the maidens of the estate against mass attack.

"Adolescent," had been Francis' assessment of the man during a get-together earlier in the evening.

"He's trying to impress us," Emily had added, although Emily was always pleased at catching men behaving like peacocks.

"He's good-looking in a rugged sort of way," Evelyn had taunted.

Bertha knew what they all thought of her Gabby, so she had kept her mouth shut. Eventually she had wandered away from the conversation.

The commotion died down. She went in search of the men

and found them connecting wires in Craig's ground floor apartment. When he flipped a switch, Gabby went outside and walked around the building. Lights came on a make-shift panel of monitor lights, one by one, following his progress.

"Neat," she commented.

Craig glanced over at her in surprise. He grinned and eyed her body, and Bertha sighed in frustration. *Hey, the part of me that thinks and talks is up here between the ears*, she wanted to say. But Craig turned away and had forgotten about her in the next moment.

She was on hand when Leroy Reinhart's Cadillac pulled up into the drive at one in the morning. Gabby muttered a startled, "Oh, shit, here comes trouble."

Bertha listened to the exchange that followed from the side entrance. Leroy demanded the identify of the newcomer, and Gabby floundered. There was going to be a lot he couldn't explain. He tried a few lies, but quickly blew it.

Bertha ran up the stairs and burst into Francis' apartment. "Our landlord's paying us a visit, and Gabby's not covering for us very well."

Emily joined them. Francis turned to her for help. "What can we do?"

Emily turned to Sally standing in the doorway. "Remember the green robe stunt?"

Sally ventured a smile and a confident nod.

Emily turned back to Francis. "We can handle this. Okay?"

Francis opened her mouth to demand an explanation, then closed it as shouts filtered up the staircase.

Emil then turned to Bertha. "Go down the back way. When we invite Leroy upstairs, tell Gabby we need him and his camcorder behind our mirror pronto. Will he do it for us?"

Bertha gave a silent nod.

Emily ventured a reassuring smile. "Francis, be so kind as

to lure the gentlemen upstairs for us. We have something special in mind for him."

Bertha hurried away to do Emily's bidding, racing down the back steps and hanging back out of sight. "I want you people off my property in twenty-four hours," Leroy roared as Francis made her appearance."

"Not unless you give me written notification of our eviction, sir. I have a budget I must account for. I have a pen and paper upstairs..."

"Fine!" Leroy raced up the stairs ahead of her. "I'll give you your notice of eviction, and then I'm going to the police!"

Bertha delivered Emily's orders to Gabby. With sudden comprehension, Gabby grinned and hurried off to comply.

Bertha returned to Francis' and Emily's apartment in time to hear absolutely nothing and to see Leroy frozen in place in the living room, looking sideways through the bedroom door.

Leroy Reinhart had caught Sally coming out of the bathroom. Sally hadn't needed much preparation to look her best, maybe a comb through her luxurious auburn hair and a touch of makeup to emphasize her clear green eyes. And, of course, she had entirely shucked her clothing.

To Bertha's eye, Sally Largesse was one of the most beautiful women on the face of the earth. She stood just over six feet tall and possessed the alabaster body of a goddess. Sally paused in the entrance to the bathroom with her lips parted, as if having been taken by surprise.

"My goodness, Mr. Reinhart. I'm so sorry!"

Leroy turned pitch red. He turned away with a horrified expression, as if prepared to flee for his life.

Emily blocked his way, stopping him dead in his tracks. "Shame on you, Mr. Reinhart," she said with a smile. She threw an arm about the man's shoulders, turned him about, and looked at Sally in mock exasperation. "And as for you, you

naughty girl, we haven't time for your fun and games. Mr. Reinhart has serious business to discuss with Francis."

Sally dipped her head in shame.

Leroy looked at the women surrounding him in confusion. "I didn't meant to barge in like this..."

"You're not intruding, Mr. Reinhart," Francis said, tentatively holding out a small notebook and ball point pen.

Leroy fought to regain his composure. "Who is that man downstairs?" he asked mildly. "What is he doing to my property?"

"He and Gabby are adding some motion detectors," Emily said with a severe look. "We've had prowlers. Possums and raccoons, in all probably, but it makes it hard to concentrate on our typing and shorthand during the day when we can't sleep soundly at night."

Leroy tried his best not to stare at Sally. He fell silent, transfixed by Sally's beauty and contemplating a growing suspicion of trouble brewing.

"If we had a prowler," Emily taunted, "you can imagine the temptation he might suffer peeping in our windows at night. Sally should be ashamed of herself the way she flaunts that awful body of hers, except she never is. Isn't that right, Sally?"

Sally raised her head with a smile on her lips. She sauntered forward and dropped suddenly to her knees in front of Leroy. With a cry of astonishment, he turned to flee, or tried to, suddenly locked in place by Emily's strong hands on both skinny arms.

A spat of laughter escaped Bertha's lips. Francis shushed her with a frantic finger waving to and fro before her lips.

With his eyes wide with horror, staring down at the naked woman kneeling before him, Leroy failed to notice that he stood in full view of the bathroom mirror. He had no time to consider the possibility that he had fallen into his own trap. In one

smooth motion, Sally pulled his tennis shorts and underwear to his knees down and made short work of a sexual technique as old as the world's oldest profession.

Leroy cried out as if in agony, then stood convulsing with his eyes crossed and spittle running from one corner of his opened mouth. Emily held him erect when his knees gave out, and then gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder when he recovered. She pointed to the mirror.

"Sorry to have to catch you off-guard like that, but smile for your wife, Mr. Reinhart!

"Say cheese!"

Chapter Thirty-three

At daybreak, John and Jennifer walked the mile and a half to another, somewhat more affluent neighborhood. John kept up a brisk pace despite carrying two suitcases, forcing Jennifer to jog at times to keep up. "Haven't visited the gym in ages," he complained. "I need a good workout."

"You're in good condition for a man your age."

John returned a displeased frown and strolled resolutely on. He turned into the lobby of a run-down, turn-of-the-century hotel and checked in, and then took an elevator to the third floor with Jennifer at his heels. Again, the room was faded with age, but reasonably neat.

John fished for his keys and headed back out the door. "Let's take another walk. I've got something to show you."

The day was fresh and growing brighter by the minute as the sun cleared the surrounding buildings and shown down upon the city. Jennifer noticed a different breed of people out and about in the morning air, delivery men and middle class people headed to work. They were a group willing to look one

another in the eye and smile when they met on the sidewalk. John seemed bewildered and distrustful.

"I take it you're a night person," Jennifer said.

"What I want to show you can only be safely seen at this time of the day. I'd be recognized at night."

They turned a corner and she saw the sign from a block away. Club Paradise. They started down a street lined on both sides with flashier taverns and adult bookstores.

The doors to Club Paradise were open to delivery people coming and going with sacks and boxes on dollies and hard carts. John stopped alongside the double doors and gestured for her to look inside.

Daylight filtered across an enormous arena of dance floors and a section of tables, the back wall lined by a bar bigger than she had ever seen in her life. She noticed that the décor differed from one end of the floor to the other. One side was bright and blue, the other dark and red, one side painted with clouds and angels, and the other with demons and walls of fire.

"Welcome to Hades," John said.

"It's just a game, right? Nobody really believes that stuff, do they?"

John turned unexpectedly serious. "Belief is a funny thing. Give a polygraph to most adults and they'd fail if they said they don't believe in Santa Claus. Some fantasies get that deeply ingrained. Most people don't know themselves which beliefs they profess or deny would fail or pass a lie detector test. A place like this is mostly an excuse to misbehave."

"Are we going to come here tonight?"

"No, but this is where our bait has been set. This is where the sharks will nibble."

They returned to the hotel at a slower pace, their mood darkening. "We'll be dealing with a sharper and more dangerous crowd here," John said. "We need to get our story

straight in case they talk about us and compare notes. I'm new to the business, desperate for cash. Nobody needs to know more than that. I picked you up in front of a bus station a week ago. You're from back east, say Pennsylvania, not too bright, uneducated, and untraceable. If you have to tell a story, don't throw around too many proper nouns, people or places. Keep stuff vague and uncertain. We've both been under a lot of stress lately, so we won't be expected to be above board on everything."

They continued on to the hotel in silence, but John walked on by. "Let's get something to eat."

They ate a quiet late breakfast in clean restaurant and then returned to the hotel. Jennifer dozed during the afternoon. John woke her at dusk, smelling of soap and wearing a change of clothing. "Make yourself up like you did last night," he instructed. "Wait here for me. I won't be long."

Jennifer applied the make-up with trembling hands, sensing that the situation was growing more hazardous. She thought of what Dimitri had done to Cathy, and especially to Valerie. She tried to imagine the kind of people who had turned Dimitri into that kind of monster, and what they had done to seduce him.

The woman John brought to the room stared at Jennifer and shook her head. "Turn that cookie loose on my street, mister, and I'll slit her throat for you."

An hour later, John brought back a man who only glanced at her. "Five hundred bucks."

"You don't know Rosie? There's a cut in it, more than five hundred."

The man studied Jennifer more closely. "Don't know no Rosie. Fifteen hundred. Let me have her. It's a fair price."

"Later, maybe."

Just before midnight, John let a slip of a black man into

the apartment. He grimaced in revulsion, and said, "Yuk. That's one nasty little scag you got there, mister. I don't want her."

"Rosie wants her. I need an address. Field for me on this and I'll give you a cut."

"If I knew Rosie, I'd be messing with some truly sick bastards, my man. I'd have to go fifty percent to bother with the risk."

"I was going to offer ten," John said. "I'll go twenty."

"Man, you know we're going to settle at thirty. Make it thirty and let me collect something up front and I'll ask around for you."

"Twenty-five and get it done tonight."

"Twenty-five percent of what? Do you know the evil you'll be dealing with? They'll make you an offer and if you refuse, we'll both wind up in an alley with the rats feeding on our faces."

"I'll take what they offer and you get your cut up front," John said. "I gotta unload her tonight. She's too conspicuous."

The black man shrugged. "It won't take long. Stick around. And think about what I said. Five hundred for an outright sale. It's a hell of a lot safer."

John watched the man leave. "Damn, that was quick."

"Nasty little scag?" Jennifer was indignant. "Did I do a good job with the make-up, or what?"

John chuckled. "What make-up?"

Jennifer threw a pillow at him. "You're going to have to be especially nice to me when this is over, Mr. Cantrell. And please don't ask me back to this part of town for a visit. Not unless someone nukes it first."

"Our friend was right about the danger of dealing with Rosie's kind," John said. "I'm risking our lives. We'll get separated, and I can't guarantee that I can get us both out in one piece."

"Tell me again why you think the risk is worth it," Jennifer said.

"Not so much worth the risk, just inevitable, something to be dealt with. What they did to Dimitri bothers me. Someone seriously twisted that bastard. I don't turn my back on something that sick."

"You know who they are," Jennifer said with cold chill.

"I know we can't walk away and hope to survive it. Either we pin a face on it and negotiate with it, or it takes us out. I'd say that I'm sorry I got you mixed up in this, except that it was none of my doing."

"Do you really think you can negotiate? You don't even have a gun."

John shrugged. "Guns are for keeping trouble at a distance. I've always found that trouble is best handled close up. Negotiation is always the best way to go, if there's a trade to be made. Violence tends to backfire. Nobody's bullet-proof."

Jennifer said nothing, chilled by the predator that was now her only ally in life. She felt like a kitten cradled in the arms of a gorilla she had once seen in a zoo.

"I keep going over it in my head," he said softly. "I don't want to involve you in this, but if someone wanted Evelyn Haxx dead, she'd be dead. Dimitri was a diversion, a distraction."

"You said we don't really know who they were after," Jennifer reminded him.

"Who includes anyone who gets in their way." John shot back. "It's still your call, kid. Call your own shots and I won't give you an argument. I can put you at a safe distance from this mess."

"Is this what you would have done for your sister?"

The questions startled him. "Putting her life at risk to save it? She never gave me the chance to do anything for her. She considered me interference."

The black man returned with a friend at two in the morning. The newcomer had glasses and looked like an accountant. "Strip her," he ordered. "I want to see what we're paying for."

"I don't want her bruised worse than she already is," John said. "I don't want to break what spirit she's got left. You can see what you're getting."

"Three thousand," the accountant said. "She goes with me now."

"It's a deal, if I can hear it from Rosie herself. I'm not a meat market for psychotics."

"How do you know about Rosie?"

"I know her from a satisfied customer."

"Give me a name."

"Dimitri."

"I know three Dimitris."

"Only one of them is a Carvelli."

If snakes could smile, they'd look like this, Jennifer thought to herself. The man eyed her knowingly and turned away in silence. John shoved her out the door behind him and followed.

Chapter Thirty-four

They were driven in a limousine to an enormous, eighteenth-century church illuminated in floodlights against the night sky. They were blindfolded, walked a short distance, and then helped down a staircase and through a door that sounded heavy and equipped with many locks.

A bare wooden floor beneath Jennifer's feet creaked. A lighter door squealed open, and a hand on her arm led her down wide stone stairs. The air here felt cold and damp. "Stop here," the accountant said. She heard a shuffle of feet. The blindfold came off.

Jennifer found herself alone within a labyrinth of narrow tunnels of rough-hewn stone. She sighed in dismay, knowing she was being shown a secret that would not be lightly freed to the world above. Impenetrable doors closed behind her.

Most of the passage ways around her were cloaked in darkness. A dim light pointed out the only direction open for investigation. Brushing away annoying cobwebs, she had only an instant to discover the filaments to be fine wire rather than spider's silk. Given another moments to think about it, she

would have realized how effective a trap the wires would be charged with the five hundred thousand volts typical of a stun gun.

Jennifer had no memory of collapsing to the cold stone. The pain of jangled nerves disoriented her. Consciousness did not elude her entirely, however. Strong arms hoisted her over a broad shoulder and carried her away, dumping her onto a hard bed in a cramped cell. When she recovered her wits, she looked into the benevolent smile of a man dressed in a black hooded robe. A priest, Jennifer thought, and then thought better of the notion.

"Welcome back, my dear. You're such lovely catch. It's not often we have such succulent young morsels wandering into our lair."

Jennifer tried to sit up. Her muscles refused to cooperate. "Where's John?"

"John is meeting with the high priestess."

"Rosie?"

The man wrinkled his nose. "You should have no knowledge of her, none whatsoever."

She tried to rise a second time. A hand on her shoulder pushed her back to the hard mattress. "Relax, my dear. Use our time together to ask your questions. They'll answer a few of my own. There will certainly be no time later for idle conversation. And I do enjoy talking with outsiders. There is so little said among most of our congregation."

"If you hurt me," Jennifer said with utmost confidence, "John will kill you."

"Indeed, he has the power to do so," the man said solemnly. "Even your Rosie knows the futility of defying a representative of the Dark Lord Himself, but your John may not realize his true mission in life, nor the sad futility of trying to hold to a bauble as elusive as yourself."

"You sound like some kind of complete idiot," Jennifer said.

The man nodded profoundly. Jennifer thought for an instant he had agreed with her assessment. "Ah, the power and wisdom of the unbeliever," he said instead. "I had forgotten the vehemence with which men deny their own heritage. It seems these days that all the forces of the world have conspired against us, even as the darkness of human nature makes itself more and more apparent."

"Blow it out your ass," Jennifer murmured and redoubled her effort to sit up.

She failed.

She gave up and tried another tact. "What are you going to do with me?"

He smiled this time. "Those who fall prey to the web are sacrificed to bloodlust."

"Why don't you just quietly wack off in a dark corner before I consider some bloodlust of my own?"

"I am but a servant of Armageddon," the man said. "I wasn't the one who determined your fate."

"Just following orders, I take it."

"Just following orders."

He withdrew an object from beneath his robe. Holding the hypodermic to the light, he removed the plastic cover from the needle.

"Wait a minute! What is that stuff! What are you going to do?"

"Shush, you pitiful little creature. You will find out soon enough for yourself."

She couldn't move fast enough to stop him. The needle went in through a bare patch of skin on her upper hip. She slowly went numb, but she remained conscious. The man leaned over her and, rolling her from side to side to gain access to buttons and clasps, he undressed her.

Shock and outrage coursed through her without any means of expressing itself. When he had shucked off her last item of clothing, he lifted her in his arms with a grunt and a chuckle at his own clumsiness, and he carried her from the cell and down the stone corridors to a chamber of darkness.

The echoes of the man's footsteps and strained breathing gave her some indication of the size of the chamber. As she was spun about and deposited upon cold stone, she saw hints of vast archways overhead. They were beneath the cathedral topside. She could hear the dim strains of a church organ penetrating from far above.

The man began to hum along with the majestic tune. He reached out of Jennifer's view for a glass jar and unscrewed a metal lid. She would have gasped in shock when he slapped a handful of cold lotion upon her bare skin. Under the influence of the drug that had been injected into her, she twitched not an iota.

Using both hands, he began applying the lotion to her stomach, unceremoniously dipping between her legs and kneading both breasts to apply a thorough, even coating across her entire torso, although he seemed entirely unaroused by the chore.

Jennifer had absolutely no idea of what kind of perverse preparations were being made. He made no effort to apply the lotion to her lower legs, or her arms and face. But those, she soon discovered, were to be wrapped with a foot wide roll of crimson lace. He bound her legs together just above the knees with the fabric, and then lifted her arms above her head and bound her from just above her breasts all the way up to her hands.

When he finished, she could see through the fabric. She could breath through it. She heard him wiping his hands on his robe, and, for whatever the observation was worth, she saw

that they had been stained a dark reddish tan color by the lotion.

He left her alone for a time. Jennifer tried to take deep breaths of air in an effort to clear her head. She exercised her fingers and lower jaw. The numbness slowly subsided. Within another few moments, she would be able to move and, hopefully, to flee and hide in the darkness.

He came back before that happened, and she managed a moan of protest as he gave her another injection in the hip. With a helpless inner storm of despair, her outer body again slowly turned to lead.

This time, though, the paralysis was of another species and had no effect upon the sensitivity of her skin. She felt the gentle breeze of his passage and the touch of his finger as he adjusted corners of the crimson gauze. If they meant to cause her physical injury, she was going to feel it, and be helpless to prevent it.

The drug did nothing to cut off her flow of tears. John, too, would have been overpowered and disarmed by now. Blundering into the lair of these people had been foolhardy. She had not thought of John as the type to fall prey to his own kind so easily.

She had time alone with her thoughts. In the end, she heard an approaching murmur of voices. They brought with them the echoing of shuffling feet and the breeze of their passage as they filled the hall and drew close about her.

"A particularly fine specimen," a man commented from so close by that he could have reached out and touched her.

Another chuckled. "What would we do without our arrogant little infidel to entertain us? Rosie has such exquisite taste in prey."

Chapter Thirty-five

John had seen Jennifer go down. The explosion had struck him an instant later, leaving him to slowly recover on the cold stones of a deserted tunnel. When he managed to regain his footing, a woman of Spanish descent wearing a red, ground-length robe awaited him.

"Where's the girl?" John murmured, only slowly regaining his strength.

"Are you a policeman?" she asked with a polite smile.

"My name is John Cantrell. I've worked for a man called Garko."

"My apologies if any of that information should have meaning to me. I was told you arrived to arrange the sale of a girl. You are still alive only because I need to know how you came to know my name."

"Dimitri Carvelli shouted your name about a half second before his father put a bullet in his brain. You must have some idea of the importance of the people you've been messing with when you sent Dimitri after Peugeot's girls."

"I had no idea," Rosie said. "My goodness, what an

unfortunate development."

"Who hired you to take out Evelyn Haxx?"

Rosie gazed at him from a beautiful face chiseled in stone. "That would be, of course, confidential information."

"Confidentiality is your prerogative, I suppose," John said, "but you're not going to have much more time than Dimitri to explain yourself before Garko and his men bounce a bullet about the inside of your own lovely skull."

She cocked her head to one side in curiosity. "Have you no confidence in your own ability to escape me and my associates with the lovely young woman who accompanied you?"

"I'm not trying to escape you," John said. "I came here to find out who pulls your strings."

"You don't want to know the agency that pulls my strings, Mr. Cantrell. Regardless of that, I'm thankful to be dealing with an intelligent man. I can guess the kind of men who employ you. I do imagine they could cause us considerable difficulty. If they knew of our existence. Which they don't. And will never."

"Then how do I know of you, you silly bitch?"

"You take too much for granted. What incredible arrogance. And yet you truly know who and what you are. I would never have expected knowledge of that nature to be fully conscious in a man. Not in this world."

"I don't want the girl harmed," John said, regretting his outburst. Anger would solve nothing.

Rosie sauntered closer. "You will determine whether or not the girl is harmed. To survive yourself, I want your acknowledgment of who and what you are. You will reside over a sacrifice to the Dark Lord."

"You've got to be out of your fucking mind," John murmured.

"You needn't inflict a fatal wound. A very small cut will be sufficient, symbolic of the blood that will stain your soul. It will

be our assurance that you would not betray us, an act I suspect similar to the nature of Dimitri's death at the hand of his father. Your soul has been stained before in just such a manner, has it not?"

Sasha's death and the hell that had followed had been that stain. John's sigh of despair was the only response Rosie needed to hear.

"Even now, it is generally thought that you are one of us, a sanctified agent of Satan. I sensed it myself when you were brought to us. No other man would have the courage to walk into our lair knowing who we are with such utter confidence in his ability to survive."

In John's eyes, a spilled drop of blood was a far cry from murder. If a death would free Jennifer, then he would give these fiends their drop of blood and be gone from their midst.

"I felt very strongly that you would listen to reason," she said. "I stake my life on my judgment in these matters."

"Harm Jennifer and I'd say your personal judgment in these matters sucks. You bank on your devil, but I'm banking on men smart enough to follow me to this place and clean up whatever mess I leave unattended."

"You don't share our world view, but you know we have one. It's obvious more is happening than a financial contract for the death of one of your friends. That is all irrelevant, of course. If you wish to conclude our business on our terms, a service is scheduled to begin within a few minutes. Partake of the sacrifice. We will then give you the girl and you will leave us. Beyond that, we may be of service to one another. That remains to be seen."

John had no recourse but to wing it from moment to moment. He had expected armed men and the opportunity to acquire a means of self-defense by disarming one of his adversaries, a tactic he had developed to perfection over the

decades. Rosie was a factor he could never have anticipated. Insane, perhaps, but an insidious and unpredictable insanity. How could anyone have ever suspected such people existed for real?

"The drop of blood you spill will join us together in the presence of the Dark Lord," Rosie said in her lovely voice. "It is a marriage that will never be broken. Your alliance with us will last forever. "

John said nothing. Her sacrifice was the only escape route visible to him. Once he had been tainted in her eyes, perhaps she'd have more of use to say to him.

"Follow me, and we will complete our foolish little ritual so that you may be on your way."

John's legs were wooden. Every step through the gloomy catacombs jarred his aching head. He'd have to use every ounce of his smarts to escape Rosie and her screwed-up minions moving at a snail's pace, because his coordination wasn't up to the challenge of escaping in any great hurry.

He could hear church music drifting down from above. "Do they know you're down here?" he asked.

Rosie glanced upward and smiled. "They'd never believe you if you told them. The Disciples of the Dark Lord have occupied these chambers for almost a century. Our kind built them. They have killed every last soul who ever knew of the catacombs and destroyed or modified all the old building plans registered with the city."

"Then why are you telling me that I'll leave here alive?"

"Because you are one of us, of course."

John couldn't see the sense of it. Insanity didn't work in this manner.

"You are what the world would deem an evil man," Rosie said, amused by his confusion. "You could betray us, but you won't bother, because you have no loyalty or interest in the

world of light, no allegiance to them at all. Whether you believe in him or not, Satan has always been your personal god, your god of choice. Spill your single drop of blood in the presence of the Disciples, and they will open their arms to you like brothers. I give you my word that it will be so."

John shrugged. Then so be it.

At the end of a long corridor, a rising chant of mostly male voices overpowered the strains of the organ overhead. Rosie made a final turn that opened onto a low balcony overlooking a chamber the size of an auditorium. They came up behind an altar of solid stone and standing before it with his back to him, a dark-robed priest waited with ominous patience.

Looming out over the open floor of the chamber, two hundred or more faces peered at John from the depths of their hoods of heavy black cloth. Rosie drew alongside the priest. The priest stepped aside to make room for John.

The sacrifice that awaited him was a dark-skinned woman with her lower legs and her arms and head shrouded in red lace cloth. She lay unmoving except for the slow rise and fall of her breasts. A crooked dagger with a silver goat's head handle lay upon her slender torso, the handle lying between her breasts, the tip of the blade resting midway between her naval and the triangle of her pubic hair.

She was young. Except for the color of her skin, she might have been Jennifer awaiting him. He would have expected deceit of that magnitude from these people. It was going to be bad enough drawing innocent blood from the girl on the stone altar, but there was nothing he could do for her. One man could not right the wrongs of an entire world. He had no way of knowing, in fact, whether or not she would be harmed at all. She could have been a willing participant, for all he knew.

"No need to dawdle," Rosie said. "Do it and go. You don't have to stay and watch the rest of the service."

"Where's Jennifer?" John said.

"Look around and see for yourself. She awaits you in plain view."

John scanned the shadows beyond the crowd. His eyes paused upon a small white shape bound to a stone column behind the crowd. Satisfied, he turned his full attention to the body lying before him. He reached for the hilt of the knife. In doing so, his knuckles brushed the nipple of one breast. He thought that she might react to the touch. She did not.

"Is she unconscious?" he asked hopefully.

"She is fully conscious and sensitive to the caress of a gnat's whisper," Rosie said. "She will be for what remains of her existence. It is not your concern, is it?"

John held the blade to Rosie's face. "I could free this girl and kill anybody who interferes."

"You have the power of the mortal world to wield against us," Rosie said. "We have but the power that arises from the acceptance of death and the absolute power of futility. No mortal force can stand against it. Kill one of us. Kill me if you wish. As many as you are able. You will cure the evils of only the tiniest corner of your own world, but you know full well its pathetic extent and the degree of moral corruption that will escape you. It avails you nothing to interfere."

From the depths of his sullen anger, John surveyed the crowd. Not a dark figure stirred. John raised the twin-edged blade above the body of the sacrifice. One drop of blood and he would be gone.

Chapter Thirty-six

Panic blinded Jennifer and filled her mind, blocking out the sight of John Cantrell standing over her, clutching the goat's head knife. John did not recognize her. He was looking out into the shadows, victim of their horrible deceit.

His eyes looked wrong. Dulled by despair. Drugged, maybe. He couldn't see through the utter simplicity of their trick.

He lowered the cold steel to touch the skin of her body. The knife was so sharp that she felt no pain, only the cooling drop of hot blood rolling across her belly.

The priest reached out with an open palm for the sacrificial blade. John held it out to him, handle first.

He saw the dark stain upon the hands of the priest.

How could he not see!

John paused.

He then reached out with his free hand and pulled Jennifer's leaden body off the altar, dropping her to the stone floor at his feet. The crowd roared. Rosie and the priest reared back in regal anger, confident that John had only sealed his own doom.

John reached out with inhuman reflexes, grabbing Rosie by the throat, slamming the butt of the sacrificial knife into her stomach and lifting her bodily into the air, end over end, body-slamming her with vicious impact upon the altar warmed by Jennifer.

"Take this one in Jennifer's place," John growled at the priest.

The roar of the congregation ceased in an instant.

"She'll destroy you all!" John roared, startled to hear his voice amplified and carried easily through the amphitheater. "She's leaving a trail of the dead to your doorstep! She's not one of you!

"But I am!"

The hand of the priest shot out, palm facing up, begging for the sacrificial knife, knowing instantly the course of action he would have to take to salvage the damage John had inflicted. John slapped the silver goat's head into his stained palm and stepped aside.

Jennifer saw the flash of the blade and heard Rosie's horrible shriek, and then her horror-laden grunt of the knife's impact, amplified as John's voice had been amplified, echoing throughout the subterranean labyrinth.

A spray of arterial blood caught the priest across the chest and sprayed out over the audience. John lifted Jennifer from the floor, scooped her into his arms and retreated from the frenzied roar of the crowd. He entered a cell in an empty corridor at random and set Jennifer down on a musky smelling bunk. He unwrapped her frantically, felt for her pulse, and grasped her hands and feet to judge her body temperature. With a sigh, he sat at her side, gazing into her opened eyes, looking lost and haunted by events that had almost slipped beyond his control.

The door behind him creaked open. John stood and whirled

about, but paused at the sight of the priest with the stained hands standing unarmed in the doorway. "You have become an instrument of the Disciples," he murmured. "You are free to go."

"What did you do to Jennifer?"

The priest glanced at her in disinterest. "The drug is a only a temporary paralyzing agent. She will recover."

John studied the man and nodded at his stained hands. That hadn't been an oversight. The priest held his stained hands out to view. "Rosie fulfilled her destiny," the priest said, "but she had lost sight of it. When you arrived, it became evident that you were to become our redemption."

"What happens now?"

"You're free to go. There is a condition, of course, a trade, a life for a life. Dimitri and now Rosie failed their missions. You will take their place. You know the life of the individual you must take. Bring to us an item of her anatomy. Her heart would be best, anything convenient for you, except that it must imply a fatal wound. DNA analysis will confirm the identity of your victim."

"Evelyn Haxx?"

Gravely, the priest nodded.

"What's the catch?" John asked after a moment of contemplative silence. "There's no trust here."

"The catch is a toxin. The consequences will be sudden and fatal in about three weeks for your young friend here. If you have fulfilled your obligation to us by that time, I'll give you a number to call for instructions to obtain an antidote. Ship by overnight express proof of the woman's demise and we will return a preloaded hypodermic that will neutralize the toxin."

"You don't expect me to take that on faith."

"Of course you will, if you give it a moment's thought. If we betray you and the child dies, you will return here, devastate

this place, and murder all you can. Property damage alone is not worth her life. Will you remember the number?"

"I never forget a number."

The man spoke a phone number and John repeated it once. "How do we know there's really a toxin?"

"The child will become ill in twenty four hours, and then recover for the three week period. You will be more inclined at that time to take us seriously. Perhaps twenty-two or twenty-three days will pass. After that time, if you have not accomplished your mission, she will die without the antidote, suddenly and painlessly."

John stared at the man in disbelief, unable to evaluate to the slightest degree the nature or extent of the threat these people posed.

"Strange forces stir in this overcrowded world of ours, John Cantrell. We are but pawns with a limited field of vision. If we play our roles, we are far more likely to survive than if we defy them. You are a killer. Kill one more time and those you deem important to you shall survive."

Chapter Thirty-seven

John Cantrell had little to say during the drive west. He pulled into the last rest stop along the interstate before reaching the Mississippi River and shut off the engine.

"How are you feeling?"

Jennifer had recovered slowly. Her head throbbed. Her muscles ached. From time to time, she felt nauseous. "I don't know. I'm scared."

"How do you want me to handle this?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"We'll put up somewhere and see if you get sick. If you don't, we assume we've been toyed with. If you do, then we take their story about the toxin seriously. I can take you to a hospital. They won't believe our story. They probably won't be able to help you. They'll turn you over to the authorities."

Tears came to her eyes. "What else can we do?"

"We have three weeks to find out who wants Evelyn Haxx dead and why they're going to so much trouble to get it done. But what I said when this all began still stands. Why this charade? Why Rosie and Dimitri, and now you and me? They

could have hired a gun off the street for a few hundred bucks and Evelyn would have been dead within a day."

Jennifer was beyond thinking rationally. Fear filled every spare void of her consciousness.

John continued on their way, but he pulled off the first exit ramp he encountered and paid at an out-of-the-way motel for twenty-four undisturbed hours. Jennifer showered and scrubbed herself raw, but the stain finally washed away. Exhausted, neither of them had any problem falling asleep in one another's arms.

Jennifer awoke in the evening feeling reasonably fit and refreshed. "We'd better get something to eat while we have the chance," John suggested.

"But what will you do if was all a trick?"

John's grin was particularly unpleasant. "We introduce Mr. Garko to the clowns who have been pulling our strings and see who prevails. End of story. I'm hoping it goes down that way."

Jennifer's mood improved as the evening wore on. The subterranean vaults, the threat of a toxin, all far too unreal. Like nightmares that might go away if persistently ignored. They ate at the best restaurant they could find, and then took in a movie before returning to the motel.

At four in the morning, Jennifer leaned over the edge of the bed and vomited. John leaped to his feet, horrified. Jennifer looked around and managed a feeble smile. "I don't think it's anything. I feel okay."

"Are you sure?"

Jennifer gestured frantically for the waste paper basket by the desk. John got it to her before she vomited a second time. Moments later, she had broken out in a cold sweat and doubled up in the middle of the bed.

"Stomach cramps," she whispered.

"Jennifer, I'm sorry."

Jennifer nodded, aware that the illness spelled her own certain death, or Evelyn's.

John watched her writhe in quiet agony, helpless. As promised, she recovered before dawn, showered, and napped, awakening to the day's first sunlight pouring through the front window.

"Let's get a move on it," John murmured. "We don't have time to waste."

They reached the castle overlooking the river before the sun had cleared the trees to the east. "You do the talking," John said. "I'll step in when you need back-up. Keep the story simple. We found the people who hired Dimitri and confirmed that Evelyn was their target. We don't mention the toxin for now. If Evelyn wants to live, she'll help us nail the party that's trying to put her down. How are you holding up?"

"I'm a little jittery."

"There's a way out of this. We'll find it."

Jennifer found Francis pacing her second floor apartment. She faced the older woman feeling more mature and less tolerant of the older woman's eccentricities and her narrow focus on life.

Jennifer told her story. Francis noticed the change in the child she had known even as she absorbed what she had suspected all along. What could John and the girl have hoped to accomplish?

"Jennifer, what has happened to you?"

"I'm still alive. I'd like to keep it that way. It's going to take everyone working together to keep anyone else from getting hurt."

Emily hovered in the background. Francis sent her to gather the girls and the two men, Gabby and the newcomer. Within minutes, Emily closed the door behind the group, as if security was an issue.

"Would your father or his friends have reason to harm you?" Francis asked of Evelyn Haxx.

For a moment, Evelyn seemed not to react at all. "But I haven't had contact with my father in almost ten years."

"You told me you had a falling out with your father. Please tell us about that."

"I was raped! My father disowned me."

"When you were a model," Francis said.

"They accused me of blackmail, but I was raped."

"You told me your father refused to help you."

"He told me that I would embarrass him and ruin his political career. He told me that my modeling career was of no importance and to keep my accusations to myself to prevent a scandal."

"You would never fully confide in me about that," Francis said quietly.

"It wasn't of any importance by the time I met you. What could you have done about it? By the time I met you, I was nothing but a common whore."

"A whore playing a dangerous game with powerful people," Francis said bitterly. "Evelyn, I knew of five safety deposit boxes you were keeping at the time, and I've seen some of your miniature cameras you're so fond of. How many of your father's friends and associates have you set up to punish your father?"

"Enough," she spat in defiance. "Enough to do the job about as thoroughly as the Roache Brothers ruined my modeling career. But that was years ago. I've done nothing. My father knows nothing of what I've been doing. I'm not as angry as I was in the beginning. My life has no more dignity, but it's been far more peaceful."

Bertha, Emily and Sally were frowning, much of the conversation having gone over their heads. "I met Evelyn in New York following a visit to France," Francis explained. "The

Roache Brothers have an international reputation. She returned with me to Los Angeles rather than risk arrest in New York for the charges of blackmail and defamation of character they filed. I knew at the time that her father was a New York politician. I had no idea that he and Senator Hacks were the same person. Senator Caliph Hacks is the man we're talking about, Evelyn's father."

"My father would never try to hurt me," Evelyn said. "He's not responsible for what has happened. I changed the spelling of my name legally. He doesn't even know."

"If not your father, then someone acting in your father's name," John said, "or someone concerned with your father's reputation. Your father is a political dead duck for as long as he has a daughter who fucks for a living."

"But he doesn't know!" Evelyn screamed at him.

"He found out," John said, "or one of his associates. Important men have adversaries, Miss Haxx. As soon as they find out about you, they turn your father's image to mud. Somebody may be trying to prevent that from happening. If a few prostitutes are killed to hide the fact, who's going to know or care?"

Evelyn looked promptly panic-stricken. "But what are we going to do?"

John looked to Francis and Craig Netherman for support. "The only way to know the score for certain would be to speak with Senator Hacks directly. I don't imagine it would be easy. It may not be possible."

"I'll speak with my father," Evelyn said defiantly. "He has no heart, but he's not an evil man. I'm so very angry with him, but I've never truly hated him."

"I'm only concerned with the party that wants you dead," John said calmly. "If that party discovers we're on to them, they'll redouble their efforts."

Evelyn stood trembling, outraged and helpless. "Then what, you bastard? What?"

"I need to speak with him myself," John said. "I can tell if he's telling the truth. It's something I'm good at. If he's not responsible, he may be able to help us find out who is. If not, we'll need to look elsewhere."

Evelyn glared at John, and then Jennifer, as if she was ultimately responsible for the nightmarish course of events.

"Evelyn, look at me," Francis said.

Evelyn turned, her movements wooden, her expression lax and her skin tone ashen.

"Where is your father now?"

"I don't know. In Washington."

"Where does he reside when he's not in Washington?"

"South of here, just across the state line. It was a horse ranch. I was born and raised there. His new wife lives there. She hates it, but I think it's the only tie to the past he has left. We were a family when my mother was alive. We were happy. And then he was gone all the time, and my mother started drinking. He abandoned us."

Evelyn gathered her courage to address her entire audience. "He'll talk to me. I can deal with this misunderstanding myself."

"We can't possibly challenge authority of that magnitude," Francis said in a frightened whisper.

"He's going to want to keep it quiet," John said. "We'll let Evelyn have her talk with her father. It'll either be a father-daughter reunion, or a trap."

"More like a land mine," Craig said. "I doubt if we could defuse it without someone getting hurt."

John eyed each of the women in turn. "If we can figure out a way to give it a try without getting ourselves killed in the process, we have to stick together. If we're separated, we'll

quietly disappear off the face of the earth, one by one."

"How dare you," Evelyn murmured.

John turned to Craig. "You're handy to have around, but this isn't your fight."

"I'll make it part of his contract," Francis said in a tone of ice. "No matter what the cost."

Craig shrugged his concession. "It's what I do for a living. Hell, I'm game."

"Do we need *his* help, Francis?" Evelyn glared at John with ill-concealed hatred. "Do we need the help of a cold-blooded murderer?"

John made no effort to defend himself. He looked to Francis for her decision.

"We have been butchered like sheep," Francis said. "We need the help of a man who knows violence of that magnitude."

"But you hired Mr. Netherman to protect us! Craig has fought honorably in three wars, and we all know what Mr. Cantrell's motive is, and I think it's disgusting!"

"Hey, hang on there, lady." Craig put his hand on Evelyn's arm and glanced nervously at John. "I'm not in the same league with this guy. Put us on opposite sides of the fence, pit us against each other, and I'm dead in a heartbeat. If we're going to be taking on others like him, I want at least one of them on our side."

Craig threw John a nervous glance. "No personal insult intended, buddy. You and I are not going to be friends. I respect you like I would a viper, but I don't want you to see me as a trip hazard."

"You handle yourself well enough," John said. "I have no quarrel with you. I'd rather have you on board for the duration than not."

Craig nodded satisfaction and breathed a sigh of relief that nobody but John noticed.

Francis stared Evelyn down. "Somebody is trying to kill you. Four of us are already dead."

Evelyn put her hands to her face, sobbed uncontrollably, and leaned against Craig for support.

"If Jennifer is John's motive for helping us," Francis said to Evelyn, "then it works in our favor, but it's not John who has chosen to sacrifice so much for us. It's Jennifer who has done so. My God, woman, how can you be so blind to what she is doing for you?"

Evelyn's sobs intensified and she fled the room. Craig started to go after her.

"Wait," Francis said. "All of you. Understand one thing. Evelyn was a fashion model well on her way to gaining international recognition. She was betrayed and destroyed, and now we are her only friends. She dissociates from us only in self-defense, and it does anger me very much that she takes that tact, but I don't want her held responsible for the deaths that have occurred, and I don't want her held responsible for the danger she poses to the rest of us. It's not her doing."

"We need information on the senator," John continued in the quiet that followed, "but once we go after it, we need to move fast. Garko and those he represents will still be looking for the reason a Carvelli was used to kill a prostitute. If he tails us and discovers the connection between Evelyn Haxx and Senator Hacks, he'll clean up what's left of us in a matter of hours because it'll implicate public officials of importance to the mob. Aside from that and for reasons I won't go into at this time, Jennifer and I have clear reason to believe that we have no more than three weeks to resolve this nightmare."

"Three weeks," Francis murmured.

John eyed Jennifer. "It'll be enough. I don't know what they have in the way of a motive or goal for what has been happening, but they weren't planning on me being a part of it."

"The best laid plans of men and monsters," Francis added with what remained of a glare of distrust of John Cantrell and his kind.

John's chuckle was devoid of warmth. "Let's hope so."

Chapter Thirty-eight

Jennifer thought it perverse that she got off so intensely on John's love-making, because it was lingering fear that aroused her. John responded to her passion with a vengeance, increasingly agitated by his own behavior, finally rolling to his feet and pacing the dark room in a frenzy. "I knew this could catch up with me someday," he muttered. "I didn't think I'd live long enough for it to be a problem."

"Sexual deprivation?" Jennifer said without sympathy.

"Taking it out on you. Jennifer, you're just a kid."

"I'm not that much of a kid and I don't think there's anything wrong with us, John."

"Sorry, but I don't know how to feel right about anything. It's not exactly my nature to be on the constructive side of human nature."

"Worse we could do is make babies," she commented, hoping the notion would tickle his funny bone rather than pique more upset.

He laughed at her, but it was a gentle laugh. "That's it exactly. I'm panicking at the thought at having to function like

an ordinary human being."

"What are you if you're not that? You scared me when you told those horrible people that Rosie wasn't one of them, but that you were. You meant it, and they believed you. Do you think of yourself as evil?"

"There's only one source of evil some people might choose to worship, Jennifer. Sometimes it comes with religious trappings. Sometimes it's science. It's no mystery, but it's the reason religion has a devil to begin with."

"I don't know what you're talking about." And she wasn't certain if she wanted to hear it.

"Think about it." John said quietly. "The natural world is a violent place. A species depends upon its predators to cull its weak and to control its population. Everything that lives feeds on something alive, or on the detritus of the dead. Living things reinforce one another in the process of killing."

"But that's not evil," Jennifer said. "That's nature."

"Yeah, but the natural world is filled with trickery and lies and deceit, like a predator that mimics the flash of a firefly to lure it to its doom, behavior people see as evil when it's manifested in human affairs. In nature, there's no compassion, no mercy or justice in human terms, none of the qualities we define as good, although it's the violence and the mass scale of death makes the cycle of life possible. The faster and more vibrant the cycle of life and death, the more vicious and inhuman, from our perspective."

Jennifer mulled over the notion. "But animals are too dumb to know any better."

"Is that saying the natural world is evil, but that it doesn't matter to dumb animals?"

Jennifer didn't know what to think.

"Does it mean its antithesis? Is behavior that will lead to our eventual destruction through overpopulation, behavior at

odds with the natural world, good?"

Jennifer's head was in a whirl. She had no way to ask John to change the subject. "I don't know what you mean by that."

"We've eliminated natural enemies to cull our weak and limit our population. Even germs and viruses are headed down the drain. We're so good at defending ourselves from our natural enemies that we go an extra step and cull the aggressive tendencies of our own species to keep our halos of purity from getting jarred loose. As cruel as it sounds, we coddle the weak and defective and undermine the gene pool. We're setting ourselves up for one hell of a fall, and there may be no way to get back on our feet when it happens."

Jennifer waited for John to conclude his argument, but that was the end of it. He had no more to say. "And all of those Satanists understood everything of what you just said? That's what you meant when you said you were one of them?"

"How good and evil are defined is the foundation to their beliefs, and the foundation of the beliefs in the church above them. The lies, deceit and trickery of nature, and the constant cycle of reproduction and killing for sustenance are our heritage. Rosie saw the dark side of human nature as a remnant of true sanity, or at least derived from the natural world. Their Dark Lord is metaphorical."

"What made you think about those things so much?"

"Sasha. I killed the men who hurt her, and then I was blackmailed and I killed men who were nothing but killers themselves. That's what I share with the Disciples. They knew I was one of them because they're attuned to the kind of pain I suffer. They could hear it in my voice."

"They heard your conviction," Jennifer said softly. "I heard it, too."

John parted the shade to the front window and stood looking out into the night, a shadow against darkness. "Where

inside the human body is there anything you could describe as the soul? I can kill, but I can never punish a dead man. You have no idea how little damage killing does. I've had people backed into a corner thank me. With a second or two of life remaining, they used it to thank me for killing them, because they had had enough and I was their ticket out."

Jennifer hugged herself in the darkness.

"I'm not evil, kid, and I'd laugh at anyone who is called a good man. We're all caught between two worlds, native to neither of them, not the one we're moving out of, and not the one we're creating. I'm not saying we won't find a balance, but all our values at the moment are seriously confused."

"But you know all of that," John add, and turned back to her in the darkness. "You're just a kid, but you know it already."

"Deep down," she said after a time, "I think that everybody knows."

Chapter Thirty-nine

Bertha awakened sometime during the night to the sound of footsteps creaking down the staircase between the ground and second floor. The door to Craig's apartment directly above the basement apartment groaned open.

Francis had assigned her the task of guarding the secret passages of the building, but nobody, Bertha decided, was guarding the guardian. Overpowered by curiosity, she rolled out of bed. Gabby grunted in his sleep, oblivious to the shuffling of her slippers on the wood floor of the spaces between the walls.

She reached the back of the mirror in Evelyn's apartment in time to see Craig sinking into Evelyn's arms. She had only a narrow view through the partially closed bathroom door, but a table lamp in the bedroom illuminated a swath of bare flesh rocking quietly to the rhythm of lovemaking.

"Naughty girl," she whispered. She'd keep Evelyn's early morning sojourn quiet as long as the two weren't causing a problem. Quiet as the mice scurrying about her feet, she

returned to the basement apartment and pulled down the cover to slip back into bed.

"Addicting, isn't it?" Gabby murmured.

"Gabby, I don't watch for the fun of it."

"You're worried they'll cause trouble?"

"Craig's not her type. She's using him, setting him up for something. Evelyn doesn't confide in anyone, and she doesn't like John with a passion. She makes me nervous."

"She's afraid of Cantrell," Gabby said. "I don't know what the kid sees in him."

"Jennifer? You don't know her like I do. They're a perfect match."

"Scary thought. Take it from an old man and a resolute coward. I'll stand behind Cantrell any day. He's a snake, as nasty and dangerous as they come, but snakes are predictable. Show them due respect and they don't bite."

"He's only helping because of Jennifer," Bertha said. "Evelyn had better not cause a problem. Maybe Francis is right about being afraid we'll blame Evelyn for Cathy and the others getting killed, because I'm thinking myself that's she's done enough harm already. I think she knows why someone wants to hurt her. She's never entirely freaked out over anything that's happened. She's just her usual too quiet self."

"Interesting situation," Gabby growled.

Bertha rolled against him, mildly aroused by Evelyn and Craig going to it so enthusiastically and sometimes wishing Gabby was a bit younger and quicker on the trigger.

Gabby pawed her affectionately in the darkness. Bertha draped her arms about his neck. "How have you been holding up, Gabby? Any of this mess getting to you yet?"

"Christ, little girl, I'm having the time of my life."

"Not me," Bertha said. "When this is over, I'm going to get me my GED and go to secretarial school and become a medical

transcriptionist, because I've had enough excitement to last for the rest of my life."

Gabby chuckled. "You, a secretary? Nah! You need yourself a young stud and diapers to change. Life ain't about nothing else."

"I got you Gabby. I don't need a young stud."

"Yeah, you do. Don't you dare let me make a baby. I'd be dead before it could grow up. I don't want to have to die knowing that."

Bertha was hurt. "Do you really feel that way?"

"You gotta see things from my perspective. You have a future. The only future I've got is six feet beneath a tombstone, if anybody bothers to put one up for me. I live life by the grazing principle these days, moving from one patch of green grass to another, and I do it walking backward, my eye on how things happening now are connected to the past. There's no future for me."

"A godfather, then."

Gabby chuckled in delight. "I'll settle for grandpa. Just don't jump up and run away too quick like. I'm gonna need time to figure out how to live without you."

"I'm not going anywhere," Bertha said. "You said so yourself. I'm young. I got all the time in the world."

Bertha thought Gabby had fallen asleep when he murmured one last comment.

"Don't we all wish."

Chapter Forty

Jennifer reached for the jangling motel room phone just before dawn. "Evelyn and Craig are packing," Bertha whispered harshly. "I've been spying something terrible. They were together earlier. I heard them moving around and checked again. Now they're packing their things. They're planning on leaving without telling anyone!"

"Tell Francis!" Jennifer cried.

"I did. She's dressing, but she might not be able to stop them."

John rolled smoothly out of bed. "What's up?"

"Evelyn is trying to run away."

"Nope, can't let that happen." John got up and dressed. He took the wheel of Jennifer's rental and drove with abandon, risking a confrontation with the state police to reach the castle before Evelyn Haxx and Craig Netherman managed their escape.

Evelyn's car was still parked in the gravel drive out back. John nosed the white Ford to its bumper and climbed from the car as Evelyn came around the side of the building struggling

with suitcases. When she looked up and saw John blocking her way, she dropped everything with a shriek, fumbled in her purse for her gun, and rushed forward with the little .22 clutched in both hands.

"Get out of my way! I'll kill you if you don't get out of my way!"

Jennifer scampered from the passenger's side of the car and danced with frantic anxiety, thinking that John's total equanimity was going too far, fearing Evelyn was angry and frightened enough to shoot.

Emily and Francis came around the side of the building, and then Bertha and Gabby. Sally's face remained pressed against an upstairs window, looking down from a safe vantage point in horror.

"Evelyn, no!" Francis roared in her most authoritarian tone of voice. "Don't you dare!"

"I'll kill him! I'm leaving, and nobody's going to stop us!"

It was then that Craig made his appearance and raised a casual eyebrow in surprise at the commotion. He carried another two of Evelyn's suitcases and carefully set them down. Evelyn scampered to his side. "Shoot him, Craig! Kill the bastard!"

"I'd prefer that you just move the car away," Craig said to John, his tone of voice quiet with resignation. "Far as I can see, nobody's got a right to stop her if she wants to go. I told her it's not a good idea."

From her vantage point behind the couple, Bertha called out to distract the woman and then swung a bag of garbage in her direction. Impact was just great enough to cause Evelyn to drop the pistol. Craig made no move to stop Bertha from rushing up from behind to kick it out of reach and then to plant her foot on the offending device.

Evelyn rushed forward, all but hysterical with impotent

rage. "Give that back to me, you little bitch!"

Bertha held her ground and gave the taller woman the finger.

Francis intersected Evelyn, spun her about, and shook her furiously. "Evelyn Haxx, you stop this horrible behavior this very second!"

Evelyn shrieked in renewed fury, but fell silent when Francis slapped her across the face. Evelyn buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Bertha picked up and inspected the handgun. She flipped the chamber open and held the gun to view. "Empty," she said. "She was bluffing."

Craig shook his head in exasperation.

"Evelyn, you have no right to turn your back on your friends," Francis said to the woman.

"You are not my friends! You're nothing but a bunch of whores! I am not one of you! I was never one of you!"

"Then what, may I ask, have you been doing for the past year?" Francis drew closer with clenched fists. "What have my clients been paying you for?"

"And I could ruin every last one of them! I could still destroy my father's career, and the career of any of those arrogant bastards who have ever touched me! I have never let a man touch me who has not risked what he deserves for his insolence!"

Francis reacted as if Evelyn had returned her blow. "Evelyn, your father is rich, but that doesn't make you special. You were a model because you are a beautiful woman, not because you are morally superior. You never had the courage to harm your father, but if you have damaged the careers and reputations of my clients, perhaps we know now why someone wants you dead."

Evelyn blanched and looked around at her witnesses,

stunned by the accusation. "My father would not try to harm me. I've never said or done anything to hurt anyone. Francis, I don't know what any of this is about. It can't be because of me."

Francis turned to John. "As far as I'm concerned, Evelyn can leave this very moment, if she wants to. Craig is free to accompany her, if that's what he wants for himself."

"No, ma'am," John said. "If she leaves, she's dead. Running won't work unless you have an entirely new identity to go along with, and these days you'd need new fingerprints and DNA to accomplish that. So, nothing's changed. If any of us survive, it'll be because we stuck together."

"But that doesn't apply to you," Francis said softly. "You have no need of us."

"Jennifer does," John replied, not at all afraid to confess his sin, "and I have need of her."

Chapter Forty-one

"**N**obody is making accusations," John said, tactfully putting as much distance as he could between himself and Evelyn Haxx in Francis Peugeot's living room. "We just need more information to work with to keep anyone else from getting hurt. Our only avenue of exploration at the moment lies with your father. We can go in unannounced, but his reaction and the reaction of his supporters to you will tell us most of what we need to know. If someone lays a trap for you, Craig and I will be the ones to spring it."

"What if one of his friends is responsible?" Evelyn asked in a hushed tone. "How am I going to explain myself if he's innocent? What will he do?"

"We ask those questions when they need asking. We have more than enough to work with for the moment."

Evelyn Haxx mulled over the logic of John's request. "My father usually spends a week at the ranch in the fall. He likes to watch the trees change color. I haven't spoken to him in years."

"The ranch would be convenient, but we can't wait until

fall," John said mildly.

Evelyn eyed him distrustfully. "You want me to phone my father and arrange for a meeting?"

"He'll be expecting you. He'll get us instead."

"He'll have you arrested."

"We won't give him that opportunity. We *will* give him the opportunity to convince us of his innocence."

Francis studied Evelyn's subdued composure in the long silence that followed.

"Evelyn?"

Staring at her folded hands, Evelyn gave a slight nod. "I never wanted to harm my father unless I had to defend myself again."

"None of this would have happened had your father put your welfare ahead of his own political ambitions. And it's possible his campaign managers know about you and want at all costs to keep that information from him. It's at least possible that we can stop the attempts upon your life with a simple reunion with your father. Regardless of all that, you can't hide forever. You'll pose a greater risk to him in the future than you do now. Now may be the best time to try to reconcile with your father."

Evelyn nodded. Francis turned to John. "What do you want us to do?"

"Have Evelyn make a call from a public phone to arrange a meeting," John said to Francis. "Just a friendly reconciliation attempt, no talk of problems unless he balks. Until you get an agreement to a face to face meeting, imply trouble up to and including the life and death variety, but without divulging any details."

"I don't think you'll have a problem making the call itself, but we'll plan for trouble afterward. Record the call with a portable cassette, wear wigs and clothing you'd not normally

wear. Craig and I will work out the rest."

Jennifer leaned against John and closed her eyes. John put a protective arm around her. No one sensed a problem between the two with the possible exception of Francis Peugeot who stared at the mismatched couple and quietly shredding a paper napkin with both hands.

Chapter Forty-two

Francis and Evelyn left in the morning for town and returned in the afternoon. Francis called for Emily to look after a distraught Evelyn Haxx and gestured for John and Craig to join her in her upstairs apartment. She held up an audio tape cassette. "We made the call from a mall pay phone."

"Did he agree to the meeting?" John said.

"In three days. Evelyn asked for a private meeting at the ranch. The conversation was quite brief. I think we caught the Senator off guard. He seemed surprised, or maybe puzzled hearing from Evelyn after so long, but that fits in with what Evelyn has said about the man, cold-hearted to the bone."

John had Craig listen to the tape. "Your call, buddy. How do you want to handle it?"

"I've been a one-man operation my entire life," John said. "You've had military training. I'm game for suggestions."

"How much time do you need with him?"

"Ten, twenty minutes should be enough."

"So, he's going to expect Evelyn and he's going to get you and me instead," Craig summarized. "That's not going to go

down well with a United States Senator and his security."

"They won't be expecting us. We'll have to take and keep them off guard. Any suggestions?"

"I suggest we reconnoiter, before we make plans," Craig said. "We rent a plane, take some photographs from the air. We'll need an idea of the layout of the ranch and surrounding terrain. We'll need to poke around the perimeter to feel out the security."

"A plane," John said.

Craig grinned. "A flying machine. Wings and all. The best way to look down upon the world."

"You know how to fly a plane?"

"My parents owned a Piper Cub. I flew it solo at sixteen. Without their permission. I've since been properly licensed."

Jennifer and John had taken up residence at the castle. Alone with the girl in their upstairs apartment in the afternoon, John poured himself coffee and pulled the shades to the windows. "Ever been up in a plane before?" he asked casually.

"Me and Francis flew to Chicago from Los Angeles and back once." It was then that she noticed his upset. "Haven't you ever flown?"

"I've never been this far from the hood before. I sure as hell never been in a plane."

"I'm going with you, aren't I?"

John eye her with a pained expression. "Kid, you gotta go with me. I need someone to hold the barf bag."

Francis called for a meeting in the evening and announced her decision to take the entire group to confront Senator Caliph Hacks. "It wouldn't be safe to leave anyone behind."

"Gabby, too?" Bertha asked.

"He'll come in handy as a go-for and extra muscle," Francis said. "Craig suggests that we go in two groups. Jennifer and John and Evelyn and Craig will drop the Ford off in town, take

a taxicab to the airport, and rent an airplane. The rest of us will rent a van, drive to the area and find accommodations for our stay in the area. We leave first thing in the morning."

John lay staring at the ceiling for most of the night. Craig had filled two heavy duffel bags and tossed them in the trunk of the Ford by dawn. With John at her side and Craig and Evelyn riding shotgun, Jennifer drove and returned the car to the rental dealer. They called for a taxi to take them to the small airport on the Iowa side of the river .

Jennifer watched John's reaction as Craig rented a sleek, late-model Cessna using his own money. As she grew to know John with a deepening level of intimacy and watched him turn into an ordinary mortal before her eyes, she expected to see a flaw or two emerge, perhaps an expression of bitterness or resentment toward Craig's familiarity with the larger world around them. Instead, he gave Craig a pat on his back when he returned from the office gesturing victory with a thumbs up.

"Way to go, partner."

Pleased by John's support, Craig's grin reached from ear to ear. He draped an arm across Evelyn's shoulder and circled the plane to make a preflight inspection. "We'll be up for about two hours. If anyone's gotta use a john, do it now, or you'll be hanging your butt out the door at ten thousand feet."

Evelyn took him up on his offer. Craig rummaged through a duffel bag and handed John a camera. "Not much more than point and shoot. I'll bank for the shots you need to take when we arrive."

John examined the camera. "It's got a screen on it."

"Digital. I've got a laptop packed away."

"I don't live in that century," John muttered unhappily.

Evelyn returned and glanced up and down the runway as they piled aboard, more afraid of the world around her than the aircraft that would carry them into the morning sky.

Craig pulled the doors closed. "Seat belts, people."

He fiddled with the controls and started the engine. He donned headphones and spoke briefly with the tower, then gave the plane some throttle and pulled out onto a runway.

"You pretty good at this?" John called out over the noise.

"Fair to middling! Nobody's star student!"

Craig gave the plane full throttle. Jennifer tried not to bother John with the fact that he was crushing the delicate bones of her hand. The plane buzzed with the vibration of the engine, raced down the strip of concrete, and then all but dived into the blue morning sky. Only when the world became a beautifully patterned carpet of farmland far below and the aircraft settled down to a melodic hum did John recover and pat her hand in apology.

They followed the snaking course of the river, and then swung a bit further east. From time to time, Craig muttered something to some distant authority on his radio, then announced that they were just under an hour from their destination. Within a half hour, Evelyn began pointing out familiar landmarks of the southern part of Illinois, and finally landmarks of personal interest from her early childhood.

Craig consulted a small map on a clipboard from time to time, and then let Evelyn point out their destination on a rolling terrain of wooded hills. "There. I see the ranch."

"Show John the main house," Craig said.

Evelyn pointed at the tiny landmark when Craig banked at one thousand feet and put it in clear view through the side window. Jennifer caught sight of a large, ranch-style house on broad lawns and a collection of smaller buildings among some green pastures. Dozens of horses stood like plastic toys on carpets of green velvet.

"Start snapping away," Craig said to John. "You can take five hundred shots, so snap anything interesting. I'll do three

passes, one to each side of the estate, and one around the perimeter."

"I think I got everything we need," John announced at the end of the third pass, and Craig took the plane west.

Jennifer hated to see the ride end. John turned green about the gills as clouds moved in to buffet the plane. The glass-like circle of the propeller pulled them slowly through the drifting clouds.

Craig set down on a deserted runway of a rural airport and cut the engine in front of a hangar. He escorted Evelyn through the hanger to take care of the paperwork and call a cab. John and Jennifer waited out front. "You okay?" Jennifer asked of him.

"I've never seen the world from the air. It's all so damned clean and neat."

"I've never flown in a plane that small before," Jennifer said, trying to put him at ease. "You should try one of the big jets packed with three hundred other people."

John rejected the notion with a shake of his head. "I can't even imagine it."

Craig and Evelyn made their appearance. Craig led the way to a waiting taxi. Evelyn asked the driver to take them to a multiple star motel beyond the city limits of the largest town in the area.

Craig paid for two doubles side by side on the second floor balcony of the motel's inner court. John and Jennifer watched Craig unpack his laptop and download John's pictures. The monitor showed a succession of razor-sharp images. Evelyn named the major roads leading to the ranch.

"John, we'll run into town for some electronic supplies I'll need when the girls get here," Craig said. "You teach me some of that fancy footwork of yours and I'll teach you a thing or two about modern security systems. I can get through a tight

defense, but I'll get my face busted if I can't move half as fast as you do."

John grunted satisfaction with the arrangement. The morning's camaraderie had taken a bite from Evelyn's characteristic haughtiness, although she still treated the spot John stood as generally unoccupied. Neither was she a breathtaking beauty dressed in jeans and a simple white blouse. Without her expensive cosmetics, she looked like a pretty, but rather ordinary woman to Jennifer's eyes.

John sat at the window and stared out over the court, watching children playing in the pool. Their high-pitched shouts and screams echoed through the early afternoon. "I've never seen kids have so much fun," was his only comment. Jennifer refrained from voicing her thoughts on what the future might hold for her in the way of children.

Francis arrived an hour later, accompanied by a grim-faced Emily and her sidekick, Sally. "I turned Bertha and Gabby loose to find us a place to rent closer to the ranch, preferably a house. Emily, Sally and I will be staying nearby for the night."

Jennifer and Evelyn accompanied the men on their shopping expedition. Craig drove to two electronic supply stores, a military surplus store, and a hunting store for nothing she recognized. John lay with Jennifer in the darkness that night, caressing her absently. "I would never have gotten this far on my own. This part of the world is more than I know how to handle."

Emily showed up with the van in the morning and they all climbed aboard. They drove to a small town after a twenty minute drive, made a turn halfway along the highway bisecting the business district and pulled into the drive of an aged, wood-frame house surrounded by trees. Francis came out the back way with Sally at her heels. Bertha and Gabby standing side by side on the back porch seemed for all the world to be

native to quaint house and town.

The house was furnished, but it didn't look as if it had been lived in for the past decade. Francis had stocked the pantries and bathroom with her usual thoroughness. By the time Craig and John had settled in, Jennifer was beginning to appreciate the cozy home tucked among the trees. "We're going to live in a place like this someday," she announced. "Or do you want to go back to your hood?"

John nodded to indicate a doe in the edge of the property. "Rats were never that big in the hood."

The group gathered in the kitchen to hear John and Craig's plans for the balance of their mission. Craig turned to John with a furrowed brow. "You take it from here. I can anticipate the security, but you're the expert in locking horns one on one."

"Someone's liable to get hurt," John warned the group, ending the last of the hushed chatter among the women. "but if we miss this opportunity, we won't have another. We won't know where to look for a counterattack or when to expect it."

John eyed Emily. "You and Sally to pay a visit to the ranch. Play coy. Bump a friendly head with security. Let us know what sidearms they carry, how they're dressed and behave, number and kinds of traffic on the property."

Emily nodded enthusiastically, appreciative of John's recognition of her potential usefulness.

He looked to Evelyn. "Draw us some maps of the rooms in the main house and the buildings near the house. When we're ready to go in, you'll call your father and announce your arrival. They'll be expecting you. They'll get Craig and I instead, although your father shouldn't object once I've had a few minutes to explain our situation.

"When we go in, we'll be outgunned," he said to Craig. "The element of surprise is all we'll have to pull this off. We don't

want anyone getting hurt."

"Your father will be surprised by the crowd you are keeping these days," Francis said to Evelyn in an attempt to lighten the mood. "He may need a change of underwear after we've left."

"He wears boxer shorts," Evelyn said bitterly. "I'll remember to take along diaper wipes for the bastard."

Chapter Forty-three

Dressed in shorts and halters, Emily and Sally left early to infiltrate the area behind closed gates. They returned with a rough head count and a conversation with a roving guard to report. "There's about ten guards that we could see," Emily said.

John cut her off. "Dressed how?"

"Kind of formal. Suits, some ties, dark sunglasses. Bad guy uniforms."

"Go on."

"We got close enough to the house to count four cars and a window van. They look like cop cars, moon hubcaps, black, tinted glass. They got a chain link fence around the whole place. We stopped a car that came out the main drive and pretended we were lost. He was carrying and he was professional. He wouldn't flirt."

Frowning, John turned back to print-outs of the photographs. "Everything's changed since the last time I've been here," Evelyn said. She pointed out construction new to her, upset that she couldn't be of more help.

Craig put an arm across her shoulders. "The building behind the house has to be a back-up generator, and I see a CB antenna on the corner of the house. The steel shed's got a lawn tractor in it."

"Can we do it?" Francis asked of the men.

Locusts buzzed especially noisily from the surrounding trees in the hot and quiet afternoon. "We're in over our heads," John warned.

"I can help," Emily said.

Jennifer had already told him stories of how Emily and Ed had worked together to keep trouble away from the business. John gave a firm nod of approval. "I know damned well you can help. The three of us, then."

"I think we can get through the guards and the security and interrogate the senator like we planned," Craig said with confidence.

"What about getting out?" John said.

"I was hoping you'd have ideas on that."

John grinned, and then quickly sobered. "We have to take this one step at a time. We'll make our move, but we won't commit ourselves if we run across more than we can handle. Our philosophy for a clean escape will be a simple one. We don't have to worry about getting out if we can't get in, which means we really need to get this done."

Craig pointed out a road on one of the print-outs. "Before we go in, we isolate. We stop traffic coming and going at critical junctions with these." He held up a handful of several crude, flat-black objects that looked like children's jacks made of flat iron. "Tires go flat. Cars stop."

Craig used a pencil to point out areas of interest around the ranch house. "Wires going into the house take three forms, electrical, telephone, and optical cable, any of which could be part of a security system, so we take them out a safe distance

from the house. We'll have to move fast when that happens. Broken connections with the outside world will trigger an alarm. Expect choppers within ten or twenty minutes. Before we enter the house, we take out the radio antenna and the back-up generator. I've got a small supply of plastic explosives and timers to help with those. They'll have shock value as well."

"Okay, so we've alerted the entire guard force to trouble before we've even made a move," John said with a sigh of frustration.

Craig rummaged in his duffel bag and extracted a rifle John had never seen before. "Tranq gun," Craig said. "We get them riled, and then we calm them down. Nobody gets hurt."

Craig held another device to view. "Night goggles. Light amplification and infrared."

"We're going in predawn?" John said.

"Yep." Craig held up a peculiar looking grenade. "Build it myself. A small magnesium flare. Super bright, short-lived and timed to detonate at random, anywhere within twenty seconds. Once we throw them in, we won't have to expose ourselves to maintain the fireworks. Before they detonate, they give off an fm signal. We'll be wearing miniature FM radio earbuds. When you hear a steady beep, you have three seconds to protect your eyes. Won't do to just close your eyes. Put your hands over your eyes as well. The flash lasts for one quarter second, but if you see the flash, don't be expecting to see anything else until sometime tomorrow."

John thought about it. "Home free. When can we move in?"

"We can be ready to move early tomorrow. We set the charges to take out the power, phone and cable lines this evening. Emily does the antenna and generator around back when the poles blow, and that'll be our cue to move in because all hell's going to bust loose at about that time."

Nobody was going to sleep that night. Craig and John drove alone to an isolated clearing off a back road and less than a quarter mile from the ranch. The evening was warm and clouding over, and as quiet as a graveyard.

A pole stood to one side of the clearing, another visible among the trees in one direction, a third visible behind them. "The high wires are electrical," Craig pointed out. "The lower ones are phone and cable. I want to tap into the phone lines and see what we've got. There shouldn't be two of them. One of them has got to be security dedicated."

"They'll have cell phones," John reminded the man.

"We'll keep them too busy for phone calls."

Craig donned spikes and a leather belt to enable him to shimmy up the pole. He worked fast, came back down fifteen minutes later, put everything away, and leaned against the fender of the car with a frown.

"What's up?" John ventured.

"In a nutshell, they're using an encoded carrier signal linked to offsite security. Rather than cut, I can rig a waveform generator to duplicate it and tap into the line further on down, so we may have more time than we anticipated before trouble arrives. Charges are set for fifteen minutes before official sunrise, and weather's supposed to be clear in the morning."

"The only iffy move is Emily," John said, thinking aloud. "The antenna and generator need to go when the poles drop. What if they see her?"

"We can set up a diversion to cover for her. We should have those fancy professionals castrated before they know what hit them."

John stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Things won't go that easy, you know. They never do."

"I don't know about you," Craig said in a confidential tone of voice, "but things absolutely never go right with me. I light

five seconds fuses that fizzle, and two hour fuses that blow in my face."

"Murphy's law."

"Yeah, I hate that bastard."

Chapter Forty-four

John and Craig's distraction for Emily consisted of a duck call. Ignored for ten minutes, the main house emptied of guards when the noise grew raucous, and it was at that moment that Emily cut her way through the chain-link fence in back.

"She's disturbed the fence perimeter detectors by now," Craig announced, consulting his watch. "Nobody inside to keep an eye on things. Someone's gonna get their ass canned for this."

An explosion sounded in the distance, sharp and echoing. Lights went out briefly in the house, and then the generator kicked in for the five or ten seconds left to its functional lifespan.

The antenna alongside the house blew in a show of sparks. Fuel detonated in the generator shed, sending a fireball rolling into the pitch black, early morning sky. Craig and John had already donned their night vision goggles. "Heads up. We've got company."

Dobermans arced across the front lawns, a prime example

of Murphy's law in action. Battery-powered yard lights came on and flooded the grounds with the cold illumination of mercury vapor lighting, each terminated by a quick succession of shots fired from a surplus M-14 resting against Craig's shoulder as John armed and chucked the flash grenades across the interior of the fence.

John covered his eyes. Blue-white light flashed. Dogs howled in terror, and men roared in anger and outright panic. Craig nodded the night-vision goggles and exchanged the M-14 for the tranq gun, taking out a guard and a guard dog unaffected by the flares.

Behind them, a car approached. Francis and Evelyn had arrived to collect Emily and await the two men. Craig and John ran for the house and took cover behind planters. "Senator Hacks!" Craig called out. "Your daughter is here to speak with you! We're not here to hurt anyone!"

The front door creaked open. One of the guards stepped out with raised hands. "Who are you! Identify yourself!"

"I'm here!" Evelyn cried from a distance, her voice carrying well in the night. "Father, I'm here!"

Senator Caliph Hacks and another of the guards stepped out onto the porch clutching handguns. Craig took the initiative to expose himself with raised hands. "Hear your daughter out, sir. Either it's done peacefully, or we're gone and you're never going to know what this was about. It's something you need to hear."

Senator Hacks gestured for a guard to put his sidearm away. Evelyn drew closer.

The senator's voice was flat. "I thought you were dead. All these years..."

"Father, somebody *is* trying to kill me."

The man's eyes widened. He shook his head emphatically, but he had already stuffed his foot into his mouth.. "I know

nothing of that. I had nothing to do with it. I swear."

"Nobody else has any reason! Nobody even knows who I am!"

"I wasn't my idea! I swear!"

Evelyn stared at the man in dismay. He had reacted to an accusation. The woman standing before him could have been anyone. The fact that it was his daughter meant nothing to him.

The Senator glanced nervously about. "We can reach some sort of accord," he said. "It wasn't my idea to allow anyone to get hurt. I have not had a personal hand in this."

Evelyn stared at John and Craig, confused and helpless.

"Evelyn, be reasonable," Senator Hacks said. "It's not too late to come to some accord. I can give you everything you could possibly want out of life. We don't have to do this to each other."

"All I ever wanted was my own life, you bastard! You know they lied! You know they hurt me!"

"None of that mattered!" Senator Hacks yelled back at the girl. "My God, Evelyn, do you know what the press would have done to me had I tried to defend you against those men? It would have meant my career!"

"*My* career, father. *My* honor!"

"You were nothing but a plaything to hang clothes on! I have the potential to become the President of the United States!"

Evelyn's tone of voice emptied of even anger. "I doubt it. I sincerely doubt it."

Evelyn whipped her twenty-two caliber handgun from the elastic of her slacks, startling John with the realization that nobody had anticipated this particular turn of events. "I wanted so badly to see you again, father. I thought you would be glad to see me and tell me that it has all been a terrible

mistake. You were my *father!* I was your *daughter!*"

Francis cried out. "Evelyn, wait!"

Evelyn fired twice. The first bullet spun the Senator to the ground. The second went wild, her aim deflected by Francis' double-fisted blow between the shoulder blades that sent Evelyn pitching to the ground.

The Senator's guard dived for the gun rattling to his feet. By then, John had his own pistol drawn and aimed at almost point blank range, shaking his head in warning. The guard climbed warily to his feet and backed away.

Francis retrieved Evelyn's revolver. Craig shrugged, eyed unhappily by his partner. "Okay, so I shouldn't have given it back to her."

John gestured for the guard to attend the Senator. "Get him inside before some other idiot starts shooting."

The guard did as he was told. Already, an ashen Senator Hacks climbed to his feet, the inside of his chest and arm bloodied by a flesh wound, but nothing more serious. The guard helped the older man inside and seated him on a couch near one of the battery-powered lanterns. John followed them in, leaving Craig outside to monitor the remainder of the recovering guard force.

"There have been a succession of attempts upon your daughter's life, all of them badly botched," John said, and the Senator looked up from his bloodied hand in surprise.

"The body count stands at eight, including three women, three of Evelyn's friends. For the sake of a friend of my own, I need to put a stop to this. Unless you want those deaths made public, I need your cooperation. I need the name of the people you've hired to kill your daughter."

"I hired nobody!"

"As you wish."

The Senator's eyes widened as John started to turn away.

"Wait! I don't know who he may have employed! I don't know how he learned of my daughter and what she was doing! He warned me that the political liability was unacceptable and offered to help if I expected his continued support! He said nothing about harming anyone!"

"She's family, you fool," John murmured, "your own flesh and blood."

"I can't survive without the financial support, for Christ's sake! Two hundred million dollars worth of campaign funds! He told me he'd take care of the matter, that I'd never hear of it again!"

"I need a name."

The Senator moistened his lips. He broke out in a cold sweat in the warm evening air, trembling and pale. Seeping blood continued to soak his shirt. "Leave Evelyn with me," he said softly. "We'll work something out."

"You're out of your fucking mind."

"He's untouchable! He's one of the wealthiest, most powerful men in the country! There's *nothing* you can do!"

"I don't have to be here, Hacks. I don't like it here at all. I want to get this over with one way or another and get some fresh air. As far as I can see, we can end it here and now by going to the press. There won't be anything left of you to protect."

Senator Hacks lowered his head in panicky submission. "Bertrand Bartow. His name is Bertrand Bartow."

John nodded in satisfaction. "Then you had better hope Bartow is as far as this goes. If we've reached a dead-end, our only recourse is to watch both you go down in flames and hope it takes the heat off the rest of us."

The Senator shot to his feet. "Please let me mediate. We can reach some accord."

John retreated to the front door and called back to those

behind him. "Everyone, back to the car."

John caught the guard's eye, the one cool and rational intellect at work in the room. "Everything's been recorded and the recorder is nowhere nearby. If we're stopped before we reach Bartow, it's already too late to silence us. We've never been here and nothing at all has happened if you cover for us. Do you understand?"

"The Senator's name will never be mentioned," the guard said. "Is that the agreement?"

John responded with a curt nod.

The guard shrugged. "Works for us."

John trotted back to the waiting car expecting a bullet in the back at any moment. "I need to make a phone call," John said to nobody in particular on the drive back to the house. Francis handed him a cell phone.

"A payphone," John said.

The car emptied at the house. Jennifer appeared from the house, took the wheel, and drove to a truck stop outside town with the sunrise a glow on the eastern horizon. John left the car, comforted by the cool morning air. He dialed the operator, asked for a number, and reversed the charges.

"State your business," Garko murmured quietly on the other end of the line.

"Bertrand Bartow. Evelyn Haxx is the daughter of Senator Caliph Hacks. According to the Senator, a man named Bertrand Bartow offered to resolve the threat his daughter poses to his career."

"You've been busy, John."

"The Senator's standing behind an eight ball the size of a planet. Maybe we can salvage the situation if we can negotiate with Bartow and get him off our back. You could, if it was in your interest to do so, facilitate matters by letting me know who the hell this bastard might be."

"I had no idea of the scope of this situation, John. I'll do what I can. Give me a call this evening."

John returned to the house ready to call it a night. Jennifer lay at his side, fully awake. "Francis is having a panic attack. Craig has his hands full with Evelyn. I heard what happened."

"Some realities you can't hide from," John said. "Some games you gotta play."

"What if we don't know the rules?"

"We make our own. Bartow is the end of the line. He's got to be the one behind it all."

Jennifer thought about it. "And then what happens?"

"Bartow calls our number for us and calls off his circus, or we threaten to turn out his lights. Once we have your antidote, we're home free."

"What if it doesn't work out that way?"

"Then it'll work out some other way." He folded the girl into his arms. "Don't waste your time on fear. Things are happening here and now. Keep your focus, kid. This is where the action is. Don't think another thought beyond the here and now until we get to Bartow. If he's big enough to hire killers, it might occur to him that he's a big enough target to take one and retreat gracefully. I've seen it done a thousand times. It's the easiest money I've ever made."

"I forgot that you'd know all about that."

"I'd forget, too, if I knew how."

Chapter Forty-five

"Phone me a number to fax some material," Garko instructed. "Peruse, evaluate, let me know how you intend to proceed."

The group abandoned the house, the town, and took up residence in another motel fifty random miles away. Francis dispatched the girls to the far corners of the rural town in search of a public fax facility. Emily and Sally were first to stumble across a Kinkos. By noon, the group gathered around the desk in Frances' room. John dumped a cluster of eight by ten photographs onto the table surface, images of two men, one young, the other old, obviously related.

Jennifer stared at the image of the older man in horror.

"What?" John said gently.

Jennifer turned and fled the room, returning clutching her precious childhood photograph. She held it at arm's length with a shaking hand to compare the younger man standing next to the woman to the older figure in the photograph.

John took notice. The resemblance was unmistakable.

"What the hell. I'll be damned."

His choice of words haunted him. For one long silent moment he fought off panic and the foulest sensation of cold dread he had ever experienced. Never had he been so badly deceived and thrown off track. The background in each of the faxed photographs hinted at an opulent lifestyle. In several, John saw severe looking figures in dark suits.

Body guards.

Francis' hand fluttered nervously about her face. "Oh, child, no!"

Silently, John thumbed Garko's familiar number using Jennifer's cell phone.

"Garko here."

"This is a seriously messed over situation," John said. "We see a connection with Jennifer Wessner, the witness. Dimitri was a diversion all along. So is Evelyn Haxx and her father. Who is the man in the photograph?"

Garko took a moment to assimilate the turn of events. "Interesting. The man is Basil Bartow, recently deceased. Bertrand, his son, inherited Gulf oil, lots of it. You'll have no way to do legitimate business with the man, and I have no way of pinning down his whereabouts. My advice is to nail him through his attorneys. He's got a hoard of them on retainer. The busiest of the lot is fishing in Minnesota on privately owned land, Carmel Lake, a nice place on the northern shore. He doesn't have his wife with him. The woman in his company is much prettier.

"Let me know each move you make as you make it, John. Provide me with the information you gather. We'll try to keep you one step ahead of the wolf packs. There'll be two, one federal when Bartow involves the FBI. That'll happen when you shake down his attorney for information. Bartow will have his private forces. He'll know who you are and why you're after him, if he's behind this fiasco. John, it's my opinion that you're

not personally equipped to manage this situation."

"I have friends," John said.

"Highly efficacious friends, I damned well hope."

John laughed at Garko's uncharacteristic unset. "Yeah, some of those. We'll check things out and get back to you."

John thumbed off the cell phone and absently set it aside. Jennifer was trembling. John slipped an arm about her and held her firmly against him.

The look on Francis' face indicated the extent of her suspicions. Jennifer and the deceased Basil Bartow were somehow related to one another. If Jennifer had been Basil's target all along, or the target of the deceased Basil's son, the attempt on Evelyn's life had been a cover. Using Dimitri to kill Evelyn was the equivalent of using a shotgun to take out a flock of birds knowing Jennifer was among the flock. No one would ever have known that Jennifer had died for a reason, or who had murdered her.

But if Jennifer had been Rosie's target, why the waste of time and effort sending Dimitri after Evelyn? Why the toxin coursing through Jennifer's blood when the opportunity to kill her had presented itself?

Bertha and Gabby were clueless for the moment. Emily and Sally looked on glumly, aware only that they were in over their heads by several orders of magnitude. Evelyn studied Jennifer with a look of perplexity, and Craig's eyes were on John for some idea of their next move.

"My God," Francis murmured, but without any inclination to spell out her gruesome suspicions in detail. "What's happening?"

"Pieces of the puzzle aren't fitting at all," John said. "I can't make sense of any of it. But one thing leads to another. We maintain our momentum and pay Bertrand Bartow a visit."

Jennifer accosted him in a secure moment among the

group chatting up a storm. "They don't have to know about the poison, do they?"

John shook his head and called out to Craig. "Can you fly something with pontoons? We're going fishing in a lake in Minnesota."

Craig gestured his confused willingness to comply. "Yeah, sure."

Emily drew self-defensively to her full height when John eyed her. "This may not be about you," John said, "but I'd like you to tag along."

Evelyn bristled with indignation. "I'd not be left behind. I'll still want to know why any of this had to happen."

John glanced at each of the balance of the group clustering around him. "No questions just yet. I don't have enough answers. I'll take Jennifer, Emily, and Craig. The rest of you stay put and keep a low profile. Be ready to move when we have a destination. We're going to need your help."

John turned and left the room dragging Jennifer along behind him. Sensing a looming conclusion to their crisis, for better or for worse, nobody bothered protesting John's autocracy.

"Something terrible is happening," Francis murmured fearfully when the two were gone. "Do what that man tells you. All of you. Without hesitation."

Later in the warm, sleepy summer afternoon, John followed Jennifer along the trails of a nearby park, hand in hand. They walked, worked off nervous tension, and had nothing to say to one another. By the time they got back, Craig had leased another plane and was ready to go. "I was about broke," he confessed. "I just found out that Francis put a damned fortune in my account to finance us. We owe the lady big time."

Jennifer drove a new rental. John sat at her side, and Emily and Craig sat against opposing back doors without

speaking, stealing curious glances at one another, tempted to pry John for more background information on their mission, but unwilling to risk his ire considering the mounting tension that had turned his face into a pale mask of chiseled stone. Craig finalized arrangements at the same airport they had used previously, but they drove to a lake thirty miles away to pick up the Piper Cub equipped with the pontoons they needed for access to Lake Caramel.

John stared at the dock protruding into the water with dismay and was last to board the plane. He didn't speak until they were airborne. "I don't like the strategy we're going to have to use to get what we want," he muttered to no one in particular. "We need information fast. It'll mean the end of an important man's career if it's provided, and it won't be provided voluntarily."

Craig found the lake without difficulty, folding the map and stuffing it in a door pouch, then circling the lake before diving for the water front in front of a sprawling quarter million dollar log cabin. A curvaceous woman sunbathed on the dock, wearing a beige bikini that matched her skin tone and made her look nude from a distance. She and a lanky man working in a boat ran for the house as the plane approached.

John scrambled from the plane and caught the man on the sprawling porch of the cabin. The woman in the bikini swung away and ran screaming down the beach. Craig moored the plane and Emily went after their escapee. Jennifer stayed put in the cockpit, unsettled by the violence she witnessed. John held a gun to the head of his captive, and if anyone had accused John of being an evil man in that moment, she would not have faulted them their accusation, except that the faces of good and evil had blurred in her short lifespan, and she could no longer tell them apart. John called out for her and others to join him at the house. Jennifer was the last to respond, but she

finally trudged up the beach to the cabin in the cool afternoon air.

Bartow's lawyer was John's size, but frail, his face a mask of panic and mounting hysteria. John forced him face down on the purple rug inside the lush cabin and bound his wrists behind his back with a nylon tie. A number of ties protruding from John's back pocket, evidence of a level of planning Jennifer hadn't noticed. She curled up on a couch in a distant corner of the cabin when Emily returned with the screaming, struggling girl, her body scuffed and dirty, and cuts bleeding on her hands and bare feet. The string to her bikini top had broken, and the fragment of cloth fell to the floor when John brutally spun the girl around and jammed one, and then the other wrist against the small of her back. Once bound, he spun her about again and stopped her piercing shriek with a massive hand clamped to her throat.

"Save your energy. You're going to need it."

Emily backed away, pale, but stoic, her arms crossed self-defensively below her breasts. It made her look dangerous, which was the effect John needed. Unless the attorney knew in his heart that he and his companion were to be tortured and killed, he would never betray his client. Jennifer saw that John had been right in that regard. His entire life was at stake working for a man like Bartow, and he couldn't be thought of as innocent. Jennifer brushed tears from her eyes, hoping the man was at least as terrified as he looked, at least as terrified as herself. Terrified, he would surrender and more quickly be released unharmed.

John turned his full attention to the man curled in a panicky fetal position on the floor. "I need to know where to find your boss. Now. Tomorrow. On any given day, at any hour. Day or night. I need to know the extent and nature of his security. Everything you know, and if it's not enough, it's going

to cost us our lives, and I'm going to take you and the girl down with us just out of spite. We're not here because we're attacking Bartow. He attacked us and we're defending ourselves as best we can."

The man shook his head frantically. "I don't know anything!"

John sighed heavily. "Sad thing is, I believe you."

The girl shrieked when John glanced her way. John's expression was stone cold, determined and uncaring. "Give it some more thought."

"God, no!" the man cried out. "You monster! She's just a child!"

John glanced at Jennifer, and if she had ever feared him, it evaporated in light of the utter and total helplessness she saw in his expression. In his eyes, his victim, too, was a child, and he sincerely did not know if he could save her.

"I'll tell you what I know!" the man cried. "Please! For the love of God, let's talk about this!"

John pulled the man off the floor and set him in a chair. "I'll go first. Disciples of Chaos. Know of them?"

The man grimaced and shook his head.

"Senator Caliph Hacks."

John got a puzzled look. "Yeah, so?"

"Do they know one another, Bartow and Hacks?"

"No. They've never done business together."

"You're sure."

"I'm certain of it."

"Campaign contributions?"

The man sighed. "Yeah."

"On the order of hundreds of millions?"

"Yeah."

John extracted a copy of a folded photograph from his back pocket and handed it to the man. "You tell me what this is all

about. Follow the implications down the line and let me know what they are."

The man studied the photograph. He had studied the faces of his captors. He glanced at Jennifer in sudden recognition. He looked up at John in shock. "Who is she? God forbid, she's related to the Bartows!"

"I take it anyone related to Bertrand Bartow would have been a contender for a rather hefty inheritance, like maybe an oil industry."

"Oh, shit!"

The man looked to his girlfriend with eyes wide with shock. "Oh, shit!"

"Her name is Jennifer," John said. "She thinks it's Wessner, but she doesn't even know how old she is. Someone's destroyed her records, erased her identity, and she's been poisoned."

Emily gasped. Craig knocked a lamp from the table standing suddenly erect.

"She'll be dead within days. Either we stop that from happening, or I begin taking Bartow's organization apart individual by individual, employee by employee, until I reach him and make him wish he had never been fucking born."

"He's in Houston," the man said. "He owns a night club."

"A toy," John said. "A place to indulge himself."

"Yeah."

Lost in thought, John's next move was to unsheathe his knife. The man cried out and tried to roll aside, the perfect position John needed to cut his bonds. He then walked over and freed the girl who made a headlong dive for the top of her bikini fallen at her feet.

John turned back to the man. "I take it Bartow is something of an asshole."

The man wet his lips. "He pays well."

"Barring complications of this magnitude?"

"Yeah, I never knew about this. I don't think anyone does. If what you're saying is true, I wouldn't have Bertrand as a client." He eyed Jennifer a second time. "Maybe the girl. If you need legal counseling, I'll do anything I can. I can do a lot."

"I can give you a name and a number," John said, "a man called Garko. He'll fill in the details of what's been happening, the corroboration you need to our story. Assuming he has all you need and that you trust him once you know who he is, would I be right to assume that your association with Bartow will become a sudden and rather deadly liability?"

The man thought it over and swallowed hard. "You could probably say that."

"Do you have friends to forewarn of trouble?"

The man looked dubious. "I'd sure as hell like to. Are you telling me to keep quiet about this?"

"That wouldn't make much sense, would it?"

The man shook his head after another moment's thought. "If I steer my associates away from this mess, Bartow is pretty badly undermined. He won't know until it's too late. If you're trying to take him down, then I guess we work in your favor salvaging our own asses."

"Sounds like our guesses are panning out," John said. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to get nasty with you."

The man sent his jowl flapping shaking his head violently. "No, not hardly necessary at all."

"Give us as much detailed information on our acquaintance of mutual interest and we'll be out of your hair."

The man nodded to a nearby computer. John gave him the go-ahead. For the next half hour, the accountant's fingers rattled across the keyboard gathering material that he burned onto a disk without asking, handing it to John in silence. Sweat had broken out on his forehead. He looked ill. "I'm sorry, but I don't think you're going to get close enough to Mr. Bartow

to do yourselves any good. Nobody's going to give him a heads up, but I think he knows he'd never get one should a problem arise."

"A problem has arisen," John said. "We'll see what we can do about shoving it down his throat where it belongs."

Chapter Forty-six

Jennifer sat cross-legged at John's side in the night. They had regrouped with Francis and her crew, rented themselves separate rooms at a large motel outside Minneapolis. Alone, John lay at her side in the middle of a king-sized bed illuminated by a full moon shining in the picture window. They had watched it clear the horizon a massive ruddy orb. It had brightened to pale white, shrunk, and would soon rise out of sight.

"What are you thinking about me and Bartow?" Jennifer wanted to know.

"I'm thinking your mother was a Wessner, but maybe you're father was a Bartow. Those two people in your picture were your parents. I'm betting on it. She was a looker and you have his eyes."

The thought gave her gooseflesh and made her feel despondent at the same time. If she had found her father at long last, she had already lost him forever. She had always suspected that her mother had died ages ago. If she was related to Bertrand Bartow, and he was trying to kill her, it still

left her with no other family in the world, nobody but Francis, the girls, and John Cantrell.

"You were in line for the old man's inheritance, Basil's estate, at least a part of it. Sounds like a motive for murder to me, and money can buy lots of ingenuity. That's what we had going here from day one."

"And you're going to make sure that doesn't happen and somehow get the antidote to the poison they gave me and make it all better," Jennifer said as if reciting an unlikely fairytale. "And then what happens to you and me?"

"There is no you and me."

"You have way too much sex with me to be saying a thing like that."

"Sex with a child. A dead man can get by with it."

Jennifer brushed tears from her eyes.

"I don't want you to go soft on me, kid."

She grabbed a handful of his hair and turned his head to face her in the dim light. "What do you think we're doing, you and me?" she whispered harshly, not wanting the world to hear what she had to say. "We're making a baby, because we're not doing anything to stop it! That's more than just sex! Don't talk about it like it doesn't matter!"

"I'm not going to make a baby, kid. It's never happened, so I don't think I can. Any way you look at it, I don't belong in your life. You can't stand against the world unless you live in the shadows. I don't want you there with me, and I can't make a go of it like normal people."

"There aren't any normal people, John. There's just people. We have as much right as anyone to get what we want out of life."

"Yeah, if they'd let us."

The next morning, Jennifer tracked down Bertha and dragged her out into the sunny motel court to unload her

burden of helplessness and growing fear of John's self-imposed fate. "He looks cold and unfeeling, but he's up to his ears in guilt and despondency. He doesn't feel he belongs anywhere, or with anyone."

She began crying. She had to wait for the sobs to subside before she could continue. "If he leaves me, he'll kill himself, Bertha! He thinks that he and I are just some kind of irresponsible interlude that can't last forever. What am I going to do? How can I stop him?"

Bertha took time to think it out. "Well, I think he's a selfish oath. He cares about you, but he's thinking only of himself. Gabby's the same way. He's ashamed of himself. There's nothing John can do about the age difference between the two of you, but don't give up on him. You'll be legal sooner or later and the age difference won't mean so much. What the hell, you pass for eighteen already, and maybe you are for all we know. Maybe John's got the guilts for screwing a kid, but he wouldn't find you so attractive if you were a hopeless airhead. He might have the hots for your body, but it's your mind he's in love with."

Jennifer had never thought of it that way.

"Nobody wants to die, Jennifer. We're all like Gabby. We know it's inevitable, but it's foolish to stop living just because of it. John's smarter than Gabby, and you're smarter than I am. You have to find some way to trick him into sticking around and taking care of you. Make him do it. Don't give him a choice in the matter. He'll love you for it.

"You'll find a way," Bertha concluded with a smile. "You'll think of something before it's too late."

John talked with Garko several times during the day, and that evening, an old man in glasses driving a rusty Honda stopped at the house. John and Craig intercepted the man in the drive. He handed the two a leather briefcase and drove

away.

The group gathered in John and Jennifer's room. They stood in utter silence around the desk while John opened the briefcase and dumped its contents onto the table surface.

Documents and more photographs. "Security blueprints," Craig said, thumbing through the papers. "Newspaper articles about Basil and Bertrand both. I've got biographies here..."

Jennifer thumbed through a little black notebook of a diary someone had kept of Basil Bartow's movements in the company of someone's wife. For one reason or another, many people had hired private investigators to report on the Bartows' business and leisure activities, and John's business friends had very quickly brought it all together.

"This confirms it," John said grimly. The photograph was an older, formal studio portrait of the same man in Jennifer's photograph with the woman Jennifer claimed to be her mother at his side. Jennifer's heart sank at the sight of it. She had dim memories of him after all, and increasingly vivid memories of her mother. She remembered a time she couldn't have been more than three or four. She had heard them talking in the dark in the middle of the night. Her talk with John had sparked the memory to life as she lay drifting to sleep.

"That's Bertrand," John said, tapping another photograph taken at a dinner party. "He takes after the old man, but he's no more than a stepbrother, Jennifer. Ten or fifteen years older than you, maybe more."

Jennifer thought that he looked like a fat toad and an arrogant slob to boot. Jennifer could see it in his face, and the expressions of dislike on the faces of those about him.

"The old man must have been desperate for someone to carry on the name," John said mildly. "I'm betting you had quite a bit more coming to you than you got."

John went through newspaper clippings, developing a quick

perspective of Bertrand and voicing his opinions as he went. Jennifer had trouble keep pace.

"Gambling addiction," John murmured. "Lady's man."

"Why not, with the money he's got to throw around?" Emily commented. "We beggars can't be choosy, huh, girls?"

"Then we go to Houston and make him stop," Jennifer spat quietly.

"Won't be so easy this time," John warned, frowning as he finished going through the contents of the briefcase. "The Senator cooperated with us." John tapped a picture of the inside of a dimly lit casino. "Count the bodyguards, in this picture, and these others. Best I could do would be to plug him from a half mile with a high-powered rifle and scope, and that doesn't solve our most pressing problem."

John had mentioned Jennifer's poisoning in passing. Word had spread through the group, but nobody had pressed for details. Maybe it had been a horrible joke of some kind, or a hallucination. Maybe her night of illness had been her overactive imagination at work. Until she could be certain, she knew how Francis and the others would be reacting to her pending death. Fear and enduring the pity of others would be a bad mix.

"We can get to him," Craig ventured. "We have enough to blackmail him."

John shook his head in anger. "The men he hires to watch his back are our equals or better, and there's more of them. I dealt with the hood and the rats that lived in the walls, but I knew every empty warehouse and back alley in town, everything that went down in the streets, and most of the people who lived there. It gave me an edge. I don't have one here."

"Women are his weak point," Craig said. "It's our strong point. Besides, we're a step ahead of ourselves. We don't know

our options until we reconnoiter."

John separated three photographs. "This looks like the inside of a gambling casino. I don't even know if gambling legal in Houston. Probably not relevant to Bertrand one way or another."

"I want to go," Evelyn said gently. "I can get to him. I promise I can. I can handle the casino. It's what I've done my entire life." She gestured with disdain to the pictures and newspaper clippings. "He's nothing. I seduced my father's most important friends, every last one of them, and I put a noose about their necks in the process. I can do the same with Bertrand Bartow."

"Jennifer and the rest of us will remain behind," Francis said quietly.

"Jennifer goes with me," John said.

"You'd endanger the child with your selfish carnal appetite?"

Craig hurried to John's defense. "Couples won't attract attention. John and Jennifer. Me and Evelyn."

"And me," Emily said hurriedly. "Me and Sally."

John thought about it.

"A light at the end of the tunnel?" Francis ventured hopefully.

"A reflection upon a pool of sewerage," John murmured. "We'll clean it up for you, ma'am."

Jennifer continued to stare at the pictures of Bertrand Bartow. "It says that Basil left no survivors other than his son."

"His bastard son," John reminded her. "My best bet."

"And a bastard step daughter who's going to kick his ass," Jennifer added spitefully.

She looked up at the group with tears in her eyes. "I have all the family I need right here in this room." She slipped her arm in John's and held tight, hoping he would take the hint.

"Real families are forever," she said softly, secretly wondering why Basil Bartow had left a wife and a child to fend for themselves in the world.

Chapter Forty-Seven

It rained the following morning. Gabby napped in his room, seldom a part of the strategy meetings, but always in the background pulling his own weight. Francis locked herself in her room. Emily kept Sally company, and Bertha joined the two briefly, helping Sally to pack. Sally had made it her part of the mission to do the packing and unpacking to keep nervous tension at bay. "We're never going to see Jennifer ever again," Sally said quietly. "Something terrible is going to happen to her."

"John won't let anything happen to Jennifer," Bertha said.

"He'll die trying, but he's just a man. He said as much himself. He's a dead man that comes to life every time he looks at her. How can two people so different hope to make a go of it?"

"Better than you might think," Bertha said bitterly, knowing they were indirectly questioning her relationship with Gabby.

"You hurt her feelings," Emily accused her lover from across the room. "What are you going to do with Gabby when this is over, Bertha?"

"Gabby's been getting it on a regular basis," Bertha said, not wanting to get maudlin over the issue. "If I cut him off, he's liable to sneak over to that nunnery by the castle and raise hell."

Emily chuckled. "That's a good one. If I had it in me to believe in a God, I'd be on my knees this very moment praying for our safety, not that I think She'd hold it against me for being an atheist considering the fact that no self-respecting goddess would have put men in charge."

"That was pretty good," Sally admitted, bereft, though, of a smile.

Gabby was awake when Bertha returned to her room. Gabby sat cross-legged in a recliner facing a wall-mounted television. He waved the cell phone that Francis had given him. "Leroy called. He told me he wants to burn the castle down and collect on the insurance. How much of a cut do you suppose I should take."

"God," Bertha cried out in exasperation, "you're all such a bunch of adolescent comedians!"

Chapter Forty-eight

Jennifer and John, Craig and Evelyn, and Emily and Sally rented three adjacent, second floor motel suites a half mile from the Bartow Community Ballroom on the outskirts of Houston. The complex sprawled over a full city block. The evening the three couples investigated the complex, bingo was in progress for the elderly in the Golden Lounge, ballroom dancing in Starlite, and a nightclub for the under twenty-one crowd in a basement area called the Inferno. The adult nightclub, Diamond Bill's, was a basement affair as well, but beneath the opposite end of the building. The three couples wandered a confusing maze of Diamond Bill's glass walls and a dazzling light show considered a unique attraction by locals.

"It might be a cover for the private club," John suggested when they returned to John and Jennifer's room to discuss their findings.

Craig flopped down onto a couch, closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "The casino's in there somewhere. Some of the photographs show side entrances to the building that I couldn't find from the inside. How do we get in? John, you

don't do well in a crowd, so you and Jennifer keep your distance. If Jennifer gets carded, someone's liable to question her out-of-state ID. Evelyn? What do you say?"

"Bartow would have a private entrance if this place belongs to him," Evelyn said. "Find it and I'll get in."

"How?" Craig said.

"I'll be invited."

Craig studied the woman in the room's flattering indirect lighting. "I guess you would at that. Plant a flower along a beaten path and someone's bound to pick it on their way by."

John took the upholstered recliner, kicked off his shoes, and tried to relax. It had been a long, exhausting day, both the drive in the escalating heat, and the confusion of the lights and crowds of the community center.

"What do you think?" Craig said, cautiously directing his question to John.

John was thinking that a man's vices were invariably his greatest weakness, gambling, women and sex, alcohol or drugs. Virtues carried to obsessive extremes carried the same price tag. Religion and politics fell into that category in his studied opinion. "Evelyn's our best bet," he said to break the mounting tension. Beyond that, he had nothing more to say. The others talked, forming a wall of gentle background noise as John all but slipped off to sleep.

Jennifer slid into his lap after a time. "You like hard rock?"

"Most rocks are hard." John put his arms about her shoulders and deduced that she was referring to music. He tried not to smirk.

"Bingo with the old folks?" Jennifer said teasingly.

It dawned on him that the others had been discussing a means of casing the center and watching for Bertram's arrival at the casino. "I've got an eye for sneaks," he said. "I'll keep an eye on exterior entrances."

"I'll keep John company," Jennifer announced. "You two snoop inside."

"Are we talking about plans for tomorrow night?" John said hopefully.

"John," Jennifer said with mock impatience. "How late do you think the old folks play bingo? It's two in the morning. Of course we're talking about tomorrow night."

He closed his eyes again, desperate for eight solid hours of restful oblivion. "Wake me about ten in the morning, sooner at your own risk."

Jennifer drove him around the community center early the following afternoon. They walked around it once on foot. The heat was stifling, but dry, forcing them both to don sunglasses in defense against the blazing, late summer sun.

John observed the loading docks and side doors to the bars and auditorium. The outside entrance to the casino had to be the chromed double doors of the main offices. Rough measurements of the accessible areas of the building left roughly six thousand square feet unaccounted for. That would be Bertrand's private domain.

At dusk, Evelyn dressed in one of her sleek gowns. Craig shaved, sleeked down his hair, and put on a light gray suit and patent leather shoes.

"You're not packing," John noted.

"I don't see the need."

"There's a need. We're outsiders. We'll be conspicuous, easy to spot."

"I don't think we'll be spotted that easily," Craig said. "Besides, we can't shoot our way out of crowds as dense as these."

"Act a little drunk, then. Don't look the part of a point man."

"What do point men look like?"

"Too damned alert and watchful. Like you."

Craig grimaced at the bulge in John's light jacket. "I guess there's a first time for everything."

"Carrying or not carrying isn't a matter of philosophy," John said. "Sometimes I can afford to play games. Tonight doesn't happen to be one of those."

They drove in separate rentals to the community center that evening. John had Jennifer park two blocks away and maintain a vigil without leaving the car.

"I don't see why anyone would pay us any mind around so many people," Jennifer said. "Why can't we snoop like we did last night?"

"Bartow inherited his money," John said. "It bothers me that he can handle the responsibility and screw around as much as he does on the side. It's an indication of how smart and dangerous he is. He's survived this long untouched because of the quality of the men he's hired to field for him. He's one of the richest men in this part of the country and he manages to keep a low profile. We're safer staying put."

"By quality, I suppose you mean really bad men."

"Pit vipers."

She shrugged. "The worst they can do is to tell us go away."

"They can take us in and ask questions and then shoot us in the head."

"So what do we do, shoot anybody that tries to shoot us first?"

"Whatever it takes."

"Really?" Jennifer asked it as a serious question.

John glanced at her solemnly. "Really."

"Okay." Jennifer double-checked her own twenty-two revolver and put it back in her purse.

Once or twice during the early hours of the evening, cars drove up to the office entrance and let people out. The parking

lots out front and out back quickly filled. Music filtered out into the night from inside, hard rock and country and western, and occasionally strains of quieter music from the auditorium.

At about nine that evening, a limo pulled up to the office entrance. Four men and two women got out and went inside. A half hour later, two more pulled to the curb and discharged its passengers.

"I saw Bertrand that time," John announced.

A car eased around the corner ahead. Headlights glimmered in the rear view mirrors from a second car. Jennifer was driving. She started the engine as they grew closer, closing from front and rear.

"We've seen everything we need to see," John said. "Get us out of here."

Jennifer switched on the headlights and put the gear select in drive. John marveled at her calm. Only the dilation of her pupils gave away her heightened state of consciousness.

The car coming up behind them pulled to the curb, edging up so close that Jennifer had no way of backing away from the glare of high beams rushing in to block them off.

"Dent fenders," John said mildly, and he reached out to brace himself. "Get us out of here."

Jennifer floored the accelerator, burning rubber as she accelerated into the glare. She clipped the oncoming car and spun it around in a rain of shattered glass and chrome trim. She bounced up over the curb and left tire marks down the sidewalk in her effort to escape.

But as she rounded the corner at the back of the building, a mass of parked cars and pedestrians blocked their path.

"Shit!"

Without missing a beat, Jennifer laid on her horn and scattered a mass of young people. Obscenities drifted in the air behind them, leaving an angered mob for the car following to

contend with.

"Damn," Jennifer muttered in a hurt tone of voice. "I think he hit a few of those kids."

The sportier model two-door came rushing up onto their tail.

"Stop," John said. "We can't risk the cops getting in on this. We settle it here."

Jennifer all but stood on the brake. The nose of the their sedan dived, and when the car behind them struck, it slid its sloped hood beneath their rear bumper and locked itself in place.

Jennifer threw her door open. John reached for her arm, his eye on the rear view mirror. Two dazed men climbed from the car that had rammed them, but by that time, the crowds of angered youths had encircled them.

"Act like you're hurt," John said. "Put your hands to your face."

John rushed from the car and circled around to the passenger door, ostensibly to attend his injured date. Belligerent teenagers closed on John, but heard Jennifer cry out in mock pain and turned away to shoot an accusing arm and finger at the vehicle behind them.

Scuffles ensued. Several girls Jennifer's own age helped her from the car, and with John's arm about her shoulder, the crowd made no attempt to detain them. Already, red lights were flashing in the near distance, easing their way through the gathering mob.

Jennifer pleaded with the crowd of girls. "I got to get my dad out of here! I shouldn't have been driving the car! Don't let them see us, please!"

The girls formed a human shield about them, escorting them for a half block, then parting to reveal a parked cab.

The cabbie grimaced as they climbed in back. "Hey, kid, I've

got fare at the door!"

Jennifer shoved two twenties in his face. Two fingers snatched the bills and made them disappear. "Where to?"

Jennifer nodded west. "That big motel over there. My dad's not feeling too well."

"What the hell's with the riot?"

"Some idiot rear-ended somebody," Jennifer murmured, and she leaned back in her seat at John's side. Already there were cops at the scene, easing the traffic on past.

Fifteen minutes later, John furiously paced their motel room to work off the gathering tension. "They can't trace the car to us using Francis' phony IDs," Jennifer said. "We can get another one."

The car wasn't the issue. "We've done all the reconnoitering we'll get away with."

"Maybe Craig and Evelyn will come up with something."

John didn't think it likely. Craig was too accustomed to playing by rules, and even if Evelyn got inside the casino, they had no plan for making use of her presence.

"What awful things are you thinking?" she said. "John, I don't like that expression on your face."

"I don't see how we can handle this," he said.

"So, what is that supposed to mean?"

"We need to interrogate the bastard and get him to lift the pressure on us. I don't think we can manage that."

"So, what do you want to do, just kill him?"

"Do we have a choice? If someone nails me, and you die, who protects the others? Bartow needs to be dead while we have the opportunity to make it happen."

"If you get close enough to kill him, you'll never get away," Jennifer said. "They'll shoot you, or arrest you."

"They won't arrest me, but it may be our only alternative."

"Talk to Craig about it. Wait for the others to get back."

Don't make decisions like that on your own."

"It's not something I'd need help with," John said.

Jennifer hugged herself in growing agitation. John tried to embrace her. She stepped out of reach.

"Jennifer, we can't leave without taking out Bartow."

"And you're anxious to get it over with," Jennifer said. "You want to hurry up and be dead and gone so that you don't have to put up with me any more."

John reached for her again if only to shut her up.

Jennifer evaded him a second time. "Who do you think I am that you're not good enough for me?"

At the back of John's thoughts, he understood that the issue at stake was his own inability to let go of his old life, or adapt to a new one. How could Jennifer hope to understand the suffering he contained inside himself? It was too dangerous to let it escape. Better to let it end while he still had it under control, while it could still accomplish something useful.

"I'm not anything so special that you have to die for me!" she screamed at him.

Craig and Evelyn showed up at three in the morning. "What happened to you two?" Craig asked evenly. John and Jennifer looked thoroughly distraught.

"We lost the car," Jennifer said. "Some cars tried to box us in and we wrecked it in a crowd and got away."

"Damn. We saw the commotion from the distance. We had no way of knowing it was you."

"So what do we do now?" Jennifer asked worriedly, watching John while waiting for an answer from Craig.

"I got in," Evelyn said, taking them all by surprise as she entered the room. "I went looking for you two when the bar was closing. Craig was talking to the bartender. Your car wasn't where you said you would wait, Jennifer, so I went around the quiet side of the building. There were limos waiting. Some men

asked what I wanted. I told them I was looking for a lady's room. A man in a tux grilled me and I came on to him. And he let me in."

John looked around. "You got into the casino."

"Yeah. There must have been fifty people inside. I made a date for tomorrow with my new friend."

Craig, John noticed, looked thoroughly unhappy with the arrangement. Evelyn noticed Craig's reaction. "So what?" she said. "I saw Bartow, and Bartow saw me, and the little pig won't be able to resist."

"So how are you going to handle it?" Craig said evenly.

"I'll invite him to my motel room for a drink."

"He won't risk it," Craig said.

"I'm diabetic and I'll need an insulin shot," Evelyn said. "Or I'll have to check on my baby daughter. I'll feel him out and I'll give him the appropriate line, and I'll bring him here. His security will wait downstairs while he does his thing. There's no way he can resist. I don't have to be pretty. I just have to know what he wants to do to me. If he thinks I've offered that of my own accord, it's something he doesn't normally get so free and easy. Most men have a secret fetish. He'll come."

"Great," Craig said in agitation. "We'll have ourselves boxed in by enough firepower to do Desert Storm all over again. Then what?"

John rose to his feet. "We can't afford to bypass the opportunity."

"John wants to kill him," Jennifer said sullenly.

"Then perhaps we'll let John kill him," Evelyn said with a careless smile. "And we'll just fly away before they all come rushing upstairs and kill us, too."

"If it comes down to killing Bartow," John said, "only one of us needs to stay behind and take the heat. If we miss the opportunity, you're all just as dead as you were when you got

here."

Jennifer fled to the far side of the room, too rattled to argue further. Evelyn shrugged nonchalantly and left, waiting just outside the room for Craig to join her.

"We'll wait and see what happens," Craig said to his sullen ally, feeling awkward and unnerved by John's cold-blooded willingness to sacrifice himself. "If it has to be the way you think, yeah, we take Bertrand the Bastard out, but we wait and see what happens. Shit happens. Maybe it'll happen in our favor. Sound fair enough?"

John remembered how much he hated roller coasters, how much he needed to be in control of his life on a moment by moment basis. This was a roller coaster ride. He wasn't in control and perhaps he never would be again.

Chapter Forty-nine

Despite the lack of any plan to deal with Bartow, they had no choice but to gather in Francis' suite and allow Evelyn to venture out alone the following evening. There were too many unknown factors to allow for a plan. Either they made a blind grab for Bartow, or they left empty-handed and defenseless.

Craig offered to accompany her, but Evelyn thought the offer amusing. "You'd behave like a pit bull. Bartow would never nibble at the bait if I had you breathing down my neck. You guys hide in the dark and I'll bring Mr. Bartow home with me, and then you jump out at him and say, 'boo!'."

"World class security and you're going to take him home for the evening." Craig looked unhappy.

"It's happened." Evelyn said it with a shrug. "I've had super important people behave in truly stupid ways with me. Want examples?"

"We'll let the details slide for the sake of my peace of mind." Craig looked suddenly concerned. "Don't let Bartow make a glutton of himself."

"I quite imagine that Jennifer will spoil his appetite when the time comes," Evelyn assured the man before closing the door behind her.

Craig paced the room. Jennifer joined him in his restless wandering while the others sat about, filing fingernails or watching television oblivious to anything on the screen. John watched stoically from a recliner in the corner of the room.

"She won't score on the first night," Craig said hopefully.

"If Bartow talks to her," Emily said, "he's a goner. She's that good."

"Have you established a relationship with Evelyn?" Francis asked cautiously of the man.

Craig challenged her with a look of resentment that masked doubt over the credibility of that sort of relationship with the woman. "She wants out of the business. She said she'd leave with me when this is over."

"She feels secure in your presence," Francis said in support of Craig's disclosure. "I don't imagine she'll stay with us after all she's been through. She'll hold herself responsible for too much of it. The past few days isn't much of a basis for a relationship, but it's a start."

Craig gave a curt nod of appreciation.

Francis' suite consisted of three rooms. They were all scattered about the suite dozing after midnight. Jennifer closed her eyes on the couch and rested. The rattle of the key in the lock brought her awake hours later.

John rose from the shadows like a monster from a horror movie. Color drained from the face of the man pausing just inside the door. He turned to leave. Evelyn grabbed him by the throat with one hand. She put her revolver to his forehead with the other, something of an oversight on the part of Bertrand's security, and backed him into the room. "Get the door for me, Jennifer," she said mildly.

Jennifer bounced up with her heart beating furiously and her knees curiously rubbery. She took a quick look up and down the balcony outside and closed the door, locking it behind her. She turned, and then leaned against it for support.

John and Craig looked on without immediate comment. Evelyn had brought along Bertrand Bartow as promised, and Jennifer could see it in his face when he saw her for the first time. He knew in a heartbeat who she was and she, in turn, was looking at the only blood relative she had ever met face to face since childhood. But he was a short man with a stocky physique and she strolled closer and deliberately gazed in disdain upon the man who wanted her dead.

"My God," he murmured, and even his voice sounded familiar. It was the same timber of voice of a father she had heard in the night as a child. They were both that man's child.

And that's as far as her interest in the man went. A cold feeling whelmed up from deep within her, numbing everything except overwhelming hatred. "Kill him," she said to Evelyn. "I don't want him looking at me."

Evelyn brought the hammer of her revolver back and put it to the side of Bertrand's head.

Bertrand fell against a wall to catch his balance, his eyes still on Jennifer. "You're her," he said. "You little bitch. You're her."

"I'm her," Jennifer said. "I'm still alive, and you're dead, you sack of shit."

"You'll never get away with it," Bertrand said, wetting his tongue, stuck with cliques as shock enveloped his mind.

Jennifer raised an eyebrow. "Shoot him," she said mildly, knowing that she was in shock herself, and less than rational.

"If you want money," Bertrand said hurriedly, "my lawyers will cut you a deal. Call them. Tell them you're holding me for ransom. We've made arrangements should this ever happen.

You can get away Scott free. I promise."

"We'll turn you loose unharmed if you can bring my friends back to life," Jennifer said. She smiled wearily. "Dimitri can stay dead. He's burning in hell, and we wouldn't want to disturb him."

"Disciples of Chaos," John said from somewhere behind her. "Who are they?"

Bartow blinked. "What? Who are they? I don't know what the hell you're talking about!"

"The people you hired to kill Jennifer."

"I didn't hire anyone! I was keeping track of her in Los Angeles and she disappeared! I told my men to keep an eye out for her and that was all! That was years ago!"

"And what about me?" Evelyn said with a smile. "Rosie put Dimitri up to killing me by way of my father's people. Who was behind that? It's all a bit too coincidental, me and Jennifer. And you."

Bertrand stared up at her in horror, clearly clueless to the facts she had presented as an accusation. Jennifer could see innocence in his eyes, and it gave her a cold chill. If Bertrand was guiltless, as had been Senator Hacks, they had achieved nothing, and she, as far as anyone knew, was still condemned to die.

"You're talking to Evelyn Haxx, daughter of Senator Caliph Hacks," Craig said helpfully.

"But she was a liability! How could I be expected to back a Senator with a prostitute for a daughter! I wanted her found! I wanted her..."

"Killed," John said.

Bertrand swallowed hard.

"And Jennifer. You wanted her dead as well."

"It never came to that," Bertrand said. "I swear. I don't know how you made the connection. We destroyed everything,

wiped out her entire past history."

Jennifer and John eyed one another in confusion. Francis was shaking her head in confusion.

"Please, I don't understand what's happening," Bertrand said, his voice harsh with stress and reduced to a whisper. "Speak with my lawyers. They'll give you anything you want."

Silence gathered. "We're goldfish in a piranha pool," Craig reminded them all. "We need a way out of this"

"There's no way out until we know who's behind it all," was John's counter-reminder. "Someone's yanking our strings. If Bertrand here is one of us, as clueless as Cathy, Dimitri and the Senator, we're still in the dark, still lined up in someone's cross-hairs."

"We'll talk to his lawyers," Jennifer said. "They'll know who I am."

"You're nobody," Bertrand said with surprising vehemence. "You're a mistake that should have been aborted when you were born."

"An indiscretion?" John coaxed. "Heir to your father's money?"

Bartow clenched his fist and forced himself to silence.

Jennifer eyed John in despair.

"I know, kid. Things are moving fast, but it's not hopeless just yet, just a bit confusing."

John turned back to Bertrand. "Got a phone on you?"

Bertrand gave a nervous nod.

"You'll stay here with our friends. Have your friends take me and Jennifer to someone who can work out a compromise. We'll work it on the honor system and trust one another implicitly, because at this stage of the game, we're all a gnat's ass away from a bullet in the head."

Bertrand snatched his phone from a breast pocket and gestured wildly while arguing with his security, men who had

been left behind in the streets below. Once an accord had been reached, he spoke without looking at his hosts. "One of my men will take you. They won't try anything. Just go talk to my fucking attorneys and get something figured out so that I can get the fuck away from you fucking people."

The entire group moved in unison toward the door. "Just me and Jennifer," John said, but grinning for the first time in sympathy for their morass of confusion. "If we don't make it back, shoot the bastard in the feet."

"What?" Emily blurted in confusion.

"Work your way up, feet, knees, testicles. Pace yourself. You've got enough bullets. Last shot goes between the eyes."

Jennifer had no clean clothes to change into. John looked vicious, unshaven and his narrow eyes bloodshot, which in Jennifer's opinion worked in their favor. They left together hand in hand without being accosted, down the hall to the elevators, and from the ground floor elevator to the streets outside where a dark limousine awaited them, and men wearing shoulder holsters.

The ride to a chrome and glass citadel took ten minutes. Another and much faster elevator that made John groan took them to the top floor and an office with a white rug and black enameled furniture. An immaculately dressed man escorted them to an office, closing the door behind them, and gesturing to seats before the desk.

"I'm James Glasgow." Glasgow sat behind his enormous desk and looked nervous. "I hear you're Jennifer Wessner."

"Was my father Basil Bartow?"

"Basil confirmed your heritage when you were born. He confided in me. He didn't quite know what to do with you at the time. Yes, Basil Bertrand was your father."

"Why is Bertrand trying to kill me?"

Glasgow shrugged. "He hasn't been actively trying to kill

you as far as I know. Locate you, perhaps, but he feared your death would lead to discovery of your identity. Your autonomy was safer."

"Why did my father allow this all to happen to begin with? Someone told me my mother died of cancer."

"She had cancer. She would have died. Yes, that did happen when you were quite young. At the time, you, your mother, Bertrand and Basil were something of a family, albeit an odd one. The agencies into custody you fell knew nothing of your father and your father never knew what happened to you and your mother. You both vanished from the face of the Earth many years ago."

Jennifer stared at the man without expression, patiently waiting for a more detailed explanation.

"Basil Bartow sent for you and your mother. You were about ready for school, your mother was scheduled for chemotherapy, and Los Angeles was to have been your home. You were about four at the time. You and your mother left Dubuque, Iowa, by car. Her choice. She wanted to see the scenery. You and your mother never arrived. We have reason to believe your mother died in a car accident. You were apparently rescued, but without identification. Basil turned every state between Iowa and California upside down looking for you. Basil died of a heart attack a short time later. Bertrand destroyed your birth records. He continued his search, but only to destroy early photographs of you in the company of your mother and father. He wanted everything he inherited for himself."

"What does that all mean for me now?" Jennifer said.

"It means the Bartow estate rightfully belongs to you. Your father stipulated as much in his will. Without knowing your fate for certain, he never fully accepted the inevitability of your death."

"How much money is it?"

"Stocks and holdings worth four billion, give or take a few hundred million."

Jennifer closed her eyes for a time.

"What's changed?" John said.

Glasgow smiled a cold and unfriendly smile. "Bertrand cut his own throat. We all knew it years ago. If Jennifer ever showed up, Bertrand could do little to defend himself. He fraudulently holds his company position. We allowed it because he has been an effective business leader. Regardless, he could easily be prosecuted and sent to jail for what he has done."

"What if I don't want that to happen?" Jennifer said.

James Glasgow frowned. He cleared his throat. He and John exchanged puzzled looks.

"I don't want it," Jennifer said. She turned to John. "I want things to stay the way they are. I want to make Bertrand's life a living hell knowing I'm out there and that I can take it all away from him if I want, but all that money will ruin everything for us."

"After everything that's happened," John said, "you just want to let it go?"

"Of course. It isn't over yet, is it? I'm still poisoned, aren't I? Someone still wants Evelyn dead."

John grew agitated, fully aware of the direction her thought processes were taking.

"But you won't let anything bad happen to me," Jennifer said. "Not if you can help it. You'll stay with me for as long as it takes, just to make sure."

"Not if I can help it," John said, clenching his fists in near panic. "How do you expect me to help you?"

She smiled. "One thing leads to another. You made it all happen. Maybe things aren't as bad as they seem. Bertrand never wanted me dead. Nobody's going to want to kill Evelyn

now, not if she's going to make headlines as the dead whore daughter of a senator. Make that call. Tell them Evelyn is still alive and that she'll stay that way, regardless of what happens to me, because I said so."

"Jennifer..."

"Would you kill her for me?"

John blanched. He dared not answer the question.

"You would, but you know it would ruin everything between us, so you won't. You'd let me die first knowing that's the way it has to be from my perspective."

"The Disciples of Chaos," John said to James Glasgow. "Do you know of them?"

"Never heard of them. How are they involved in this?"

"Don't know. Time to find out."

Jennifer reached for John's hand.

"Phone Bertrand," John said to Glasgow on the way out. "We've got ourselves a stalemate. Everybody gets turned loose. Nobody gets hurt. Make sure he understands what's at stake in no uncertain terms."

"Consider it done. And, Miss?"

Jennifer managed a polite smile for the man.

"If you ever change your mind, consider me an ally. My interests are with the company, and your father's wishes."

"I will, thank you."

On the street below, John stopped in a pool of bright sunlight. He punched out numbers on his cell phone. It rang continuously.

A man wearing a dark suit and sun glasses separated himself from a crowd nearby and approached, stopping just close enough for his voice to carry in the early morning traffic. "That won't be necessary. We can conclude our business face to face, here and now."

Jennifer gawked. John experienced an unfamiliar intensity

of panic, but he put his arm about the girl's shoulders and contained it. "Evelyn Haxx is still alive," he said.

"We know."

"We won't kill her."

"No need. Jennifer's life is in no danger. The poison was a lie."

John all but stumbled so suddenly did the burden of the past few days vanish from his shoulders.

"Why?" Jennifer said, voicing the only question left to be answered. "Why did they all have to die?"

The stranger's gaze remained on John. "No one had to die. Consider the parties involved."

"The Carvellies," John said. "Caliph Haxx. Bertrand Bartow."

"Francis Peugeot and her girls," the man said. "Yourself. And one other."

"Rosie," John said. "The Disciples of Chaos."

"A truly volatile mix. We have no control over the behavior of the individual."

"Who are you?"

The man shrugged. "Forces that be."

He started to turn away.

"One question," John called out. "Please."

"I will answer your one question."

"Like Jennifer asked to begin with. Why?"

"A helping hand," the man said. "Think about it carefully. A nudge here and there in the right direction until the world can stand upon its own two feet and manage its own affairs. Left to its own resources, the road would be so much more difficult, or perhaps impossible."

The man turned away again and all too quickly vanishing back into the crowd.

Jennifer opened her mouth to protest. Tears flooded her

eyes.

"We'll talk about it later," John said. "I need time to think."

Chapter Fifty

Jennifer drove John to the roadside park along the Mississippi where Dimitri Carvelli had been executed and where John had tested Craig Netherman's skills and attitude, an alliance he could not have survived without. Working with a partner had been a new experience. Not a day had gone by without new experiences, not since the day he had barged into his own darkened motel room to find the precocious child waiting for him with a gun pointed to his head.

Life itself had changed into an experience he could never have imagined. He had once feared the larger world beyond the hood. Now, he cherished the flutter of every green leaf of this new world.

Jennifer parked against a magnificent wall of trees. She sat on the hood to wait for John's final meeting with the man who had once been the bane of his life. Garko arrived alone in a small car looking frail and vulnerable, emerging to join John at a nearby picnic bench.

"John, you have me worried. I can't ever remember a smile.

I can't imagine what it may portend."

They sat facing one another. Garko took a moment to gaze at the girl perched on the hood of the nearby car. "Jail-bait in the extreme."

"Probably."

"You've taken good care of her. Can't say I'm not proud of you. I hated what the hood did to you, John. I hated using you. Do you know that, or do you need to even the score with me?"

"You treated me with respect, Mr. Garko. I expected nothing more of you. Neither one of us could help the rest of it."

Garko studied him with a curious intensity. "So, was it Bertrand from the beginning?"

John shook his head slowly, emphatically. "Bertrand was involved with the Senator. I don't know who tipped Hacks off to the whereabouts of his daughter. I don't know who hired the Disciples of Chaos to take her out. Could have been an associate of either Hacks or Bartow. Bertrand couldn't have been aware of Jennifer's presence or she would have been a target from the beginning."

"Too much coincidence?" Garko suggested.

John sidestepped the question. "I couldn't at first tell who may have been the intended target, or why. Dimitri was a poor choice of assassins. Nobody in their right mind would have used a psychopath to take out the daughter of a United States Senator. That being the case, who set Rosie off? They were both high profile."

"You're implying someone orchestrated our unfortunate series of events."

John wasn't certain he could express his suspicions in a way Garko would accept. "I see the natural order of things at work, deceit, lies, violence."

"The Disciples of Chaos."

"The antithesis to conventional wisdom that bans evil from

human affairs, and along with it, the natural checks and balances that sustain life."

Garko stared at him without expression.

"Someone is helping to attend to that balance."

Garko scoffed. "Someone? Some super-secret organization, a League of Gentlemen?"

"Hardly matters" John decided. "Maybe Dimitri's rampage served a purpose. What happened to the senior Carvelli's connection to the mob?"

"Times change," Garko said grimly.

"Caliph Hacks wanted to be president someday."

Garko ventured a wry grin. "Won't happen. The man's nothing special now that his relationship with a disowned daughter is public knowledge."

"Nobody saw it coming. In retrospect, everything seems..."

"Orchestrated," Garko said.

"By someone in the hierarchy a lot higher than Rosie. Life isn't about fear or suffering," John said, "no more than it's about anyone's twisted notion of morality. Good and evil miss the point entirely."

Garko took John's moment of hesitation to change the subject. "You didn't take Bertrand Bartow down."

John had nothing to add to the comment.

Garko glanced at the child waiting patiently in the verdant afternoon. "As long as Bertrand retains power, he's a threat to her. As long as she's in danger, you have reason for being."

"I was hoping we wouldn't be that transparent."

"I do see your problem, though. You need to know that it's finished."

Nobody escaped being touched by an ordinary chains of events set in motion by someone who was playing one hell of a game of billiards," John said. "They knew exactly where all the balls needed to go, and they touched each in exactly the right

way to make them go there."

Garko studied him for a time. "What if you're reaching too far, seeing connections that don't exist."

John had no intention of arguing the point. "I just don't think so."

"I'm not saying you're wrong," Garko said. "I trust your instincts."

John caught Jennifer looking his way, smiling mischievously, forewarning that the night to come was going to be an entirely new experience for the both of them. Life itself had become something new and unexpected. Maybe he could live with the unexpected after all.

He reached across the table to offer Garko a handshake to end the exchange. He had been expecting more from the man, but he was willing to settle for nothing. Garko shook his hand firmly, but wouldn't let it go. "When did it all start?" he asked gently.

John paused to consider the question. It had started with Dimitri and Cathy Weibler, of course. Or, it had started with Jennifer lost in a city on the coast, or with an aging Francis Peugeot attempting to employ to innocent to manage human complexity. From his own perspective, it had started with Sasha, his own sister.

So, it had no beginning. It was an ongoing process with individual perspectives. Only from those perspectives were there beginnings and endings.

"Might be best to take it all at face value and let it go at that," Garko said.

"As you have. I never said I didn't have the orchestration figured out. You knew about Jennifer all along. You didn't send me after her to ensure her death. You knew I'd protect her."

Garko's expression turned to stone.

"Evelyn was the coincidence and you used her attempted

assassination to throw Jennifer in Bertrand's face. Things got out of hand. Evelyn Haxx would never have given Dimitri a chance to kill her."

"I never in a thousand years thought you'd guess," Garko confessed. "Dimitri was a calculating bastard. Rosie would never have gotten the best of him. Killing Cathy Weibler sent him over the edge and I lost control."

John sat back down and stared off into the trees. "What was the game plan?"

"The game plan was to protect Jennifer from the half-brother until she was old enough to challenge his power. The game plan was to put her in a position to do so. Her father had that worked out from the very beginning."

"Then you were the one who hired the Disciples of Chaos to take out Evelyn," John said. "You intended to have me in place before anyone got hurt. The rest of it worked out as planned. You pointed the finger at Bertrand and Jennifer had her day in the sun."

"She sacrificed an empire for you, John. I envy you more than you could imagine."

"You almost got us both killed."

"I was hoping that wouldn't happen. I hope you appreciate the fact that I had two pawns to pit against a full set of opponents. I did the best with what I had to work with."

John grinned and rejected the notion outright. "You take the natural order dead serious. Lies and deceit pitted against formal rules of unsustainable power."

"So do you," Garko said gently. "I noticed that long ago. I noticed it in the child as well."

John studied the intensity of Garko's cold gaze and saw for the first time the depth of their decade-old camaraderie. "You almost blew it," was his only accusation.

"Only had I misjudged you. You lived up to my

expectations, John. No one else ever has."

"I thought I told you I quit. More than once."

"Was never a matter of employment. More a matter of salvation. Yours and Jennifer's. Mission accomplished. You're free to go."

John took the time he needed to think the situation through and decided it would take longer than the hours left to the day. He gave his mentor a curt nod of acknowledgement and appreciation he'd never have the words to express and headed back to the car.

"Things settled?" Jennifer asked as he approached, mildly alarmed at John's distracted expression.

"Settled," John said.

Garko watched the two drive away. He perched himself on the edge of the table and enjoyed the later summer afternoon until dusk, and then he, too, still lost in deep thought, left the clearing to the dream-like consciousness of the evening's wildlife.

Chapter Fifty-one

Dr. Leroy Reinhart was startled by the girl that intercepted him when he pulled the white Caddy behind the white elephant of a castle that was to be his financial ruin. Francis Peugeot and her secretaries, if that's what they were, had forestalled foreclosure for a month. Now, it hardly mattered who eventually attended their eviction. He had at least the obligation to tell Gabby the bad news.

Jennifer was the name, he remembered, a woman-child with an air of sophistication. He rolled down his window. "Is Gabby about?"

Jennifer ignored the question. "How much?"

Leroy briefly wondered what "how much?" had to do with Gabby. She patiently waited for him to make the right connections. "Oh, the property? What?" Leroy looked up the face of the apartment building with its medieval facade. "How much for the *property*? It's in foreclosure, kid. I'd need a quarter million to get myself out of hock!"

"We'll take it," Jennifer said without hesitation. "Give me an attorney's name and number. I'll have ours get in touch with

him by the end of the day."

Still bristling at the humiliation meted out by Francis Peugeot's so-called secretaries, disbelief was slow to fade. Pitted against the calm intelligence of the child, it did fade. With shaking hands, Leroy scratched out the information on the back of one of his business cards. "This had better be on the level. I'm really not in the mood to have my chain jerked..."

"No more chain jerking, Mr. Reinhart," she said with an unexpectedly sweet smile. "You turned out to be the right guy in the right place for us. I'll let Gabby know you don't need the place burned to the ground anytime soon."

Leroy winced and looked suddenly panicky.

"When we're ready to move on," Mr. Reinhart, "we'll leave a pan of grease burning on Gabby's stove in the basement."

Leroy suspected they had as much to hide from the world as himself. "I'm trusting you guys with my life, you know."

"We trust in your discretion as well," Jennifer said. "I'll let Gabby know that he has a new boss. He does go with the apartment, by the way."

In Gabby's basement apartment, Gabby and Bertha discussed Gabby's continued employment. "Getting too old to keep the place in one piece," was Gabby's initial reaction.

"Hire whatever you deem needs to be done, but you'd be the expert on what needs to be done, assuming Jennifer can pull it off. We're all hoping she's on the level."

"Wouldn't be staying just for the job," Gabby grumbled gently. "Don't really have any other reason to stick around."

"You and me, Gabby," she said gently.

"There is no you and me, little girl. I don't need to be fooled with like that. I'm not a charity case just yet. I know what you girls do for a living."

"Keeping the likes of you happy, old man."

He grinned despite himself. "Yeah, well it doesn't take much

for an old fart my age."

"Then stick around and change our light bulbs and you can take special favors out in trade. We can be friends."

"Some friends we've been."

"Exactly."

He finally made eye contact. "Leroy's losing the place?"

Bertha chuckled. "And Jennifer's shaking down her half-brother to buy it. We discussed it this morning and she phoned her attorney an hour ago. She's got whatever she needs. And we agreed that you go with the property."

Gabby shifted to a more comfortable position on the couch and smiled a self-satisfied smile. "Well, I do like the way you gals do business even if the business itself is a bit much for me."

Bertha responded to a call from the ground-floor hallway and joined Jennifer to attend the final and most formidable crisis. They went up the stairs side by side and joined forces with Emily Pike and Sally emerging from their second-floor apartment.

Francis sat in a rocker overlooking the Mississippi looking old and ashen despite her make-up. The fact that she had applied it upon waking indicated that she was not as yet down for the count. "The castle is ours," Jennifer announced to the woman, "and Gabby is sticking around to change our light bulbs, Bertha tells me."

Francis Peugeot shook her head slowly. "I don't think I can do this any more."

Jennifer knelt before her. "Why not?"

"Old and tired. Evelyn left us, you know. She's trying again for a modeling career. Her father needs the publicity."

"Emily says you have some new girls coming in tomorrow."

"I'm reconsidering."

"Ok, so what are you going to do if you retire? Where would

you go?"

Francis stared off into space. "Anything I want. Anywhere at all."

"Alone?"

Francis sighed.

"Nobody can handle the girls like you do, Francis. Just delegate some authority to get the grunt work done."

Francis looked away. "When are you leaving us?"

"I'm not leaving."

Confusion showed as a play of conflicting emotion on her face.

"No, I'm not leaving John. His old boss found him a new job."

Francis bristled with indignation. "What legitimate, respectable job..."

"He's going to work for Mossad."

Francis shook her head in confusion.

"Israeli Intelligence. It's a local position." Jennifer smirked her pride shamelessly. "I'm not supposed to say more than that. Just so everyone knows he's gone legit and can hold in own from here on out."

"Then you won't be too far away from us," Francis said hopefully.

"I'll be right here. I'm not going anywhere at all. You guys are my family. I'll help with the girls, just as you've always planned. Nobody holds it against me, especially now that I'm doubly useful. The castle belongs to us now, and Gabby had an idea."

Francis frowned.

"The mirrors," Jennifer said. "Voyeurs and exhibitionists. We'll make a fortune."

The End